

# Children, the new media sophisticates

*Dr Patricia Gillard, principal of User Insite and former ACT manager for Roy Morgan Research, examines the child audience, who they are and how they use TV and new media*

**R**esearch in the 1990s understands that children actively negotiate family values and share their viewing experiences, most often with schoolmates. They are active in shaping an understanding of the world and themselves from whatever emotional and creative resources they have in their homes and schools. How, then, have children's uses for television changed over two decades? How has television changed them?

The first difference is that children are watching the news, rather than avoiding it as they seemed to 10 years ago. There is still a high level of discomfort with the realistic violence and images of hungry children or mistreated animals, especially during mealtimes. But news does seem to be part of most children's viewing routine.

The second major change is the greater interest and sophistication of 1990s audiences in attending closely to special effects, especially in horror films and those which construct violent scenes. Many children have learnt to make use of video replay, using videos or movies taped from TV. They even use freeze-frame and constant repeating of segments to find out exactly how special effects are put together. Some are reassured when they spot how it is constructed. Video players were not available 20 years ago. As children have gained some control of TV images, they have become more fascinated with how special effects are produced and used in storytelling.

From the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) study *Kids Talk TV* in 1996, I was also struck by the dominance of sport in the tastes and interest of older boys. A decade ago, boys 11 years and over were closer in their tastes to younger children. This change may well reflect greater programming across the week in sport and also the impact of programming on pay TV. Boys aged 13-17 are now some of the "heaviest" viewers of TV, according to AC Nielsen's 1999 *TV Trends*, whereas 10 years ago, girls watched for longer hours on average than did boys.

With more knowledge of TV and film conventions, TV programs are able to demand that children draw on their social experience to a greater extent in order to enjoy the story. While this might seem commonsense, it is not the way that children's relationships with TV have been studied. The findings are a result of applying cultural theories to the analysis of television programs. TV programs create a range of interpretations, and audience members draw on their own experience to place themselves in the story and to form their own conclusions.

## Children's uses of new media

In the past 20 years, research practices have changed the kinds of questions researchers think to ask, and the answers they expect to get about new media. First, researchers want to know how the

family environment provides a context for children's uses; its rules and spaces and economic resources. Where do family members now watch TV, when and who with? What is the relationship between computers, TV screens and other media? Who watches and plays with whom, who chooses, who decides, who pays? Do men still dominate the remote control and do women and children keep up their other activities while viewing? What personal media is carried outside the house, and what is brought in by friends and family? How do the program formats and characters which go across media and show themselves in toys and merchandising also inhabit family space and influence social value?

If survey statistics alone are used to give a picture of child audiences, then the audience is becoming "fragmented". A 1997 report in the *Sun Herald* newspaper claimed children were watching one hour of TV a week less than in 1995, with Saturday and weekday mornings showing most attrition. The numbers are certainly breaking up and possibly being distributed across a larger number of media forms and contents. One commercial survey by Turner Broadcasting estimated that 33% of Australian children owned their own computer and 43% had access to the Internet. But children have always moved between different activities or done them in parallel and in company. The picture is more interesting now but children still choose the best ways to have fun and fill in time, and free-to-air TV still has the central role in providing entertainment for most of them.

## Internet use

It's clear that we know very little about Australian children's actual uses of the Internet at home. The Australian Bureau of Statistics report *Household Use of Information Technology* shows that in 1997 there were

... continued on page 22 >

## Developing Child, Developing Media

... continued from page 12

hours. A good toy allows children to direct, act, produce and prepare the props for their own imaginative creation. Repetitive use of program-associated toys is not real play but mere imitation.

Children see real violence in the media which also introduces them to entertainment violence. They become confused between fantasy and reality. Play therapists have found that children who experience violence in their own lives seek entertainment violence and violent toys as protection and a way of understanding the violence committed against them.

A television viewing syndrome, PTVT (Post TV Trauma), sees children respond angrily when the television is turned off, said Professor Levin. Parents need to develop strategies to encourage children who suffer this syndrome into play of other kinds. Non-violent play can be encouraged and developed just as violent toys and programs encourage aggressive play.

Her message was that parents and educators have to help children be informed media consumers. They need to explain clearly what can and cannot be watched and played with, and why this is so. This communication and shared knowledge will empower the carer and the child.

Bruce Shearer

## Children, the new media sophisticates

... continued from page 13

1.7 million children aged 5-17 years who frequently used a computer. This was half (51%) of the children in their age group. The computer was used by roughly one-fifth of the children aged 10-17 years for Internet based activities with Internet use increasing slightly as children grew older. At 5-9 years old, there were only 4% of computer users accessing the Internet.

Extrapolating from patterns in earlier research, one might be able to guess what children are doing with the Internet. They are likely to be using it for interactive and social purposes. Chat sessions online and sitting in groups of two or three, to offer advice to the person with the mouse, is likely to be their preferred interaction. They will be noisy, not concentrated. They will laugh and eat and offer advice. They might not do it for long, and if the house rules allow it, they'll play music and do other things at the same time. When children are using the Internet for schoolwork, they might have parents with them sometimes for advice, or more likely, to encourage their progress.

This article is an edited version of Patricia Gillard's address to the Australian Broadcasting Authority's "Children's Television Policy Forum", a one-day seminar held in Sydney on July 22, 1999

## From The Archives

### Pay TV latest

**DBS appears to be dead as a delivery option for pay television. The remaining options have narrowed down to a cable only system, or a combination of indirect broadcast satellite with cable or MDS delivering the service to subscribers.**

This is the trend emerging from questions put to key submitters - Department of Transport and Communications (DOTAC), FACTS, Hoyts and the CLC - by the Saunderson Committee during its third and latest round of hearings on pay television.

Hoyts, which made a late and substantial submission to the Committee, is the only major potential pay TV provider to have come forward in this inquiry. That others have not come forward is most likely due to the amount of time and money they expended on the Tribunal's 1984 SPS inquiry, only to have a more or less indefinite postponement. This time the industry is taking a wait-and-see approach. Hoyts is pitching for DBS

delivery of a Home Box Office-type service, with no regulation.

DOTAC did not make a written reply to Saunderson's list of questions but instead gave lengthy evidence in response to Committee. Many of the Committee's questions were critical of the Department's submission, including its use of the "publishing" and "broadcasting" models. Judging by the review of broadcasting regulation the Department may have modified its approach on regulation although it did not publicly resile from its deregulatory approach for pay TV.

DOTAC strongly advised against repeating the British experience with DBS which suggests that the chances of its succeeding here among a much smaller population are extremely dubious.

Two consultant economists appeared for FACTS and read at considerable length from prepared papers on the likely economic impact of pay TV, a tactic which some felt amounted to a filibuster. One of these papers revealed that the commercial networks' debt

burden was considerably greater (more than three times greater) than the figure given to the ABT, an inconsistency which Chairman Saunderson was quick to question.

Insofar as trends in the Committee's thinking could be divined from the hearings, it would seem that - in line with its earlier recommendations on the ABT - it is in favour of a rationalisation of the Broadcasting Act. It clearly does not wish the development of pay TV to be characterised by the adhoc approach that has been a feature of other broadcasting developments in Australia.

It would favour having policy objectives included in the Act rather than being enunciated separately for each new element in the system.

It remains equivocal on Australian content regulation for pay TV, mindful of the relatively disastrous Canadian experience resulting from high initial content levels for cable.

Communications Update, August 1989