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NEW ISSUES IN CHILDREN'S
TELEVISION POLICY

December 3, 1987

Seminar Notes

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

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Victoria Gregorian
Programming Director, WLVI-TV (Channel 56), Boston

Peggy Charren
President, Action for Children's Television

Peter Lemieux
Dept. of Political Science, MIT

Gail Kosloff
Student Rapporteur, MIT

This session focused on the current policies governing children's television especially in light of new "interactive" television programs like "Captain Power." The current debate focuses on whether programs such as this, which interact with specially designed toys, actually constitute full-length commercials for these toys.

Victoria Gregorian provided the audience with a demonstration of the Captain Power toy interacting with a video of the television program of the same name. It was evident from Victoria's demonstration that the toy is not extremely easy to use; one must align the light beam on the screen with the light source on the toy to actually make a "hit" and cause the toy to make an audio sound. She acknowledged the challenges of playing the game and compared Captain Power to playing a game of darts.

Victoria wishes that the show/game was not so much like a war game. However, she thinks anything that will make a child active is positive. She does hope that the money Mattel has spent on developing this technology will encourage others involved in programming to use this technology in combination with less violent content.

She disagrees with others who believe the Captain Power show is targeted at 2-11 year olds. Her own station, Channel 56 in Boston, originally aired the show on Saturday mornings and has since moved it to the 4:00 time slot because she believes it appeals more to 7-12 year olds. She acknowledged that many of the other TV stations are also changing its program time to Saturday and Sunday in the late afternoon.

Regarding the success of the Captain Power show, Victoria believes it is difficult to gauge its popularity based on the ratings. Her own station does not run focus groups to evaluate the popularity of programming. Instead it relies on third party ratings which provide volume measures and not evaluations of content. In her opinion, the price of the Captain Power toy, which sells at about \$40, is probably an impediment to the toy's sales. At this price it is difficult for her to see parents running out to buy the toy for young children.

For Victoria, the real question of airing programs like Captain Power, is whether they will generate revenue for her station. She cited the difficulty she has in experimenting with children's programming on her station: if she airs a program with low ratings and it fails she would not expect her boss to be supportive in the future.

Victoria noted that her station had some flexibility in how it dealt with Mattel's Captain Power. For example, Channel 56, opted not to take a cut of Captain Power toy sales and told Mattel it could not advertise the toy during the show. She does believe that even if the commercial were aired, it is so similar to the show it would be difficult for a viewer to distinguish the two. Victoria also noted that she has continued to enforce the 6 minute per half hour NAB rules for commercials at her station. As Programming Director, she believes it is her job to protect the license of the station so she would rather be conservative on this issue.

Furthermore, she believes there is a real lack of "good" children's programming available to broadcast stations today. She noted the amount of "garbage" in the form of children's programming that she has been asked to review lately. Victoria believes we are not seeing more creative and educational programming on TV because it has gotten so expensive to produce (she noted that Captain Power cost \$600,000 per episode to produce.) Also, on the subject of reviving old shows, she does not think the kids of today would be stimulated by the kiddie programming of her generation.

As an emerging trend, she cited the growing proliferation of kids game shows because they are relatively cheap to produce. Unfortunately, according to Victoria, after one producer conceives of an idea like kiddie game shows the others "pounce" on it and it becomes a situation of overkill.

Victoria also noted that TV stations are faced with other problems this year aside from the availability of children's programming. In her opinion, stations such as her own are not receiving expected revenues from toy ads because the toy manufacturers do not have anything to promote this year. Furthermore, the effects of the "people meters" are being felt on stations since the devices are saying children's viewing is down. This means agencies are having to pay "make goods" to sponsors because the ads are not apparently reaching a large enough audience.

Peggy Charren, the founder of Action for Children's Television (ACT), is an avid spokesperson on the issue of the over-commercialization of television. She related her recent testimony before the House Telecommunication Subcommittee on this topic. She and ACT are opposed to programs like Captain Power because they are not serving the "public interest" as mandated by the Communications Act of 1934. ACT is not focusing on cable and home video since the "public interest" clause does not apply.

Programs such as Captain Power are not, in Peggy's argument, accessible to both poor and rich viewers since they require the purchase of a device, e.g. toy, to reap the full benefits of the programming. Although she is not thrilled with the content of programs like Captain Power given their violent nature, she is more concerned with companies like Mattel misusing the public spectrum since the add-on toys are not equally available to poor and rich children.

Peggy traced some of the history of the problem of program length commercials. For example, in 1969, Mattel and ABC had a Hot Wheels program that was banned since it violated the amount of commercial air time per hour. She blames the demise of children's TV on Ronald Reagan and his appointments to the FCC. Peggy cited her opposition to ex-FCC Chairman Fowler's attitude that "TV is just another appliance...a toaster with pictures."

ACT is concerned with not carrying the review of children's programming too far; it is concerned with the issue of censorship in this context. It promotes free speech and does not aim to limit it in lobbying against program length commercials. Peggy mentioned that ACT may in fact appeal the FCC's recent decision to restrict pornography to certain hours.

On the subject of good programming, Peggy touted the creative children's programming aired in the past, e.g. CBS's "In The News" series, and some Hallmark-sponsored programming. She noted that one of ACT's goals for the next year is filling the news gap for kids and hopefully reviving shows like "In the News." She is of the opinion that stations should continue to air creative programs such as Jabberwalky even if the ratings are not great (though she admits this is easy for her to say since she does not have to worry about the bottom line). She also acknowledges the problem of measuring children's TV viewership. Furthermore, in contrast to Victoria's views, Peggy would rather see kiddie game shows on the air than violent toy-related shows. She is also of the opinion that there is a lot of creative/educational programming available to TV stations, it is just a matter of searching for them.

Peggy voiced a lot of interest and excitement on the subject of the future of children's television. She noted that "she loves the idea that the future of TV will be different." She raised the issue of what people really mean by interactivity and how this relates to the television set. Peggy also cited some of the problems the new media (e.g. videos) are creating for parents as they struggle with how

much TV their children should watch. She believes that the best rule for parents is to monitor how much time their kids spend in front of the television and remember that TV viewing cannot replace other activities.