Newspaper Coverage of Children’s Television

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24 October 1996
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Foreword

The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania which would address public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. Consistent with the mission of the Annenberg School for Communication, the Center has four ongoing foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; and Health Communication. Each year, as well, a special area of scholarly and social interest is addressed. The Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas. This series of publications disseminates the work of the Center.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson
Director
Newspaper Coverage of Children’s Television

Summary

This study is the fourth in a series of reports on the subject of children’s television released by the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Following three earlier studies that examined the effects of different types of programming on children (Mares, 1996), surveyed parents and their children about viewing habits and preferences (Hart, 1996), and analyzed the content of children’s television programs (Jordan, 1996), this study looked at how newspapers discuss this issue, particularly in their entertainment sections. The principal question this study asked was, “Do newspapers make it easier or more difficult for parents to find quality shows for their children to watch?” The study included an examination of overall news coverage of this issue, a detailed analysis of television critics’ treatment of children’s television, and a profile of the entertainment sections of nine newspapers. The study found several examples of positive trends in newspaper coverage of children’s television, as well as some areas in need of potential improvement.

A summary of the study’s major findings:

• Parents who read on page one that children’s television is violent and harmful can’t count on the entertainment section to tell them which shows are bad and which are good.

• Children’s television has a secure place on the news agenda, accounting for 1,199 stories in the nine papers studied between July 1, 1995 and Aug. 1, 1996.¹

• But reviewers at those nine papers rarely cover children’s television. Out of 2,266 stories written by the selected critics during the same period, children’s television was the subject of these critics’ articles only 1.2% of the time.

• Newspapers devote a great deal of space to telling parents what movies, events, and activities are appropriate for children, but don’t perform the same service when it comes to telling them what the good children’s shows are.

• Newspapers are more likely to run a regular “Soaps” column than a “Kidswatch” column.

• In fact, media critics cover children’s television at about the same rate they cover sports (1.3%), daytime talk shows (1.1%), and late night talk shows (1.1%). This means, for example, that David Letterman (204 mentions) and Oprah Winfrey (94) were mentioned by the critics we looked at more than stars of childrens’ television shows such as Carmen Sandiego (6) and Big Bird (3).

• Children’s television is more likely to be described than reviewed by critics. More than half of the stories recommending at least one children’s television program did so without giving a reason. Typically, the review only included a brief plot summary.
• When critics mention children's television, it is typically as a general phenomenon that is problematic. Children's television was most commonly discussed without including any specific programs. But even when a show wasn't mentioned, critics often highlighted problems with the overall state of programming, particularly the lack of educational messages and the tendency to reinforce stereotypes.

• Even when a show is reviewed, parents often aren't told whether their four-year-old or their ten-year-old should watch it. Fewer than half of the stories discussing a particular show mentioned an appropriate age range.

• Still, reviewers do a good job of telling parents where to find the few shows they recommend. Critics mentioned what channel a show is on in 77% of the stories in which they recommend a program, and included the time it airs in 85% of those stories.
Introduction

As advocates, politicians and industry leaders debate the state of programming, children's television has moved into the foreground of public policy discussions in the last several years. These discussions have become more prominent in the last year as President Clinton and Congress have worked with network executives to include a V-chip in new television sets that will allow parents to screen out shows they feel are inappropriate for their children, and to require a minimum of three hours of quality children's programming each week. In addition, candidates, including Clinton and Dole, have made election year issues of what they perceive to be excessive use of violent and sexual themes in shows aimed at children.

Of course, concern over children's television programming is not new in Washington, and neither is the impulse of the federal government to impose regulations on networks as a response to public outcries over the lack of good shows. After parents, advocates and some academics raised a furor over network inattention to children's needs in the early 1970s, the FCC established vague guidelines requiring a “reasonable amount” of educational programming (Kunkel and Canepa, 1994). Perhaps not surprisingly, these guidelines did not produce a marked improvement in programming over the next two decades, leading to congressional enactment of the 1990 Children's Television Act (CTA). This act mandated that broadcasters serve children's educational and informational needs, defined as programming that would “further the positive development of the child in any respect.” The CTA did not make clear, however, how much time was to be devoted to this programming, which ages it should be directed to, and when it should air (Jordan, 1996: p. 8). These deficiencies led to a more explicit requirement, now referred to as the “Three-Hour Rule.” The “Three-Hour Rule” requires broadcasters to air a minimum of three hours per week of educational television, beginning in September of 1997. It also requires broadcasters to identify for the public (through the media) which of its programs are educational programs for children.

The full history of children's television as a policy issue, as well as the accompanying body of social science research into the effects (or absence of effects) of various types of programming on behavior and attitudes, has already been documented in the previous Annenberg Public Policy Center studies (Hart, 1996; Jordan, 1996; Mares, 1996). Those reports offer a useful background to this project as they shed light both on what types of shows can be found on television as well as what parents say they want in programming for their kids. These are, after all, the underlying components of news coverage: what's “out there” to be covered and what readers are interested in. The question raised by this study is how good a job newspapers do of covering this issue.
Parents and Their Children: What they want; what they watch

The first Annenberg Parents, Children and Television Survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center asked a national random sample of 1,205 parents of 2- to 17-year-old children about the viewing habits and attitudes of themselves and their children (Hart, 1996). Overall, that survey found that most parents felt it was their responsibility to make sure their children watch appropriate shows, but that they were confused about how to do so.

The survey found that 70% of parents say they are more concerned about what their children watch than how many hours a day they spend in front of the television. But at the same time 61% named TV as the medium whose influence over their children most troubled them, more than double the next closest potential influence, music lyrics (27%) (Hart, 1996: p. 4). In addition, more than half of parents surveyed said it was “totally or mainly” their responsibility to make sure their children watched programs they approved of, with fewer than 5% saying it was principally the responsibility of networks (p. 5).

Parents also reported a sense of helplessness in finding quality programming for their children. For example, 46% said that their children watch “inappropriate” programs, with parents of elementary and adolescent children most likely to say this. In fact, while parents of preschoolers were more than twice as likely to say that their children don’t watch inappropriate shows, those with children in elementary school were about evenly divided, and a majority with adolescent children said their children watch shows of which they disapprove (Hart, 1996: p. 9). This pattern of increasing helplessness as children grow older emerged again when parents were asked to name good children’s shows. Parents of preschoolers were more likely to name specific programs than were parents of older children, who often named networks and channels (e.g., “Shows on PBS”) or even programs aimed at preschoolers, such as “Barney” (p. 11).

The Hart survey exposes parents as uneasy with the type of programming their children watch, especially as their children get older. Parents appear willing to exercise control over the type of shows their children watch, but don’t seem to know what shows are worth watching. Again, this becomes increasingly true as their children move into adolescence. Interestingly, while the President, Congress and the FCC are increasingly willing to regulate broadcasters, parents say raising their children is primarily their responsibility, not the networks’. The problem appears to be that, when it comes to television, they don’t have the necessary information to do so.

Still, it might be reasonable to ask if the reason parents can’t name good shows for older children is because there aren’t any. Jordan’s (1996) content analysis of 198 children’s television programs, however, found that while the majority of quality shows are targeted at preschoolers, there are still some good shows for elementary school children and adolescents. Jordan used a quantitative scale to label programs as high-, low- or medium-quality based on the presence of quality “contributors” and “detractors” in each episode coded. Quality contributors included age appropriateness, inclusion of pro-social lesson, lesson salience (i.e., was it pervasive throughout the program or just an afterthought before the credits?), diversity of characters and setting, and creativity. Detractors included the presence of verbal or physical abuse,
sex or sexual innuendo, stereotyping (e.g., gender or racial), offensive language, and “uncontradicted images of characters engaged in unsafe behaviors” (Jordan, 1996: p. 14). In addition, coders applied a qualitative rating of “negative,” “neutral” or “positive” to each program to add to the evaluative scale.

Jordan’s findings shed some light on the results of the Hart survey. First, she found that there are about as many high- (38.5%) as low-quality (36.6%) programs (p. 15). But she also found that more of the shows aimed at preschoolers were of high quality, while those targeted at elementary school kids were more likely to be low quality: 75% of the shows for children aged 2-5 were high as compared with 12% that were low quality, while only 26% of those for elementary school kids were high quality and 48% were low quality. Shows for adolescents were most likely to be of “moderate” quality (46%) — basically innocuous entertainment — although a significant proportion were high quality (42%) (p. 17). Still, Jordan found that the lion’s share of children’s television shows are intended for 6-11 year olds, meaning that while a smaller percentage of these shows are high quality, there are still some good shows for this age group. Indeed, 47% of the high-quality programs in her study were aimed at elementary school children (p. 17). Unfortunately, most of the high-quality shows in her sample air on cable, meaning that millions of children, a disproportionate number of whom are disadvantaged, can’t watch them.

The findings of Hart and Jordan invite us to ask why it is that parents seem so involved and knowledgeable about programming for their preschoolers but not for their older children. One possible explanation is that there are proportionately fewer high-quality programs for elementary school-age children on commercial broadcast television and many more on cable television. Another possible answer is that parents are more likely to be watching with their preschoolers, accounting for their greater control of what’s watched as well as their ability to name several specific programs they feel are worth watching. In fact, the Hart survey points out that children’s television watching is less supervised as they get older. Parents of older children appear to need even more help determining what is and isn’t quality programming since they aren’t as likely to be around to survey the shows themselves, as they do with their preschoolers. As Jordan writes, Advocacy groups, Home and School Associations, even the local TV critic can spotlight high-quality children’s programs and list them in a place where parents and children can get easy access (TV Guide, local TV listings, parents’ magazines). The president of PBS also recently suggested that programs receive a ‘positive’ rating, so that parents who use the V-chip could bring in the quality programs as well as screen out the violent ones (1996, p. 35).

Hart and Jordan make several points relevant to newspaper coverage of children’s television. To begin with, if there’s one thing networks and parents can agree on it’s that it’s the job of the latter to raise children. But parents are often too busy to conduct their own analysis of the universe of children’s television shows, make rules for their children about what shows are appropriate and make sure those rules are followed. Parents appear to be lost when looking through the forest of children’s shows in their local newspaper’s TV grid, especially when it comes to their older children. Yet, as Jordan points out, there are good shows out there. The question is, how will parents know where they are? One obvious answer is by reading the newspaper, particularly the entertainment section, to find out what the local critic recommends. How well this function is served by print journalism is the focus of this study.
Method

This multi-method study consisted of three levels of analysis. Level I sought to understand generally the place of children's television on the news agenda. The question asked here was, “How important is this topic to editors, reporters, sources, and, presumably, audiences?” To do this, Lexis and Dialog database searches of all nine newspapers included in the study were conducted to see how often the search term “children and television and programming” appeared between July 1, 1995 and August 1, 1996. The nine newspapers coded were: the New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Daily News, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Miami Herald, Chicago Tribune, and Los Angeles Times.

The word “programming” was included in the search term to help limit the number of hits to stories that discussed the type of shows aimed at children, rather than a more cursory reference to the phenomenon of children's television (which would have yielded far more hits). These results could be compared with the amount of coverage in the reviews of each paper's television critics (Level II) as a way of discerning whether children's television is discussed primarily as a news event (e.g., a speech by Dole denouncing the state of programming) or as a form of entertainment. In addition, this level of analysis included searches of all 198 shows analyzed in Jordan's (1996) study. This approach allowed us to see what types of shows were covered the most across the newspaper, and could also be compared to the reviews of specific critics.

Level II represented the crux of the study. This stage included a content analysis of every story written between July 1, 1995 and August 1, 1996 by the television critics and columnists at the nine newspapers studied, a total of 2,266 news items across 11 writers. Stories were collected from Lexis and Dialog. In every case, the principal reviewer was included in the analysis, but we also coded several reporters who wrote other types of television columns, typically daily, substantive updates on each evening's broadcasts. So, for example, both Tom Shales and John Carmody of the Washington Post were included in the study. Because many of these daily columns are organized into several, unrelated “items,” we made “news item” our unit of analysis rather than story, with a news item defined as a section of a story with a separate (albeit often truncated) headline that is more than simply a subhead or graphic technique to break the flow of type. This approach had two advantages. First, it increased the likelihood that we would catch a reference to children's television in our sample. Second, it allowed us to capture the daily television columns in addition to the less frequent regular critics' columns.

Stories were coded for several characteristics, with the major dividing line being whether they discussed children's television. If an item did not discuss this topic, it was coded for the type of programming it did involve but nothing else (other than some basic record keeping information such as date of story). If an item did discuss children's television in any way, it was examined for a battery of other traits. These were:
• Appropriate Age Range (if mentioned): Who is the show targeting?
• Inappropriate Age Range (if mentioned): Who shouldn't watch the show?
• Good Shows: What specific program(s) is the critic recommending?
• Bad Shows: What specific program(s) is the critic not recommending?
• Criticisms: What is the critic citing as a reason not to watch the show?
• Kudos: What is the critic citing as a reason to watch the show?
• Channel: Does the critic mention the channel on which the program can be found?
• Time: Does the critic mention the time the program airs?

“Criticisms” and “Kudos” were broken down into the following dichotomous (0/1) variables, with a one indicating the critic mentioned that particular feature of the program:

• Criticisms: Violence, Sexual Themes, Offensive Language, Stereotypes, Lack of Educational or Social Message.
• Kudos: Presence of Educational or Social Message, Educational, Entertaining, and the absence of each of the following characteristics: violence, sexual themes, anti-social actions, offensive language, stereotypical representations.

These characteristics were selected from Jordan’s (1996) content analysis of individual programs. Those criteria are themselves taken from “the literature on the effects of television on children, interviews with advocates and people in ‘the business,’ and the coding team’s intuitive sense of what constitutes a quality program” (p. 14).

This level of analysis was meant to address the questions raised by Hart (1996) and Jordan (1996). Specifically, it allows us to understand the breadth of information available to parents when reading television criticism and commentary in their newspaper. A gain, the principal question being asked is, do newspapers help parents make informed decisions about what shows their children should be watching? (Coding guidelines are attached as appendices.)

Level III of the study involved a qualitative examination of four weeks’ worth of newspapers during August and September, 1996 from each of the nine publications studied, with particular attention paid to their entertainment sections. This phase of the project served four purposes. First, it allowed us to capture any regular coverage of children’s television we may have missed by looking solely at critics’ coverage. For example, every newspaper’s television guide supplement in the Sunday paper includes a section on children’s television shows. Although these were in many ways deficient in terms of providing good information on the shows listed, they did represent the type of existing feature that could be easily adapted to provide a better service to readers. They also would have been lost in an analysis that relied entirely on Lexis searches. Second, it exposed a host of regular features each paper ran for parents about activities for their children. These typically ran in “weekend” sections of the Friday paper, and included reviews of movies appropriate for children (including age suggestions and content descriptions) and
museum attractions aimed at children. Third, this level of analysis provided a portrait of what regular features run in entertainment sections already (such as soap opera columns) and how each paper's television grids were set up. Fourth, it permitted a comparison among papers in a way that might help bring ideas from one publication to another or even meld several approaches in a way that suits each individual paper's existing format and emphases.

A note on choice of publications and dates: The nine newspapers included in the study — the New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Daily News, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Chicago Tribune, Miami Herald, and Los Angeles Times — were chosen on several grounds. The New York Times and the Post were chosen for their agenda-setting role both within the news media and among policy makers (Rogers and Dearing, 1991). The Los Angeles Times was included because it has established itself as a leader in the coverage of the broadcast industry, particularly Hollywood. The others were chosen primarily for reasons of geographical diversity, with one New England paper, two Mid-Atlantic, two from the South, one from the Midwest, and one from the West. Obviously, there is an eastern bias in the sample, with only one paper originating west of the Mississippi. It was felt, however, that these papers represent distinct sections of the country (e.g., Boston and Atlanta are culturally quite different from one another) and are read far beyond their site of publication. Finally, the 13-month span of the study was designed to include two July periods and one August, as these are the months when critics review a host of new shows released by both cable and broadcast networks.
Level I: The Place of Children’s Television on the News Agenda

Children’s television programming traveled from the policy agenda to the news agenda in the last year. The nine papers studied averaged between four stories a month at the Philadelphia Daily News and 23.1 a month at the Los Angeles Times during the 13 months analyzed. A total of 1,199 stories about children’s television programming ran across all nine papers, an average of 10.3 per month at each publication. As has been suggested, much of this coverage stems from the efforts of President Clinton and Congress, spurred by children’s television advocates, to further regulate the amount and quality of network children’s shows and to require a V-chip on new television sets. As will be seen later, very few of these nearly 1,200 stories were written by television critics, indicating that this topic is defined primarily as a policy issue rather than a form of entertainment or popular culture to be reviewed and commented on.

Further evidence that children’s television programming is an issue in the news and not the entertainment sections comes from the repetition of two examples throughout the coverage. “Sesame Street” and “Power Rangers” dominated coverage, with the former being mentioned in 107 stories and the latter 106. The next show was only mentioned in 40 stories. These two shows appear to represent for politicians, advocates and journalists the best and worst of programming for kids, respectively, and are frequently used as paradigmatic examples of good and bad shows. “Sesame Street” has long been the poster child of “quality” programming and is old enough to be recognized by lawmakers, journalists, parents and children. “Power Rangers,” meanwhile, has not only become the emblem of “bad” programming but received additional attention when actors dressed as characters from the show appeared with House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

Newspapers appear about as likely to discuss high-quality shows as low-quality ones. Using Jordan’s (1996) rating system as a guide, of the 20 most frequently mentioned shows in news stories, ten were low quality, nine were high quality and one was medium quality. Expanding out to the 30 most mentioned programs, 18 were high-quality shows as compared with 11 low-quality and one medium-quality. In addition, high-quality shows were mentioned more on average than low-quality shows: excluding the outliers of “Sesame Street” and “Power Rangers,” high-quality shows were mentioned in an average of 7.6 stories each, low-quality shows in 6.1 stories each and medium-quality shows in 4.1 stories each. Finally, more high-quality shows (49) were mentioned than low-quality (43) or medium-quality (19) shows, but the difference is not great.

These numbers tell an interesting story about the way children’s television is treated in the news. First, reducing complex issues into Manichean terms — as expressed in the dominance of two programs as exemplars — is a trademark of both policymakers’ public discourse and the accompanying press coverage (Gans, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Fishman, 1980). This trend appears to hold for the most commonly mentioned programs, which are about evenly divided among high- and low-quality shows. It would appear, then, that like many issues, children’s television has been reduced by sources and journalists alike.
to a dichotomous set of “good” and “bad” shows competing for ratings. Still, very few stories that discuss children’s television programs actually mention any (even “Sesame Street” and “Power Rangers” only appear in about 9% of the total stories).

These findings suggest that newspapers tell parents there’s something wrong with the shows their children might be watching but don’t tell them what to do about it. Most importantly, given the scant references to good shows other than “Sesame Street,” parents may be left asking, “Is that all there is?” To find out, they are likely to turn to the entertainment section for answers.
Level II: Examining the Critics’ Coverage

A n analysis of more than 2,200 news items over a 13-month-period shows that the 11 television critics and columnists studied rarely covered children's programming. Only 1.2% of the total items written by these critics between July 1, 1995 and August 1, 1996 discussed children's television. This ranked behind sports (1.3%) and barely ahead of daytime talk shows (1.1%) and late night talk shows (1.1%). (Table 1) Items mentioning multiple non-children's-oriented programs were coded as “mixed” (the most common category). But any item discussing children's television was coded for that attribute alone. That means that other types of shows were actually covered far more often than children's television. For example, critics at the papers studied were about nine times as likely to mention David Letterman (204 stories, or 9%) and nearly four times as likely to mention Oprah Winfrey (94 stories, or 4%) than to mention children's television. Meanwhile, the most popular character on the most frequently mentioned example of a good children's show, “Sesame Street’s” Big Bird, only appeared in three stories, or about one-tenth of one percent of the total items. Another popular character who's name even appears in the name of the program (and so might get mentioned more often), Carmen Sandiego, fared little better: She was mentioned in just six items. This trend held across all 11 critics, who ranged from never writing about children's television (in several instances) to discussing it in just 5.6% of the items.

Table 1: Distribution of Types of Shows Discussed by TV Critics
(Percentage of total news items across all critics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network Prime Time</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News/Public Affairs</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable Movie/Special</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBS</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network Movie</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox Prime Time</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable Series</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's TV</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daytime Talk</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Night Talk</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daytime Soaps</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What did reviewers cover? What we'd expect them to, actually. After “mixed,” the most common categories were “network prime-time” (16.4%), “news and public affairs” (14.2%), “other” (12.3%), and “cable movie/special” (9.6%). Prime-time programs garner the greatest audiences and therefore appeal to the most readers. Critics would be remiss not to devote the bulk of their coverage to them. Still, the paucity of coverage in terms of proportion of overall coverage means that parents will have a difficult time finding out what the good children's shows are.

Unfortunately, the critics didn't make up for a lack of quantity with quality, at least in terms of informing parents about what made a show good or bad. In fact, even when critics wrote about children's television, they didn't review it, they described it. For example, 54% of the stories mentioning children's television didn’t reference a specific program; instead, they discussed it generally, often in an offhanded manner. All of the stories that talked about children's television without mentioning any shows talked about its problems, specifically the lack of educational messages (64% of this subset) and the tendency to reinforce stereotypes (36%). In other words, like the general news coverage of children's television, critics told parents that programming is bad, but didn't say which shows to avoid. In fact, there was just one instance of a show being explicitly mentioned as bad, the now familiar “Power Rangers.” On a brighter note, the critic did give a reason for the judgment: too violent.

While good shows were more likely to be discussed by critics than bad ones, they were usually mentioned without any description of what made the program worth watching. Of the items recommending at least one named program, 54% did not give a reason for the recommendation, typically just offering a plot summary instead. Parents are ultimately left to wonder why their child should view this program, as well as what criteria they might look for in other shows they see their children watching. In fact, parents probably wouldn't even know which of their children should watch the show: only 21% of the items mentioned the appropriate age range for a particular program.

The story isn't all bad, though. Critics did an excellent job of telling parents when and where a show could be found. Of the stories that mentioned a specific program, 77% included what channel it was on and 85% listed the time it was airing.

In addition to the 11 critics and columnists discussed, the study also coded a regular Friday column in the Miami Herald called “Kidswatch.” This column began running in early 1996 and recommends several programs airing in the coming week. The column is an improvement over the general trend in coverage outlined above in several respects. First, it has become a regular feature (complete with logo) that typically runs at the top of one of the inside pages in the entertainment section, so parents know where to find it. Second, it previews that week's episodes rather than simply discussing the subject of children's television in general or reviewing one episode, never to revisit the program again. Third, it provides an age recommendation for each show. And like other criticism, it includes time and channel information.
Still, there is room for improvement. Specifically, the column relies primarily on plot summaries rather than critical assessments of content that might explain why a show is being recommended. This is not to say that explanations are never given, just that they are not the norm. This is the same problem with similar columns in TV supplements. Possible explanations will be discussed below, but it seems important to realize that one family may have a different idea of what's suitable for their children than another. Reviewing children's programs in the same way other television shows are reviewed would allow parents to make more informed decisions.

A second problem with the column is that it tends to recommend the same shows week after week. Is this because these are the only shows the reviewer feels are worth watching? Or is it because the critic has been sent promotional material from these producers? It's unclear. Finally, some of the recommended shows were rated medium or low quality in the Jordan (1996) study: Of the 19 shows mentioned in the "Kidswatch" column that were included in that report, 11 were rated high quality, four medium, and four low quality. This isn't to say that Jordan is right and the critic is wrong, or vice versa. It may be that this critic reviewed each episode and judged it worth watching. More likely, it may suggest the need for an objective standard to which all critics can turn. The alternative would be for reviewers to actually critique each show, and, in the case of a weekly column, each episode, but that seems too onerous. (It is not done for other types of shows, for example.) This will be explored further below.
In the final portion of the study, each of the nine papers was collected for a month and analyzed. If the previous discussion has focused on what parents won't see in the entertainment section (i.e., substantive discussion of children's television programs), one of the most interesting findings from this phase of the study involves what they will see. For example, in almost every paper parents will be able to find a weekly update on the previous week's trysts and tragedies on every daytime soap opera, a horoscope to plan their day by, and, in many cases, a rundown of the eccentric guests and salacious topics on that day's daytime talk shows. On a less tawdry level, they'll also find daily highlights of prime-time and late night shows, often under the rubric of recommendations. Most of the papers studied divided these daily capsules into types of programming, including late night talk shows, network movies, and prime-time comedies and dramas. But while plenty of room was made for these regular features, the equivalent did not exist for children's shows.

This is not to say that children were ignored by newspapers. Indeed, there appeared to be a great deal of emphasis on children at all nine publications studied, particularly in the Friday/Weekend pullouts that came as extensions of the entertainment sections. Papers ran extensive listings of a wide variety of activities and cultural events for children, from museum exhibitions to festivals to concerts, often with appropriate ages listed. Many included a separate movie review section to let parents know what films might be interesting for kids. In one of the best examples of this, the Washington Post's critic not only describes the film's plot and content, but says exactly what age the movie might be appropriate for (e.g., "Trainspotting" was recommended for older high schoolers). In addition, this critic includes movies she feels are worthy (or that children might be pestering their parents to see) but that contain the usual bugaboos of sexual and/or violent imagery. The goal appears to be to provide parents with the information they need to allow them to decide whether these are things they want to keep their children from or things they might want to see together. Still, while papers seem to be bending over backward to help parents find things for their children to do, they aren't extending the same service to the activity that occupies so much of children's time: watching television. They appear to rely on the cursory plot summaries in the children's sections of weekly TV Sunday supplements. But as has been discussed above, these are largely inadequate means of informing parents about the broad range of high- and low-quality programming.
Discussion and Possible New Directions

Previous studies have shown that parents are concerned about making sure their children watch quality programming but don't know what the good shows are or where to find them. Yet research also demonstrates that there is a wide array of enriching, entertaining programs produced for children. This study suggests that newspapers appear to suffer from the same dilemma as do parents. Children's television is a consistent topic in the news sections of America's papers, often discussed in terms of a struggle between good and bad programming. Critics rarely discuss the issue, but when they do they tend to bemoan the general state of children's television. Neither the front section nor the entertainment section, however, seems to indicate what the good shows are, or even what constitutes quality programming. Critics are unlikely to mention quality shows or to say why a show is good when they do recommend a program. News articles rarely mention specific programs outside of “Sesame Street” and “Power Rangers.” Ultimately, this analysis reveals that newspapers aren't providing the necessary information for parents to make judgments for themselves about what they want their children to watch.

The story is not all bad, though. Indeed, this study found several areas of hope and potential new directions for covering children's television that fall within existing practices and news routines. Some ideas culled from the three levels of analysis:

- Reviewers can include the new season's children's television shows in their regular July and August previews of the upcoming season.
- During the review season entertainment sections could include brief recommendations of each day's children's shows on their front pages along with reviews of other new shows. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and Miami Herald already do this for other types of programming, for example.
- Instead of relying on Sunday TV supplements, newspapers would better serve parents by running weekend children's television highlights on Friday.
- In the same way that most papers already run daily highlights next to their TV grids for other types of programs, they could do the same for a couple of children's programs they find particularly noteworthy.
- Alternatively (or additionally), papers could run daily summaries of the quality children's programs next to those for daytime talk shows, morning news shows and other types of programming.
- Papers could expand on their already laudatory efforts at informing parents about cultural events aimed at children by including weekly columns like the Herald's “Kidswatch.” These columns should be more than plot summaries, however, and include the type of content and age the show is appropriate for.
- Papers could adopt a practice utilized by the New York Times in which the daily TV grid includes check marks next to recommended shows. This would require critics to review children's television shows in advance (or at least to know what shows are generally recommendable), but would allow parents who miss the Friday columns to glance quickly and see what shows look good for each day.
Implicit in many of these recommendations is the need to review children's television programs. The easiest way to do this within the existing framework of daily routines and space limitations is to include these reviews among the usual stable of new season previews that run during July and August. For shows that are already on the air, critics (or other staff members) can either review them separately or use a standard, objective system, such as that used in Jordan's study. This would make it easier to implement many of the suggestions above, such as check marks next to recommended shows in television grids.

Finally, it is worth noting that if parents are provided with the information they need to find quality children's programming, a snowball effect may occur: Ratings for these shows would likely increase (while those for low-quality shows decrease); advertisers would flock to these programs; and producers and networks would be provided with a market incentive to create more good shows and fewer bad ones. This may have the added effect of preventing future federal regulation of broadcast media. Indeed, this argument has even been made recently by the FCC (1996, p. 23).

This study makes clear that newspapers can do a better job of covering children's television. It has not intended to argue that critics should cover children's television more than prime-time, or that beat reporters should be assigned to this issue alone. Instead, it has attempted to point out how the current deficiencies in coverage can be remedied by simply treating children's television like any other entertainment genre and including it in normal reporting routines.
References


Endnotes

1 The high amount of coverage is in large a reflection of several high profile news events surrounding this issue, including President Clinton’s “summit” on children’s television in July, 1996.

2 Many of these stories were commentaries on NBC’s Olympic Coverage in July, 1996.

3 The critics and columnists coded were: Caryn James and Walter Goodman of the New York Times, Tom Shales and John Carmody of the Washington Post, Frederic Biddle of the Boston Globe, Steve Johnson of the Chicago Tribune, Howard Rosenberg of the Los Angeles Times, Robin Dougherty of the Miami Herald, Bob Longino of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Ellen Ray of the Philadelphia Daily News, and Jonathan Storm of the Philadelphia Inquirer. For some unexplained reason, Storm’s columns were not retrievable on Dialog, forcing us to code the abstracts from Lexis. It is unlikely that this would have prevented us from capturing any substantive discussion of children’s television, however.

4 It might be argued that “news and public affairs” is over-represented, but not when two factors are taken into account. First, this category would include local newscasts, which are often highly rated. Second, it also includes “newshours” such as the highly popular “60 M minutes” as well as the less watched shows such as “Dateline” and “Prime-Time Live.”

5 The “Kidswatch” column occasionally recommends parents watch a program with their children, such as when a dramatic or taboo issue is discussed in a mature and perhaps educational manner.
Appendix: Television Critics Coding Guidelines

Story ID: The story ID consists of five parts: The publication the article appeared in; the month, day, and year the item ran; and the sequential order in which the item appeared. A full ID, then, might look like the following:

pi032496b

This ID would refer to an item that ran in the Philadelphia Inquirer on March 24, 1996 and was the second item in a critic's column. Note that months always consist of two numbers (e.g., 09 and 10 for September and October).

The publication abbreviations are the following:
pi = Philadelphia Inquirer
dn = Philadelphia Daily News
ny = New York Times
wp = Washington Post
bg = Boston Globe
ac = Atlanta Journal-Constitution
mh = Miami Herald
cr = Chicago Tribune
la = Los Angeles Times
dn = Dallas Morning News
tv = TV Guide

Not Children's TV: Fill in the number corresponding to the subject matter discussed in the item if the item does not discuss children's television programming. If the item does discuss children's television programming, leave this blank.

1 Network Prime Time Show (CBS, NBC, ABC only; Prime Time runs from 8-11 p.m.)
2 Fox Prime Time Show
3 Cable Series (e.g., Larry Sanders Show on HBO)
4 Network Movie
5 Cable Movie or special (including original programming)
6 Daytime Soaps
7 Daytime Talk Shows (e.g., Oprah)
8 Late Night Talk Shows
9 PBS
10 News/News hours (e.g., Dateline)
11 Sports
12 Mixed (i.e., the item discusses more than one type of programming)
13 Other
Children's Television: Fill in a “1” if the item discussed children's television at all, even if other types of programming were mentioned in the same item; leave blank if it doesn’t.

The following categories are only coded for if the item is about children's television.

Appropriate Age Range: Fill in the number corresponding to the age range a critic says a show or group of shows is appropriate for. Leave blank if the critic does not mention an age range (e.g., just says “children” or some other generic group label). If the critic mentions an age or age range that falls within one of the listed categories but isn’t the entire category, fill in that number anyway. For example, if the critic says he would let his four year old watch “The Tick”, fill in “1” for the 0-5 age group. If the critic mentions specific ages that overlap from one group to the next, fill in “4” for mixed.

- 0 None mentioned
- 1 0-5
- 2 6-11
- 3 12+
- 4 Mixed

Inappropriate Age Range: Fill in the number corresponding to the age range a critic says a show or group or shows is inappropriate for. Leave blank if the critic does not mention an age range (e.g., just says “children” or some other generic group label). If the critic mentions an age or age range that falls within one of the listed categories but isn’t the entire category, fill in that number anyway. For example, if the critic says he wouldn’t let his four year old watch “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles”, fill in “1” for the 0-5 age group. If the critic mentions specific ages that overlap from one group to the next, fill in “4” for mixed.

- 0 None mentioned
- 1 0-5
- 2 6-11
- 3 12+
- 4 Mixed

Good Shows: Fill in the numbers corresponding to the show/shows a critic lauds as being good for children to watch. If a critic says a show would be good for one age group but not for another, this should be coded in this “good show” category rather than the next, “bad show,” category. Leave blank if not applicable.

99 = Other
**Bad Shows:** Fill in the number corresponding to the show/shows a critic criticizes as being bad for children to watch. Leave blank if not applicable.

**Criticisms:** Fill in the number corresponding to the reason a critic criticizes a show/shows. Leave blank if no specific criticism is made. These are a series of dichotomous (0/1) variables, with 0= not mentioned and 1= mentioned.

- Violence
- Sex
- Language
- Stereotypes
- Lack of Educational or Social Message

**Kudos:** Fill in the number corresponding to the reason a critic says a show is good for children. These are a series of dichotomous (0/1) variables, with 0= not mentioned and 1= mentioned.

- Social Lesson
- Educational
- Entertaining
- Not violent, sexual, anti-social, encouraging stereotypes, and/or clean language

**Information about the Show:** These are two dichotomous variables: Channel and Time. If the critic mentions what channel and/or network a show appears on, fill in a “1;” otherwise leave blank. If the critic mentions what time a show airs, fill in a “1;” otherwise leave blank.