

## Parents, children and media — The role of adults mediating children's TV viewing

Excerpts from a presentation by Sophia Wu,  
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*[Professor Wu argues that children are not as media savvy as we sometimes assume, and that with new media saturating the globe, media education is more critical than ever before. She sees an important role for parents which is not currently being fulfilled based on evidence from her research. Ed.]*



The following discussion is based on two separate but related studies that I conducted in Taiwan from 1993 to the present. One, conducted in 1994, entitled “An Investigative Study on Children’s TV Literacy” included 937 children in Grades 4 - 6. The other was a two-year ethnographic study which observed 32 families for 4 days per year from 1996-1998; it was entitled “Exploring the Social Practice of Children’s TV Viewing — Contextual Analysis and Meaning Construction.”

### **My findings indicated that:**

- More viewing does not increase TV literacy. The amount of viewing was irrelevant to children’s TV schema level. Watching more TV did not lead to more TV knowledge.
- Cognitive development plays an important role in determining the level of children’s TV knowledge. children’s TV viewing
- One of the most influential predictors of TV literacy was age. It seems that those at a higher stage of cognitive development have a better ability to decode TV messages. When young children consume adult fare, they do not necessarily understand it just because they are heavy viewers.
- Children demonstrate sufficient knowledge in decoding formal convention of TV production such as shots, cuts, and special effects.
- Children are less competent in understanding the denotative meaning of TV content and even less in understanding the connotation of TV messages.
- In general, children have greater trouble in decoding the persuasive intent of messages, social stereotyping, media ecology or political ideology.

I would like to modify the notion that children learn from watching TV; what they learn depends on what they watch. There are other variables in the process of consuming images. Based on the qualitative data from the observation of the 32 Taiwanese families, I would argue for a fuller picture of how media affects the child audience. From my observations, I found that:

- Reverse modelling is very common, especially for children who watch TV frequently. This does not mean the children understand better than their parents do; however, they present themselves as the informed and sometimes control information flow. For example, a child who is more familiar with pop music than the parents will more likely be the information-giver in the co-viewing context.
- A child co-views with an adult only about one-third of the time. Active co-viewing means that the adult is making an effort to co-view with the child, which is, in general, not common. (US data indicate only 5 minutes of adult-child co-viewing per day.)
- The social hierarchy of viewing reflects a variety of factors, including who has the remote control, who occupies the best viewing seat, and who is the information provider during viewing. Another factor is how frequently a child obeys parental intervention.
- Communicating with TV content is an ongoing process for many children. They either talk to a TV program while viewing it alone, or discuss it with siblings, particularly when watching cartoons. More often, they extend the topic from TV and make it meaningful in another context.
- Co-viewing with adults, mainly parents, is quite different than with siblings.

Adults usually do not react to children's questions and tend to give "quick" answers if they do make an effort

No matter what type of media children encounter today or in the future, they are likely to decode messages based on their developmental stage, personal experiences, and the viewing context in which they are engaged. Children are less likely to self-teach or to see through and behind the screen of manipulation without being taught or told. The complexity of globalization of children's programming and the profit-making and popular culture behind such market-driven forces are hard to understand even for adults. New media suggest a new concept of treating young audiences as a market; such an issue is way beyond children's comprehension.

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## **Children's media habits at the end of the 1990s -- Some recent US findings**

(Media include: TV, VCR, CD and audio cassette player, radio, video game player, computer, Internet, print)

- Children aged 2 to 7 spend a little more than 3 hours per day watching TV and videos; 45 minutes reading (20 minutes on books, 16 minutes on magazines, 5 minutes on newspapers).
- Children aged 8 to 13 spend about 7 hours per day on all media.
- 69% of US households with children aged 2 to 18 own a computer; the children spend on average 40 minutes per day in front of the computer screen with games and/or on the Internet.
- Children watch more general entertainment than children's programming. Children's information programs are watched most frequently by 3 to 5 year-olds. 9 to 12 year-olds watch these programs only 30 minutes per week.
- On average, in a mid-sized US city, there are about 1000 children's programs broadcast per week, of which 25% target preschoolers. The other 75% are viewed by older children who watch only about 30 minutes per week of these shows.

US children are watching a substantial amount of adult TV fare.

[Sources: Kids and Media at the New Millennium, Kaiser Foundation, November 1999;  
Children's Use of Electronic Media: A National Survey, publisher n.a.]

Presented by Sophia Wu