

Quality, quantity lacking in children's educational TV, study says

November 12 2008

Commercial broadcasters are doing the "bare minimum and not much more" for children's educational programming, according to University of Illinois communication professor Barbara Wilson, one of two lead researchers on a study released today (Nov. 12) by the organization Children Now.

The study was presented at a news conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

According to the study, one in eight TV shows (13 percent) labeled by broadcasters as educational/informational programming for children was rated as "highly educational," and about one in four (23 percent) was rated "minimally educational."

The study also found that most broadcast stations (59 percent) offered only the minimum of three hours per week of educational/informational (E/I) programming, as required by federal legislation, and only 3 percent of stations offer more than four hours.

Three-quarters of stations confined all of their E/I programming to weekends, and more than a quarter of programs were rated as high in depictions of either physical or social aggression, according to researchers.

"As parents, I think we have a right to expect that if commercial channels are using the public airwaves, they're supplying something good

for kids. That's what the Children's Television Act mandates. But I don't think the spirit of the policy is being followed here," says Wilson, who also heads the department of communication at Illinois.

Not only is the overall quality of programming a concern, Wilson said, but so is the balance between three types of educational lessons: social-emotional (self-esteem, personal feelings, relationships), cognitive-intellectual (academic), and health.

Only a third of the E/I programs broadcast on commercial television taught an academic lesson and only 3 percent taught a health lesson, she said.

"You're getting a much less diverse set of lessons and content in commercial television than you are if you go to PBS," she said.

The other lead researcher on the study was Dale Kunkel, professor of communication at the University of Arizona. Kristin Drogos, a graduate student at Illinois, was a research assistant and co-author. The programs were viewed and coded by students at Illinois who were trained and supervised by Wilson and Drogos through a semester-long class earlier this year.

The federal requirement for E/I programming on commercial television results from the Children's Television Act, enacted by Congress in 1990, Wilson said. The Federal Communications Commission then followed up in 1996 by clarifying its definition of E/I programming and enacting the rule requiring three hours per week of such programming.

The study findings are important, Wilson said, because children spend about six hours a day with some form of media, about half of that time watching television. And even though other forms of educational media exist, such as through cable television, computer software and DVDs,

broadcast television remains the only option that requires no financial resources beyond a television, she said.

In conducting the study, the researchers chose the 30 children's educational programs most widely aired by commercial broadcasters in a nationally representative sample of 24 television markets of different sizes. For comparison, they also chose 10 children's programs aired by the Public Broadcasting Service.

Three episodes of each program, broadcast between November 2007 and May 2008, were then randomly selected for analysis of their content based on six criteria of educational quality.

The student researchers who viewed the episodes were asked to judge each of the criteria on a scale from low (0) to medium (1) to high (2).

Episodes scoring 0-6 were considered "minimally educational," those scoring 7-10 were considered "moderately educational," and those scoring 11-12 were considered "highly educational."

The students also rated the episodes on the degree of physical and social aggression depicted, with 28 percent of episodes found to be high in aggressive content. Social aggression, such as name-calling and teasing, was the most prevalent, with 36 percent of episodes containing some and another 21 percent containing a high number of instances.

In some cases, portraying social aggression is necessary to teach the lesson, but often it is used gratuitously just to get a laugh, Wilson said. "And these kinds of behaviors can be just as harmful and painful to kids as physical aggression can be."

Wilson said she was confident of the study results because of reliability measures that showed consistency across the scores of the student

coders, who each worked individually in a media lab. She said the researchers plan to submit the study for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

Even though the study is critical of the mix and content of E/I programming offered by commercial broadcasters, "we are not saying that E/I programming is bad," Wilson said. "I don't want to lose sight of the fact that there is a lot of programming targeted to children that is far worse ... but when a show has an E/I label on it, parents should be able to expect high-quality content most, if not all, of the time," she said.

Wilson thinks commercial broadcasters should consider creative ways to make more programs that teach a broader range of lessons in entertaining ways. "Why should the higher quality shows be mostly on PBS?" she asked. "We ought to be able to expect the same level of quality across the board."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Quality, quantity lacking in children's educational TV, study says (2008, November 12) retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2008-11-quality-quantity-lacking-children-tv.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.