

New study shows reduction in high quality educational programming for children

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Dale Kunkel, communication professor at The University of Arizona, was one of the lead researchers in a new study by Children Now, which shows that only 1 in 8 children's education TV programs meet high quality standards.

The study, entitled "Educationally/Insufficient? An Analysis of the Educational Quality & Availability of Children's E/I Programming," evaluated the quality of programs claimed as educational/informational (E/I) by commercial stations.

Commercial television broadcasters are required by law to air a minimum of three hours per week of children's educational programming. The goal of the Children's Television Act (CTA) is to increase the availability of high-quality educational programs, such as PBS's Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. However, the guidelines that determine what qualifies as an "educational" program do not address the quality of the educational content.

Kunkel, with fellow researchers Barbara J. Wilson (University of Illinois) and Kristin L. Drogos (University of Illinois), analyzed 120 episodes across 40 program titles. Each show was evaluated on a range of educational criteria that are associated with children's learning from television.

Their findings indicate that most programs designated as E/I offer only limited educational value for child viewers: Only one of every eight E/I

shows (13%) is rated as highly educational. Nearly one of every four (23%) were classified in the lowest category of "minimally educational." Most E/I programs (63%) were judged to be "moderately educational."

Children's programming is part of the "payment" broadcasters are supposed to deliver in return for their use of the publicly-owned airwaves. Kunkel observed, "Commercial broadcasters are clearly falling short in meeting their obligation to the nation's children."

Kunkel has testified as an expert witness on children's media topics at numerous hearings before the U.S. Senate, the U.S. House of Representatives and the Federal Communications Commission.

The researchers also found that 28 percent of E/I episodes were high in aggressive content, which includes physical or social aggression, undermining the purpose of E/I programming.

Studies conducted in the 1990s found that between 20 and 33 percent of E/I programs were rated as "highly educational." Thus, the new data suggest that educational quality is at the lowest point yet measured for E/I shows aired on commercial channels.

PBS shows were rated more educational than E/I programs shown on commercial stations (9.1 vs. 7.9 on a 12-point scale.) PBS programs tended to emphasize cognitive-intellectual lessons (55 percent of programs); whereas, commercial channels relied largely on social-emotional lessons (67 percent of programs), such as sharing or getting along with others.

The study reveals that the majority of stations (59 percent) deliver only the minimum required amount of educational programming, with just 3 percent of stations nationally offering more than four hours per week. Furthermore, 75 percent of stations schedule E/I programming

exclusively on weekends, despite the fact that children watch an average of three hours of television per day every day of the week.

Eight commercial and public broadcast series earned an exemplary rating for their educational content: Sesame Street (PBS), Beakman's World (Commercial), Between the Lions (PBS), 3-2-1 Penguins (Commercial), Cyberchase (PBS), The Suite Life of Zack and Cody (Commercial), Fetch! With Ruff Ruffman (PBS) and Teen Kids News (Commercial).

"With ample models for success on public and commercial television, the mystery is why so many children's programs are still so weak at conveying educational messages," said Kunkel. "The study certainly suggests that the FCC should be monitoring compliance with the children's programming requirements much more closely in the future."

The report is being released Wednesday at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Federal Communications Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein will offer remarks on the policy implications of the research and a panel of media industry, academic and advocacy experts will discuss the findings.

Source: University of Arizona

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