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TV Broadcasters and Research on TV and Children

Are Spanish TV Broadcasters Interested In Better Quality TV For Children?

Abstract

This paper describes the main contributions of Spain's TV broadcasters to the study and reformulation of the relationship between television and childhood, and is justified by the need to compile and organise these contributions. Quality content broadcast for children, children's consumption of television and the role of TV channels in transferring a positive image of childhood are the mainstays of this text. The information we report is the result of the study by the *Observatorio Comunicación y Sociedad* (the Communication and Society Observatory). The methodology based on a review of the scientific bibliography on television and childhood enabled us to put our study in context. We then developed a questionnaire for the people responsible for the content broadcast for children by the main Spanish TV channels, and analyzed the different experiences and the working papers produced by television networks to create a setting for the broadcasters' main contributions to a new paradigm that improves the relationship between minors and television. The conclusion drawn from the analysis and the expert literature review is that, except in the case of the public state television broadcaster and some regional television stations, research on and redesign of the childhood/television relationship is not one of the TV channels' priorities. In fact, only TVE carries out important scientific research in this field.

Resumen

Este artículo describe las principales aportaciones de las televisiones españolas al estudio y reformulación de la relación entre televisión e infancia. La necesidad de recabar y organizar a lo largo del tiempo esas contribuciones justifica este trabajo. Los contenidos infantiles de calidad, el consumo infantil de televisión, y el papel de las cadenas televisivas para trasladar a la ciudadanía una imagen positiva de la infancia, han sido los ejes vertebradores sobre los que se ha fundamentado este texto. Los datos aportados son el resultado de un estudio llevado a cabo desde el Observatorio Comunicación y Sociedad. Metodológicamente, la consulta de bibliografía científica sobre la televisión y la infancia ha permitido contextualizar este estudio. Posteriormente, la utilización de una microencuesta a los responsables de contenidos infantiles de las principales cadenas televisivas españolas, y el análisis de las diferentes experiencias y documentos de trabajo elaborados por las televisiones, han permitido construir un escenario con las principales aportaciones de las emisoras a un nuevo paradigma que mejore la relación de los menores con la televisión. Las conclusiones más destacadas extraídas del análisis y de las consultas con los expertos apuntan a que, salvo en el caso de la televisión pública estatal y de algunas televisiones autonómicas, la investigación y reformulación del binomio infancia/televisión no es un objetivo prioritario para las cadenas. De hecho, solo TVE tiene producción científica relevante en la materia.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Infancia, menores, televisión, investigación, contenidos televisivos, programas, Internet, alfabetización audiovisual.

Children, minors, television, research, TV content, programmes, Internet, media literacy.

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1. Introduction and overview

So far this century, the issues that have aroused most interest among Spain's media researchers and the general public have been the defense of children's TV viewing (Torrecillas & Díaz-Cerveró, 2012), the quality of television contents aimed at minors, compliance with the «Self-Regulatory Code of Content» (Fernández-Martínez & López-de-Ayala, 2011), and the need for media literacy policies (Aguaded, 2007). The relationship between children and television is being heavily researched beyond our borders as well (Steemers & D'Arma, 2012: 67-85; Pereira & Pinto, 2011; Larsen, 2010: 267-283). In recent years, this interest has manifested itself in many scientific conferences and forums, such as the «Spanish-Portuguese Conference on Quality TV» and the «International Television Forum» both held in 2007 (Aguaded, 2007), or the «3rd Congress of Research Groups on Infancy and Communication» in Madrid in 2011.

Several university research groups have also contributed significant scientific material on the subject (Tolsá & Bringué, 2012). Research on the relationship between digital natives and the screen media (García, 2009: 7-30) by the SOC MEDIA Project, or investigations into the relationship between minors and television, such as the PROCOTIN Project (2008-2012) directed by Professor Núñez-Ladevéze, are just two of the initiatives undertaken in recent years in Spain. In each case, concern for quality children's television has been a constant.

This growing interest has, in some cases, brought about greater involvement by the television networks in the research and creation of a television discourse with the benefit of children in mind.

It has been the public state television broadcaster (TVE) that has developed the greatest number of initiatives in this sense, although concern for this issue has also been shown by regional television broadcasters.

Nevertheless, there are certain differences between the contributions, as well as in the styles of research carried out by the various broadcasters in the public television sector. While TVE's contribution has gone above and beyond its mere informative purpose and has usually been committed to research, as far as regional television stations are concerned the commitment has mainly been to raising professional awareness of child-related issues and the supervision of content during child-safe viewing times.

The search for standards relating to children's TV viewing at home as implemented in other countries (Seon-Kyoung & Doohwang, 2010: 389-403), the detection of screen risks for minors (Livingstone & Haddon & al. 2010) and the creation of a positive child-viewing discourse have been the cornerstones of public state television research; and the results of these activities have been published and disseminated at various national and international conferences. For their part, regional television broadcasting companies have mainly focused on aspects related to compliance with the 2004 «Self-Regulatory Code on Television Content and Infancy», along with the use of guidelines in their Style Books for the development of children's television contents. Their collaboration with the audiovisual councils and research groups pertaining to their sphere (Millian & Pons, 2006: 825-852; Moreno, 2007) should also be kept in mind.

The case of private networks in Spain is different. Beyond subscribing to the «Self-Regulatory Code on Television Content and Infancy» and signing a protocol for collaboration between the «Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs» and the audiovisual sector on June 26, 2004, their efforts have amounted to no more than sporadic actions promoting the rights of minors. In fact, in the proposal drawn up by the association of private networks, UTECA, for the creation of a «Supreme Television Council», child viewing has largely been ignored (Del Corral, 2006).

2. Material and methods

2.1 The «Communication and Society Observatory» as context

The «Communication and Society Observatory» is an initiative of the Villanueva/UCM research group in which researchers from the Complutense University and teachers from the CES Villanueva participate. During 2010-11, the observatory carried out an investigation project as part of a programme that funded research groups promoted by the Complutense university and the «Grupo Santander» banking institution

One of the goals of the project was to draw up a report on the current state of research on children and the media in Spain (1980-2010) to identify the main research groups and papers related

to the children/media issue, especially in the area of media schools and the media. To this end, research on the main television networks' contributions to this type of study and investigation was undertaken.

2.2 Material and methods

In order to evaluate their contribution, those actions carried out by the television networks that have contributed to improving television content related to children and their rights were taken into consideration. The documentary investigation technique and reading of scientific contributions on the subject made it possible to establish the state of the matter. From this starting point, an analysis was made of both the experiences and the scientific material which the networks had produced, either on their own or in collaboration with institutions and research groups. In addition, the envisioning of campaigns and the pro-children content broadcast by various networks enabled a better understanding of the stance taken by some of the networks in favor of a new approach to the relationship of television to children. And finally, the results obtained by a telephone survey of those responsible for children's TV contents at the networks made it possible to confirm their level of commitment concerning quality children's content first hand. The conclusions included in this article were drawn from this fieldwork.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Public state television (TVE) research on Childhood and Television

The first references to research on the relationship between children and audiovisual contents, dating back to the early years of television in Spain, can be found in the RTVE Library. One of the first documents to appear in its catalogue is the paper titled «Children and Television: a survey on television programme ratings», by Jesús María Vázquez, for the «Ministry of Information and Tourism» in 1965. The «TVE Press Dossier on Children and Advertising» (September 1979-December 1980) created by the RTVE Press Office in 1980 is another example of early documentary references to the relationship between minors and advertising.

As a member of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) TVE has, practically since its beginnings, taken part in information forums held by the European public television networks, the conclusions of which were reflected in documents such as the «Television programmes for pre-school children and kids» paper by Pilar Cabrera in 1985, which presented the main findings of a seminar on school-age television promoted by the EBU.

From 1990 to 2000, studies related to children's television viewing were carried out by TVE's Marketing and Television Ratings Research Department, although its bias and aims were now clearly business-oriented given that 1989 saw the end of TVE's television broadcasting monopoly. Currently, this department continues to produce reports of a technical nature on children's television ratings drawn up using audiometric data supplied by companies such as Kantar Media or EGM (General Media Study). Since 2000, research has been taken over by the «RTVE Institute», its training center.

3.1.1. The research contribution of public television to the issue of childhood and television between 2000 and 2010

The publication in 2003 of the white paper on «Education and the audiovisual environment» by the «Audiovisual Council of Catalonia» (Pérez-Tornero, 2003) marked a turning point in public television's awareness of the impact of television viewing on minors.

Following this report by Professor Pérez-Tornero, a reflective trend was set into motion that considered the possibility of reconciling television viewing with the interests of children. This has continued in recent years, from the family mediation perspective (Gabelas & Marta, 2008) and that of child-viewing habits (Pérez-Ornia & Núñez-Ladevéze, 2006:177) and their transformation in recent years (López-Vidales, González & Medina, 2010: 97-130).

Public state television has played an active part in this tendency since its beginning. To this end, TVE organized the national forum on «Family, Minors, Education and Television» in 2004, which yielded two decalogues on «good television practice», for children and for parents, which had been drawn up earlier in joint working sessions between researchers and media professionals. The evaluation by participants in this collaboration indicated a clear need for change in the face of

growing social alarm surrounding children's television viewing. Concern arose out of the scarcity of children's programming, inappropriate contents for minors broadcast by the networks and, especially, the long hours spent by children in front of the TV. Expert research had shown that children's television viewing took place mainly in the evening, a time when programming content was inappropriate for their age.

Shortly thereafter, the outcry from organizations such as the «Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs' National Observatory of Television for Infants» forced television companies to take notice of the problem. The outcome was the signing of the «Self-Regulatory Code on Television Content and Infancy» on December 9, 2004. Public state television not only subscribed to the agreement, but also made a commitment to further its work in favor of quality children's television.

3.1.2. From priority children's television content to sensitive content

In 2005, «Televisión Española», in collaboration with the «Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs », carried out a research project aimed at detecting the type of children's content being broadcast by Spanish networks, and to propose guidelines for programmers. It dealt with defining the preferred content and priority values that quality children's programming should possess. The results of the investigation were published by the «RTVE Institute» under the title of «Infant Television Programming: orientation and priority content» (Del Río & Román, 2005), which was coordinated by Miguel del Río, co-author of the «Pigmalión Report» (Álvarez & Del Río & Del Río, 2003). The contents were presented at the «National Forum on «Infancy, Television and Education» organized in June 2005 by the «RTVE Institute» and the «Directorate General of Families and Infancy». The forum included representatives from the main networks and the most prestigious researchers in this field.

Also in 2005, the «RTVE Institute» organized the «Young People, Drugs and Communication» forum in collaboration with the «Foundation for Assistance in the Fight against Drug Addiction ». The resulting report, as agreed by the participating researchers and called «Proposals for Action on How to Use Information about Young People and Drugs» was published by RTVE (several authors, 2005: 3-15).

In 2006, a new and powerful electronic rival to television emerged: the video game (García-Galer, 2006: 8-13). This inspired public television broadcasters to hold a national forum on «Television, Video Games and Infancy in a Multiscreen Society» in May 2006, at which the proposal arose to create a decalogue of instructions to guide families in the proper use of video games and other screen media.

In November 2007, the public state television's scientific contribution was presented at the «International Forum to «Educate our Ways of Viewing. Proposals on How to Watch Television» promoted by the «RTVE Institute», «Grupo Comunicar» and the «Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs' Directorate General of Families and Infancy», which considered the proposal for useful guidelines for much-needed media literacy and for a conscientious viewing of children's television content. The forum's scientific contribution was reflected in issue N° 31 of the journal «Comunicar», as well as in the publication of «Educating our Ways of Viewing », edited by IORTVE and «Grupo Comunicar» (Aguaded, 2007).

Nowadays, as a result of all of these contributions by public television, its professionals can count on a series of recommendations for producing content that also guarantee the rights of minors. Hence, in June 2010 TVE unanimously approved its Style Book in which, the section on the media and sensitive content dedicates an epigraph to children that refers to standard guidelines for its professionals, its aim being to manage content for children and their rights on public television in an appropriate manner (RTVE, 2010: 52).

3.1.3. TVE in the debate on children and television

Over the last ten years, public state radio & television has been collaborating with other institutions which have promoted research on the relationship between minors and the screen media, such as the «Observatory of the Directorate General of Families and Infancy», the Ministry of Education's working groups on educational television and the various audiovisual councils. For informational purposes, we should highlight the work carried out in collaboration with the Audiovisual Council of Navarra to create awareness and promote research on issues related to children

and television. This collaboration gave birth to the «Learning How to Watch TV» campaign with performances for schools, teachers and parents in that region, and in which TVE professionals took part.

Also noteworthy are other campaigns for children's rights promoted by state television. The latest was announced at the end of 2011 with the slogan «Our Commitment to Infancy». However, campaigns for literacy and awareness of healthy children's viewing of TVE programming could already be seen as far back as the 1970s and '80s. In 1988, for instance, the publicity firm «Contrapunto» conducted a campaign for this network called «Learning How to Watch Television» starring the famous dog, Pipin.

3.2. Regional public television research on children and television

The differing business structures of regional broadcasting companies and their coexistence, or not, with regional audiovisual councils, has determined the contribution of these networks to research on children and television.

3.2.1. Canal Sur

Aside from studies from a business perspective of children's ratings using audiometric data, some interesting proposals for dealing with children and television have emerged from Andalusia's regional television broadcaster. Its Style Book includes the commitment of journalists at Canal Sur to children, in line with United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child and other legal texts which have been adapted to the network's output (Canal Sur, 2004: 42). It should be emphasized that Canal Sur was one of the first television networks to incorporate these children's rights in its Style Book.

Nevertheless, this public broadcaster does not currently prioritize research on children and television, which is now mainly carried out by the existence of Audiovisual Council of Andalusia (www.consejoaudiovisualdeandalucia.es), although the network often collaborates with its investigations and with other research projects run by the regional government's Observatory of Infancy. Some of this research can be found in its website repository.

3.2.2. «Televisión de Cataluña» (TV3)

Despite being the leading regional network due to its size and its screen quota, the same considerations are applicable to TV3 as Canal Sur. Research on children and television in the region is led by the «Audiovisual Council of Catalonia» (CAC) the oldest media watchdog in Spain rather than by the Catalanian public television broadcaster. Nevertheless, the Department of Children's Programming at TV3 often collaborates with universities and the CAC, contributing evaluation and content for analysis. In addition, TV3's Style Book («Manual d'ús») devotes an epigraph to children's programming content and the values that should guide television programme production aimed at minors. In 2011, TV3's children's programming department joined in the design of educational formats for television through the «Educlip» Project, in which the «Departament of Education» of the Generalitat (regional government) and several Catalanian universities are currently taking part. All research carried out by the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia' can be found on its website (www.cac.cat) in the «Recerca i Quaderns del CAC» section..

3.2.3. Other regional companies and a new generation of regional networks

At the three remaining networks that broadcast in their own regional languages – Euskadi, Comunidad Valenciana and Galicia, research on children related to television is limited to the consumption and evaluation of data supplied by audiometric companies. Although it is true that these regions do not have their own audiovisual councils, they do have universities that generate research on this subject (López-Sánchez, Tur & García del Castillo, 2010: 553-560).

For their part, the regional networks that emerged after 2000 and which are defined as «low cost» models, RTPA, Canal Extremadura, etc., do not consider research to be one of their main goals. However, as public television broadcasters, children's rights and respect for child-safe viewing times are among their objectives.

The rest of the regional television broadcasters – Telemadrid, Castilla-LaMancha TV, etc., have made no notable contributions to research on the issue of children and television either.

3.3 Private networks and children from a research perspective

Since their creation in 1989, Spain's private networks have not shown any particular interest in the relationship between children and the screen media. The issue of children was not even included as a goal in their proposal for the creation of the «National Audiovisual Media Council », which never got off the ground (Del Corral, 2006). Despite signing up to the «Self-Regulatory Code on Television Content and Infancy», according to the results of follow-up work to determine the degree of code compliance by these networks, the impression is that private broadcasting companies only subscribed to these agreements under pressure from the press and society in general rather than because of an apparent concern for the issue. This is backed up by data from institutions such as the «Television Viewers and Radio Listeners Association», the «Audiovisual Content Observatory » (OCTA) and the Rey Juan Carlos university. Furthermore, media convergence is not helping to improve matters. Regular viewing of conventional television content by minors, either on the Internet or through television network streaming, has further complicated self-regulatory code compliance. (García Torres, 2008: 61-67). Nevertheless, in spite of non-compliance, some networks (Tele5) have made children the focus of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts. Network content with a social interest, as in the «12 months, 12 causes» campaign which included children is one rare example.

The UTECA association, which represents the interests of the private networks in Spain, has promoted occasional research proposals, the majority from a legal perspective (Fuente Cobo, 2010: 279-295). The most prominent work presented by UTECA has been the «Report on the Assessment of TVE Compliance» which was researched by the «Institute for the Study of Democracy » in 2008 (Núñez Ladevéze, 2010). One of the aspects analyzed in this report was that of child-safe viewing hours. The study concluded that «La 2» was in full compliance whereas some «TVE-1» programme compliance was questionable.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In the light of the results obtained in this study, it can be stated that TVE alone among Spain's television networks is the only company that has contributed research that aims to raise the standards of television for children. Nevertheless, some researchers (Mayugo, 2002:42-48) have been demanding alternative, quality children's programming and a new role for public television along the same lines as other European networks whose models should be taken into account. Although TVE's contribution to the debate on the need for community media literacy has been highlighted throughout this article, the public state network has declined to get involved in the various European initiative proposals on this issue in recent years.

Having abandoned the idea of creating a «National Audiovisual Media Council » that would safeguard, as was planned (García Castillejo, 2011), a healthy relationship between minors and television, and given the fact that content supervision is ever more difficult due to content broadcast on the web, a greater commitment to quality content and media literacy for minors is needed from the networks. This is especially true when we take into account that it would seem that self-regulation has not exactly yielded the results expected in Spain. It is essential that the networks collaborate with research already being carried out on concrete proposals in this area (Ferrés & Piscitelli, 2012: 75-82; Aguaded & Sánchez-Carrero, 2008: 293-308), or that they work on similar experiences being promoted throughout Europe (Pérez-Tornero & Paredes & al., 2010: 85-100).

The public state television broadcaster must follow the lead of other European networks, such as the BBC (García Matilla, 2005: 33-44), and get involved in media education for a responsible use of television, as well as for the reestablishment of viewing hours specifically for children and different youth age groups. We propose collaboration between the public networks and universities to redesign programming content for TVE's «Clan» channel, with the intention of transforming it into a truly educational channel, as well as research aimed at minors and adolescents which might fulfill one of the main purposes of the public television service: the education and training of a discerning community.

The contribution of TVE to the consideration of priority content and values in children's television programming has already been highlighted. However, this same research should also include child-oriented advertising on TV along the lines of other studies dealing with values in TV advertising aimed at adults (Rausell-Köster & Espinar & al., 2009: 109-136). The fact that TVE is not,

at the moment, subjected to market pressures guarantees that the proposal is based on positive values for children.

This article has also touched on the scarcity of scientific contributions of regional networks regarding children's viewing, and that in those regions where audiovisual councils exist it is these institutions that have to fill the research gap. This should not strike us as odd considering that the financial constraints at these regional networks impede research. It would be interesting to discover to what extent the regional audiovisual councils themselves or the recession have contributed to this lack of research. In any case, the close involvement of these networks in television policies in favor of children is essential, since it is only by taking the demands for quality children television to heart that the networks can contribute to responsible television viewing.

As for the private networks, it is noted that business interests take precedence over those of children. Their negligible interest in the relationship between minors and television is in need of a thorough motivational study. In the meantime, users and researchers retain the negative impression from research on compliance with the «Self-Regulatory Code on Content» by these private networks that demonstrate carelessness in their treatment of child-safe viewing hours (Ruiz-San-Román & Salguero, 2008; Fernández & López, 2011).

The DTT in Spain brought about more hours of child programming, as well as channels that specialize in this specific target group, such as «Clan» TV or Catalonia's «Canal Super 3». Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean better quality or a greater commitment to research. A commitment to quality children's content on the part of the independent DTT suppliers could be an area for future investigation.

Therefore, it would appear that there is sufficient evidence to state that, when television networks are faced with constant criticism for their disinterest in children, at least there is a certain predisposition on the part of public television to progress towards better television content for young people. Moreover, in spite of the general criticism of non-compliance with the «Self-Regulatory Code on Content», especially on the part of the private networks, and in spite of the poor quality of some programming, we can confirm that, slowly but surely, the quality of content for children is improving (Tur & Grande, 2009: 33-59). For this reason, it is essential that we exercise clear judgment when dealing with the networks, keeping in mind the diversity of the initiatives undertaken by the companies in the sector, although it is evident that there is still a long way to go.

In short, our proposal can be summed up as follows: to foster collaboration between television companies and universities; to research advertising aimed at minors; to study the reasons behind the lack of research by the private networks; to analyze the level of commitment to quality on the part of content suppliers; and to study the audiovisual councils' contribution to this line of research.

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