



January 1996

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Recommended Citation

Corcoran, Farrell (1996) "Children and Television Advertising," *Irish Communication Review*. Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 9.

doi:10.21427/D7313M

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/icr/vol6/iss1/9>

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Children and Television Advertising

Editorial Note

During the summer of 1995, the incoming RTÉ Authority decided to curtail the amount of television advertising broadcast during children's afternoon programming. That decision sparked a public debate on the issue. As part of its commitment to provide a public forum for discussion of broadcasting issues, a one-day seminar was organized by *Irish Communications Review* in association with the RTÉ Trade Union Group and the RTÉ Participation Forum on the issue of 'Children and Television Advertising'. It was held in the Dublin Institute of Technology at Aungier Street on 21 October, 1995; over one hundred broadcasters, advertising practitioners, educationalists, academics and others attended and contributed to a lively and stimulating exchange of views. Below are the edited transcripts of three of the major contributions to that seminar.

Media, children and RTÉ

Farrell Corcoran

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Research on media and children

I am particularly frustrated by the lack of debate on issues concerning the media and children in this country. That may be a sweeping statement but we tend to react rather than take an active interest in trying to influence things. These reactions tend to be shaped by moral panics. There is nothing as depressing as a moral panic that arises, usually in the area of violence, every year or two, in response to something happening near us, for example in Manchester, Liverpool or perhaps closer to home. The same tired old arguments and positions are taken with little sign of real thinking or that, as an educated adult group, we are moving on and informing ourselves a little more about the issues. That is my way of saying that I think this conference is a great idea and the organizers are to be praised for getting it together.

Obviously, television is a huge presence in our lives and particularly in the lives of our children. This is a startling fact of life, and yet we seem to have very little knowledge as parents, as teachers and as other professionals of its effects or how it works. Neither have we mechanisms for gaining new knowledge or looking at the results of research and beginning to apply them.

To set today's issue – advertising, television advertising and children – in a broader context for a moment: there are many concerns dealing with children and television that are studied and converge on today's topic. Usually they come under different headings or are classified in different ways but they include such issues as the information processing skills of children and how they develop across age, gender and social classes. There is much interest in children's perception of reality: What is reality? How real is the world of television, often referred to as modality? What is the modality of a particular television programme or commercial for a particular kind of child or age? Much work has also been done on patterns of attention to the stimuli coming from the television screen, both audio and visual. Again this is relevant to any intelligent discussion of advertising as a particular branch of programming. How do schema or mental models of the world develop in children?

We do know that something begins to happen in children when they get a schema or model to interpret or to assign meaning to television programmes. We need to track how that grows, particularly in relationship to different categories. How does a child know, for instance, that a particular mental model can be applied to interpreting the information from a cartoon as distinct from an actuality programme or a commercial? There is an evolving body of knowledge that looks at how children think, what goes on in their cognitive activity and how they think through the television materials that surround them, in many cases virtually all day. All this is astounding when comparisons are conducted on how much time children in different countries, including Ireland, spend in front of a television set.

Many studies have been done on the impact of television on children's creativity and growth of imagination. Again, it behooves us to ask the question: to what extent do we want to cultivate creativity in the whole younger generation in any country? To what extent is the ability to think creatively a national asset for survival and development as a nation in the future? I think it is an interesting area to look at.

Other studies look at the impact of different quantities of television viewing on children's ability in school – their performance, their reading ability and the development of their world view and belief systems. Attitude change is another fascinating area: to what extent do television materials of whatever kind change attitudes and, in particular, affect stereotyping? Do gender, ageist, racist and class stereotypes affect the representation of poverty? To what extent do they affect children's evolving attitudes to so-called real life?

There are also studies on how children use television: what are the patterns of use? what are the gratifications that children seek when they turn to television at a particular time as distinct from going out to kick a football? Some of these studies examine the displacement effect: what does television displace? There are only twenty four hours on the clock, so how do the different leisure activities of children work into that? What is pushed aside? And of course, the old hardy chestnut comes back all the time: violence. What is the relationship between depictions of violence on television and real life aggression?

I would like to argue that television advertising should be seen in a holistic way, part of a much larger environment. Television is a huge symbolic environment for children today. It replaces older symbolic environments that used to be controlled by village elders, parents, churches and urban or rural cultures. Today, we are increasingly convinced, especially in Western countries, that television is a huge shaper of our whole symbolic environment, what we call culture – that which we carry around in our heads, our feelings, ideas, attitudes, etc. This refers not just to television advertising, but television across the full range of its output.

But it is not television all by itself. It includes other media which are available to children, including computer games. It also includes what media theorists call the intertextual area, where certain meanings, symbols and icons get chained out across a great number of areas. Typical examples might be where Hollywood uses *Jurassic Park* or *Batman*; as a result, we have dinosaurs and Batmen reproduced across a huge range of media, including lunchboxes, mugs, pyjamas, etc. In other words, we are no longer talking about the spot television advertisement but a complete symbolic environment.

Consequently, we should have a holistic approach to research to understand these areas. The thorny issues of policy and regulation, what we should do about our convictions and our findings, also need to consider the total environment of children. But you might ask: who cares? People are working in university departments and think-tanks producing certain types of knowledge. Knowledge is also generated by parents observing their children, by social activists, by teachers. But how does this information get focused towards any kind of action? This is something that concerns me.

'Civil Society'

The concept of 'civil society', which has caught on more in Eastern Europe than in the West, may be useful to this discussion. Civil society means simply the organization of human thinking and activity not associated with government or market forces. It is people's movements: social activists and all kinds of organizations involved in bettering human life socially. In some countries, civil society, particularly in relation to children and children's media, is quite advanced. In the US, for instance, there has been a very active group called Action for Children's Television. The American Academy of Pediatrics has been involved in an organized way. There is also a very interesting movement, in which I was involved some years ago, called Parent Participation in TV Workshops; it was funded by a foundation that was neutral in this matter but worked hard to get parents interested in children's television, in watching with them, and in studying scripts of programmes prior to broadcast. It developed an interest in not shunning the television and turning away from it but in rolling up the sleeves and getting in there with children and doing some co-viewing. Research has shown that co-viewing, parents or older siblings watching television with children, is extremely beneficial; it helps children to read the output of television in a more intelligent or real way.

In the UK, there are also a number of groups; the National Food Alliance is building an umbrella organization of groups worried about diet – the sugary and salty food problem in advertising aimed at children. In other European countries, consumer rights associations spend some of their energies thinking and talking about television. There are also viewers and listeners associations.

In contrast, Ireland is weak in this area of civil society. We have wonderful pub and one-to-one discussions but little by way of organized discussion focused on policy reform. One way forward is to build bridges between broadcasters, advertisers, educators, parents, and opportunities and issues like this one today, where we can listen to each other. We can argue and we can disagree but at least we can listen to each other. I know the National Parents Council does look at this issue from time to time and is beginning to raise awareness; I welcome this development.

Policy Reform

Is there a need for some kind of media policy reform when we think about children: Who they are? How children use television, etc.? I am convinced that there is such a need but it must be continual, not controversy-based. We need to be continually aware of children's rights, how to protect them and how to advance them. The media environment in which children live is changing rapidly, profoundly and continually; for that reason alone we cannot stand back and say that the feelings, results and attitudes of yesterday are current tomorrow. A society that gives up on thinking about its children and their rights is lazy.

The area of policy and regulation is what media people call a 'site of contestation'. It is a difficult area; we will disagree, we will argue. There are different interests involved because it is about finding a balanced point between the rights of children and the rights of other groups in society: for example, the 'right' of producers to produce material, to have it distributed around the world, and the 'right' to advertise products. All of these are sometimes in opposition to each other. It is something that needs to be talked through rationally; it is also a situation in which I would love to see children's rights kept on the agenda.

Policy in my view must be broadfronted rather than narrow cast; it must also be empowering. We should also examine where children are presently situated developmentally, and if it is possible to give them some power to deal with the huge symbolic environment in which they have to grow up. I am talking about media education. It is time that we say to the politicians and people who control resources that

they look at the real world of children and pay attention, in the school curriculum, to that which they spend many hours a day doing.

We have run away from the issue of media education; we have shunned it. This may be unfair but I think we are only nibbling at the issue by trying to influence the curriculum in very small ways. If you talk to teachers, there is a large problem with in-service teaching. Many people ask: What are media skills? What is televisual literacy? It is not enough to say go out there and teach it; we have got to actually put resources into empowering children to deal with the environment in which they find themselves. Part of that would include demystifying the media, teaching children the processes behind certain phenomena in the world, bringing forward their skills at an earlier age. For example, helping them to discriminate a little bit in advertising; to think, as older children can, about what are the advantages and disadvantages of a product or a service? How do television programmes get made in the first place? Where does advertising fit in? How do they get made? And so on.

The core of the problem seems to be the following: Firstly, children are economic actors. We do not like to face up to this but it is true, in the sense that children exercise quite considerable power on the purchasing decisions of adults. They have an influence on adults' purchasing decisions. This is a very bald statement that must be qualified with all the subtleties of demographics: it is not true of all families, it is not true of all kids, and there are variables that would make this a much more sensitive and refined description, but I am throwing out a generalization.

Secondly, just like adults, if we are talking about commercial television or even a system like RTE which is partially commercial in its funding, the attention of children is sold to advertisers. Just like adults, their attention has to be captured, maintained and sold on to advertisers. That is the basis of how television works. So this brings up the whole question of fairness. One of the oldest principles in selling is the notion of *caveat emptor*: 'let the buyer beware'. When we try to persuade someone to purchase a service or a product, the person must be smart enough to ask the questions, to be critical, to back away, and then say, 'Yes, that's just for me'. Young children, however, do not have the ability to decide the selling or persuasive intent behind the service or product because of their particular stage of cognitive and emotional development. The same questions of fairness can be asked about other classes of people in society, such as mentally disabled people, whose cognitive skills are not on a par with adults.

These are very bald statements; I will not waste time making all the reservations that should be made: it depends on social class, the sort of cultural capital that children are lucky enough to have available to them in some families or unlucky enough not to have in others. However, it is a question that can not be brushed aside; as adults, in a democracy, in charge of our own environment, we have to ask whether there are ethical questions about the persuasive activity aimed at children.

Television advertising is not the same as advertising in the classified pages of newspapers; there, information is laid out in a linear way. Great care and expense is exerted in making commercials and they use a variety of techniques that are attractive to children. Observation studies of children's interaction with television tell us much about their attention level, the speed, camera angles, colour, music, a narrative line, etc., all of the aspects of a short commercial, that have quite an allure. While teenagers are fascinated by it, they are not taken in as are young children and are motivated to see how they are constructed; in many cases, the ads are created in a much better way than much of the programming in which they are embedded.

There is also the question of 'pester power'; the fact that pressure is exerted within families from children. Again, this is a problem from which we cannot shy away, particularly where peer pressure puts children under unsustainable pressure to purchase even where the family income does not allow it. In addition, there is great disquiet not just in a small segment of society but in many segments of society about

this pester power. This is not a problem unique to Ireland; it arises in many countries and there is much written on the subject.

What should be done?

Firstly, television is part of a huge symbolic environment, very complex and interrelated, in which our children are brought up today. Other structures of meaning that used to exist have dissolved or are rapidly dissolving as we get ready to exit from this century. Therefore, we need to pay a great deal of attention to this symbolic environment.

Secondly, broadcasters have many different kinds of audiences. They can be looked at on an age, gender or class scale, etc. Children are a special minority; they are a special audience. They need a certain amount of protection, a certain amount of empowerment. How do we do this? How do we translate this into action? One way is to limit advertiser's access to young children. A study commissioned by RTÉ in August 1995 found that a majority of adults with young children responded 'Yes' to the statement that there is too much advertising during children's programmes. The same survey also found that over 60 per cent of parents responded positively to the statements: 'We do not want to have any ads aimed at children during children's programmes' and 'There should be more regulation of what is broadcast during children's programmes'.

It is true that we must be very circumspect about quick dipstick research using qualitative methods; moreover, we can argue continually about the methodology. I am, however, using these figures to point out that there is a feeling that something should be done to limit advertiser's access to young children. This is not just a perception in the minds of academics or in the RTÉ Authority. Rather, I would like to think that the RTÉ Authority is reflecting the feelings in the country.

Other things also need to be done. Media education can be used to provide children with the cognitive skills that they need, and to balance the pressures that they feel. We need to begin this at an earlier age.

Thirdly, I would like to see something done to boost parent's and teacher's interest in television and television-related issues.

Fourthly, I would like to see us work towards some kind of level playing field at an international level to protect children's rights because every national broadcaster is working in a competitive environment which is international. We are dealing with a large number of terrestrial, cable and satellite-direct-to-home channels. This is not going to stop; the number of channels is going to increase. It makes sense for at least one broadcaster to say 'if we're going to make some changes in what we do, wouldn't it be nice to see others do the same?' In addition, Ireland is a small country, non-aligned in terms of an imperial past. We can set an example; we can begin to argue in the right places that others should come on board and form a consensus around some of these issues. There will be a lot of argument, debate and disagreement but I am an optimist; I would love to see movement towards some kind of consensus at an international level.

RTÉ Authority Policy

I want to move on to the recent RTÉ action and what was decided regarding advertising and children's programming. I will refer to the general policy decision but to no detail that has revenue implications or how it is to be operationalized: which days of the week, hours, programmes or commercial breaks. This is because there is a danger of somebody like me in a forum like this giving information that is not fully thought through, that is not detailed enough and that clashes with the information which interested parties should get from RTÉ executives who implement policy.

What was the decision of the RTÉ Authority? Firstly, being conscious of the public service broadcasting tradition but also of the dual funding situation in which RTÉ has grown up, the Authority stressed that children are a very special audience. It was decided that there should be no commercial break immediately before, during, or after a programme directed at pre-school children.

Secondly, it decided that RTÉ should reduce commercial breaks to a maximum of two in any clock hour, with a minimum of twenty minutes between breaks. It was also decided to move in the other direction: to produce and broadcast 'infomercials', short commercial-like messages with the feel, production values and quality of commercials but aimed at boosting the power that children need to deal with the symbolic environment in which they live. This would mean supporting the relationship between parents and children, putting out messages such as 'children can not always have what they want', 'Santa Claus does not have a bottomless pocket', 'all that glitters is not gold', etc. The intention is to try and reduce unreal expectations that children may and do have, partly as a result of advertising and partly as a result of peer pressure. This is a kind of cultural penetration that exists even if you do not look at television; the desire for goods that floats in the culture and is picked up from other children and places in our society.

This policy has to be implemented. RTÉ is funded in a dual way; it is not purely public service broadcasting organization; it is quite different from the BBC. RTÉ is dual funded by money from the public and the market. This means that over the past three decades, RTÉ has built up a very long and good relationship with the advertising industry. There have been some wobbles recently, partly because of the way in which the decision was announced but co-operation with advertisers is an essential part of RTÉ. It is very important that RTÉ respect that trust and the contractual obligations, whether explicit or implicit, entered into and that the policy be worked out carefully to take all of these things into account.

Trading relationships are very important and they cannot be rudely disturbed, interrupted or whatever. This is a fact of life for RTÉ. Other commercial practicalities need to be borne in mind: that we live in a competitive environment, and that children watch television and are exposed to television advertising across a range of terrestrial and cable satellite-delivered channels. TV3 will probably be on air during 1997. It is also unlikely that RTÉ will become funded solely by public money. Therefore, it will continue to be part of a commercial, competitive environment. RTÉ needs to be funded adequately, and there are arguments about the license fee, how low it is, and how long it has been frozen. But these are day-today realities.

For me personally, it has been very interesting to come from an academic environment where one has reasonable freedom to talk about research and its discoveries, to sift through that critically, and to talk about policy. But it is also interesting to find myself part of the RTÉ Authority, having to look at the realities on the ground. Because of its dual funding structure, there will always be contradictions between the public broadcasting remit and commercial imperatives. That has been part of the history of RTÉ since its foundation; it can not be wiped out. Maybe there are ways in which this can be turned to creative good rather than being seen as negative. It is my hope that through patient talking and listening to each other, we should be able to protect the rights of children.