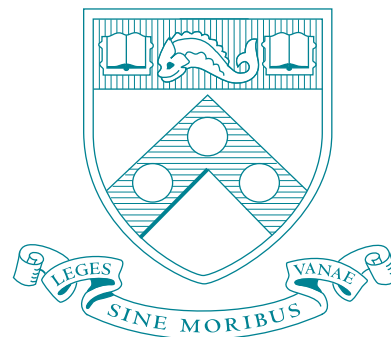


Newspaper Coverage of Children's Television: A 1997 Update

A Study by Sean Aday (Ph.D. Candidate, University of Pennsylvania) for the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, under the Direction of Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Funded by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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Foreword

The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania which would address public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. Consistent with the mission of the Annenberg School for Communication, the Center has four ongoing foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; and Health Communication. Each year, as well, a special area of scholarly and social interest is addressed. The Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas. This series of publications disseminates the work of the Center.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson
Director

Summary

This report seeks to determine whether newspaper coverage of children's shows has been affected by new Federal Communications Commission guidelines regarding the airing and labeling of educational programming, and, if it has, in what ways. An earlier study (Aday, 1996) examined coverage from July 1, 1995 through August 1, 1996; this second wave looked at television critics' coverage from August 1, 1996 through February 22, 1997.

Some of the highlights of this report are:

- **Critics rarely cover children's television.** Like the earlier study, this report found that television critics rarely review programming aimed at children. In fact, they are more likely to cover daytime talk shows than to report on programs aimed at children.
- **Parents do not think newspapers do a very good job of covering children's television.** A majority of parents in a nationwide survey (53.4%) said that their local newspaper was either "not very helpful" or "not helpful at all" in making decisions about children's programming. Newspapers were considered either "somewhat helpful" or "very helpful" by 41.4 percent.
- **Parents are more likely to use sources of information about children's programming other than newspapers.** Reflecting the perceived lack of usefulness of their local newspaper, parents surveyed reported that they were more likely to learn about programming from watching it themselves (49.7%), from *TV Guide* (24.8%), or by word of mouth. Only 9.7 percent of all parents said they were most likely to learn about programming from newspapers.
- **Even when critics do cover children's television, they rarely give a reason for recommending or panning a show.** Barely half of the stories that either lauded or criticized specific shows gave a reason for that opinion.
- **On a brighter note, critics were more likely to mention specific shows during this later period (August 1996 to February 1997) than they were in the first study (July 1995 to August 1996).** This means that critics were less likely to simply discuss children's television as a general phenomenon and more likely to tell readers which shows were worth watching and which were not.
- **None of the newspapers included educational designations in their television grids.** Only *TV Guide* included the "E/I" icon in its listings. Parents were therefore unable to use their daily newspaper to learn what programs the stations had designated as their educational fare.
- **Broadcasters are not adequately notifying newspapers and television guide services about the educational programming they are producing.** This is one of several factors making it difficult for newspapers to adapt to the new reporting requirements that took effect January 2, 1997 requiring that broadcasters inform the public which of their shows fulfill their FCC obligations.

Introduction

After nearly two years of vocal and often contentious debate among children's advocates, broadcasters, and politicians, new federal guidelines for improving the quality of children's television went into effect January 2, 1997. These guidelines, and others that take effect later this year, represent the latest in a nearly three-decade-long effort to increase the availability of positive, educational programming for children. The guidelines (discussed in more detail below) require broadcast stations to air three hours of educational programming a week in order to receive expedited license review, to label that programming with an icon or rating at the time of airing, and to notify newspapers and television guide services of the programs' educational designation so that parents can more easily find such programming.

These regulations were designed to address parents' concerns about the quality of programming their children were watching. A national survey conducted during the period of debate found that parents felt strongly about the state of children's television, with 70 percent expressing more concern about what their children watched than about *how many hours a day* they spent watching (Hart, 1996, p. 4).

With all of the attention paid to this issue by policymakers, advocates, and parents, it is not surprising that our earlier study of newspaper coverage of children's television found that children's television is a consistent topic on the news agenda. That study found, for example, that over a 13-month period during 1995 and 1996, nine newspapers ran an average of 4 to 23 stories devoted to children's television each month (Aday, 1996, p. 11). Unfortunately, however, that study also found that newspapers did a poor job of helping parents distinguish good and bad shows. For example, television critics, whose job it is to review programming and make recommendations to readers, rarely, if ever, covered children's television. Only 1.2 percent of the sampled stories written by critics concerned children's television, meaning that it was covered about as often as sports (1.3%), daytime talk shows (1.1%), and late-night talk shows (1.1%) (Aday, 1996, p. 13). Indeed, newspapers were more likely to run regular columns updating the liaisons on soap operas, the feuding lineups for that day's daytime talk shows, and highlights of prime-time and late-night shows than they were to regularly update parents about children's programming (Aday, 1996, p. 16).

Parents have apparently noticed that newspapers ignore children's programming. In an April, 1997 nationwide survey of parents and children, a majority of parents interviewed (53.4%) said their local newspaper was either "not very helpful" or "not helpful at all" in helping them to make decisions about what shows their children should watch. In fact, parents were far more likely to say that newspapers were "not helpful at all" (28.7%) than to say that they were "very helpful" (9.6%). Only 31.8 percent said they were "somewhat helpful."

Lacking confidence in their local newspaper, parents were far more likely to seek out other modes of information to help them decide what shows were good or bad. Nearly half of those surveyed (49.7%) said watching programs themselves represented their main source of information about children's pro-

gramming, with *TV Guide* the second most common response (24%) and word of mouth the third (11%). Local newspapers came in fourth at 9.8 percent. The survey's findings reveal that parents have not only noticed the lack of coverage of children's programming in local newspapers, but have sought alternative sources of information, including the opinions of other parents.

While such avenues are valuable, it is clear from earlier studies that politicians, broadcasters, and the press have left parents on their own to search the vast universe of children's programming for quality shows for their children to watch. At a conference of television critics and children's advocates held at the Annenberg Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., in October, 1996, critics offered two explanations for the lack of newspaper coverage. First, they argued that it was difficult for them to review children's television because they did not feel they were experts on what makes a show educational or high-quality. Second, they said that they were wary of trusting broadcasters or even independent sources to tell them what is and is not quality in this genre.

The Federal Communications Commission requirements that force broadcasters to make a fuller effort to provide educational programming and to notify program guides about it raise the important question of whether newspapers will use the information provided by broadcasters and include educational designations in their program grids and perhaps even reviews. This study, representing a follow-up to our earlier examination of newspaper coverage of children's television, therefore asks, "Are newspapers doing a better job of informing their readers about educational programming than they used to?"

The New Regulations: Background and Details

In the past, FCC regulations concerning educational programming have tended to be well-intentioned but toothless, and were often circumvented by broadcasters who appeared to believe that there was an inverse relationship between quality and profits. For example, regulations passed in the 1970s requiring a “reasonable amount” of educational programming typically translated into the ghettoization of such programs to the late-night or pre-dawn hours when few people, and fewer children, were likely to be watching. Furthermore, broadcasters often used a liberal definition of “educational,” passing off dubious fare as quality programming (Kunkel and Canepa, 1994; Jordan, 1996). A later effort to amend the flaws in this early regulation, the 1990 Children’s Television Act (CTA), addressed only half of the problem. The Act made more explicit what constituted “educational,” but failed to say how much time broadcasters needed to devote to such programming or when those shows had to be aired (Jordan, 1996, p. 8).

With the backing of a President committed to improving the quality of children’s television, in 1996 a bipartisan congressional effort to amend the deficiencies in the CTA culminated in new FCC guidelines regarding educational programming. These requirements address two core issues: quantity and quality. First, the guidelines require commercial broadcasters to air a minimum of three hours a week of “core educational programming” in order to expedite license renewal. Second, “core educational programming” is now defined more explicitly in terms of six components:

1. The program must have education as a significant purpose, rather than simply an incidental moral lesson in the final 30 seconds of a show otherwise laden with violent or other problematic content.
2. The educational objective and target child audience (e.g., preschoolers) of the program must be made clear in writing in the children’s programming report.
3. The program must be regularly scheduled, meaning at least once a week.
4. The program must be of substantial length, meaning at least 30 minutes.
5. The program must air between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m.
6. Finally, the program must be identified as educational at the time of its airing (e.g., with an “E/I” [educational/informational] icon in the corner of the screen) and program guide services must be notified of the educational content so they can list the program accordingly. The requirements regarding on-air identification and program guide notification took effect January 2, 1997; those mandating three hours a week of educational programming will take effect on September 1, 1997.

Method

This multi-method study consisted of three parts. The first part included a content analysis of every story by the television critics and columnists at the nine newspapers studied that was published between August 1, 1995 and February 22, 1997 — a total of 1,557 news items.¹ Stories were collected from the Lexis-Nexis database service. In every case, in addition to including the paper's principal reviewer, we analyzed stories by several reporters who wrote other types of television columns, typically daily updates on each evening's broadcasts. So, for example, both Tom Shales and John Carmody of the *Washington Post* were included in the study. Because many of these daily columns are organized into several unrelated "items," we made "news item" rather than "story" our unit of analysis. A news item was defined as a story with a separate (albeit often truncated) headline that is more than simply a subhead or graphic technique to break the flow of type. Analyzing news items rather than stories had two advantages. First, it increased the likelihood that we would catch a reference to children's television in our sample. Second, it allowed us to capture the daily television columns in addition to the less frequent regular critics' columns.

News items were coded for several characteristics, with the major dividing line being whether they discussed children's television. An item that did not discuss this topic was coded for the type of programming it did cover, but nothing else beyond such basics as date of story. An item that did discuss children's television in any way was examined for other traits, including:

- Appropriate age range (if mentioned): Who is the show targeting?
- Inappropriate age range (if mentioned): Who should not watch the show?
- Good shows: What specific program(s) is the critic recommending?
- Bad shows: What specific program(s) is the critic not recommending?
- Criticisms: What is the critic citing as a reason not to watch the show?
- Kudos: What is the critic citing as a reason to watch the show?
- Channel: Does the critic mention the channel the program can be found on?
- Time: Does the critic mention the time the program airs?

"Criticisms" and "kudos" were broken down into the following dichotomous variables, with a "1" indicating that the critic mentioned that particular feature of the program:

- Criticisms: violence, sexual themes, offensive language, stereotypes, absence of educational or social message.
- Kudos: presence of educational or social message, educational, entertaining, and absence of violence, sexual themes, offensive language, and stereotypes.

1 The critics and columnists whose writings were analyzed were: Caryn James and Walter Goodman of the *New York Times*, Tom Shales and John Carmody of the *Washington Post*, Frederic Biddle of the *Boston Globe*, Steve Johnson of the *Chicago Tribune*, Howard Rosenberg of the *Los Angeles Times*, and Phil Kloer and Bob Longino of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

The characteristics of criticisms and kudos were selected from Jordan's (1996) analysis of quality in children's television programs. Those criteria are themselves taken from "the literature on the effects of television on children, interviews with advocates and people in 'the business,' and [Jordan's] own intuitive sense of what constitutes a quality program" (p. 14).²

This level of analysis was meant to address the questions raised by Hart (1996) and Jordan (1996). Specifically, it allows us to understand the breadth of information available to parents when reading television criticism and commentary in their newspaper. Again, the principal question being asked is, do newspapers help parents make informed decisions about what shows their children should be watching? (Coding document and guidelines are attached as appendices.)

The second part of the study involved a qualitative examination of two months' worth of newspapers from each of the nine publications studied, as well as *TV Guide*, with particular attention paid to the newspapers' entertainment sections. The two months covered the period from the week of February 10, 1997 through the week of April 11, 1997. This phase of the project served four purposes. First, it allowed us to capture any regular coverage of children's television we might have missed by looking solely at critics' coverage. For example, every newspaper's television guide supplement in the Sunday paper included a section on children's television shows. Although these were in many ways deficient in terms of providing good information on the shows listed, they did represent an existing feature that might be easily adapted to provide a better service to readers. They also would have been lost in an analysis that relied entirely on Lexis searches. Second, the analysis exposed a host of regular newspaper features (typically in "weekend" sections of the Friday paper) aimed at parents about activities for their children. These included reviews of appropriate movies (including age suggestions and content descriptions) and museum attractions. Third, this analysis provided a portrait of regular features in entertainment sections (such as soap opera columns) and of how each paper's television grids were set up. Fourth, it permitted a comparison among papers in a way that might suggest ideas that could be appropriated or adapted to suit each paper's existing format and emphases.

The final part of this study involved interviews with editors and reporters at the various publications studied. This part of the project sought to better understand alternative ways of covering children's television. The results of these interviews will be discussed along with the qualitative analysis below.

The nine newspapers included in the study — the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Philadelphia Daily News*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Miami Herald*, and *Los Angeles Times* — were chosen on several grounds. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were chosen for their agenda-setting role both within the news media and among policy-makers (Rogers and Dearing, 1991). The *Los Angeles Times* was included because it has established itself

2 Intercoder reliability was achieved on all measures using the rigorous Krippendorff's Alpha statistic, with each variable achieving an acceptable reliability score of at least .62 and most exceeding the .70 level (Krippendorff, 1980). These statistics should not be confused with the more often used — but less precise — correlational measures of intercoder reliability, which should reach the .90 level. (Appendix shows the coding document and guidelines.)

as a leader in covering the broadcast industry, particularly Hollywood. The others were chosen primarily for reasons of geographical diversity, with one New England paper, two Mid-Atlantic, two from the South, one from the Midwest, and one from the West. Obviously, there is an Eastern bias in the sample, with only one paper originating west of the Mississippi. It was felt, however, that these papers represent distinct sections of the country (e.g., Boston and Atlanta are culturally quite different from one another) and are read far beyond their site of publication. Finally, the study was designed to include a period in August, as this is when critics review a host of new shows released by both cable and broadcast networks, and to also include the first few months of 1997 to see whether the new FCC guidelines were affecting coverage and, if they were, in what ways.

Findings

Part 1: Content Analysis of Newspaper Critics' Coverage of Children's Television

As in the earlier Aday study, this study found that newspaper television critics rarely covered children's television (Table 1). The most common genres covered by television critics between August 1996 and the end of February 1997 were news (19.2%), network prime-time shows (17%), and cable movies (7.9%). Children's television was covered as often as late-night talk shows such as "The Tonight Show" (1.7%), and less often than daytime talk shows such as "The Jenny Jones Show" (2.4%). Critics were about as likely to cover children's television during this period as they had been in the previous 13 months (1.2%) (Aday, 1996, p. 13).

Table 1: Types of Shows Covered by Television Critics Between July, 1995 and February 22, 1997

July 1, 1995 to August 1, 1996	Percentage news items	<i>n</i>	August 1, 1995 to February 22, 1997	Percentage news items	<i>n</i>
Mixed	24.2%	549	News/public affairs	19.2%	299
Network prime-time series	16.4%	371	Network prime-time series	17.0%	264
News/public affairs	14.2%	322	Mixed	17.0%	264
Other	12.3%	279	Cable movie/special	7.9%	123
Cable movie/special	9.6%	218	PBS	7.5%	117
PBS	7.5%	169	Other	7.2%	112
Network movie/special	4.8%	108	Cable series	7.1%	110
fox prime-time series	3.4%	76	Network movie/special	7.0%	109
Cable series	3.1%	70	fox prime-time series	3.6%	56
Sports	1.3%	29	Daytime talk	2.4%	37
Children's television	1.2%	28	Late-night talk	1.7%	26
Daytime talk	1.1%	24	Children's television	1.7%	26
Late-night talk	1.1%	24	Sports	0.7%	11
Daytime soaps	0.1%	3	Daytime soaps	0.2%	3

It is not surprising that critics' degree of attention to children's television did not differ dramatically from that found in the earlier Aday study. No external event took place after August 1, 1996 that would have propelled children's television into the foreground of critics' reporting. The new FCC guidelines that took effect January 2, 1997 would be more likely to have an immediate influence on news coverage and television grids than on reviews. Nonetheless, in nearly 20 months of coverage, during a

period when children's television was a mainstay on the news and policy agendas and when significant new federal regulations promised to dramatically alter the content and availability of that programming, critics failed to cover these shows.

Some critics did cover children's television more frequently than the overall rate. John Carmody of the *Washington Post* discussed the subject in 2 percent of his news items, and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* two television writers, Phil Kloer (4%) and Bob Longino (3%), also included more items about children's programming than did the group as a whole. Carmody and Longino write daily columns filled with many short news items focusing more on that day's programming, ratings, and other information. Kloer, on the other hand, is the only one of the article-length reviewers in the study who had a greater proportion of stories about children's shows than the group average. These results mean that parents are typically unable to learn from their newspaper's television critic what a children's show is about or whether it is good or bad. In fact, in many cases the critic virtually never mentions children's programming at all.

Perhaps related to the fact that the typical mention of children's television appears as a truncated news item in a column like Carmody's or Longino's, this type of programming is not usually covered very well even when it is mentioned. Just about half (53%) of the items that either lauded or criticized specific shows gave a reason for that opinion (e.g., the show included a positive social lesson; the show was too violent).³ Compared to the previous 13 months, however, critics were marginally more likely to give reasons for their judgments. In that earlier period, only 46 percent of the items mentioning specific programs included reasons for the opinions (Aday, 1996, p. 14).

More importantly, when they did discuss children's television, critics during this later period were far more likely to mention specific shows. Where only 46 percent of the news items about children's television between July 1, 1995 and August 1, 1996 referenced specific programs (Aday, 1996, p. 14), 73 percent of those written between August 1, 1996 and February 22, 1997 did so. Critics were also more likely to mention an appropriate or inappropriate age range for the shows they discussed, in 31 percent of the total items about children's television as compared with 21 percent of the items in the earlier study (Aday, 1996, p. 14).

Taken together, these numbers show that critics were less likely to talk about children's television as a general phenomenon in the later period but were more likely to give readers a handful of programs to seek out or avoid. But critics still offered infrequent explanations of why those shows were worth or not worth watching, even if they were more likely to do so than in the earlier period studied. And despite improving as a group, critics still tend to forget that "children" refers to a wide range of ages, interests, and needs, and that a show that might be great for a 10-year-old may be inappropriate for her 4-year-old brother.

3 Of the four stories that discussed bad shows, two included reasons for the criticism, while only eight of the 15 stories about good shows gave reasons for the positive reviews.

A final important aspect of any story about television programming is information about when the show airs and what channel it is on. On this front, this study found mixed results, especially in comparison with the earlier report. Critics were even more likely to mention a specific show's airtime in items between August 1, 1996 and February 22, 1997 (100%) than they were in items between July 1, 1995 and August 1, 1996 (85%) (Aday, 1996). But they were far less likely to mention the show's channel in the later period (42%) than the previous one (77%) (Aday, 1996). This left parents to hunt through their newspaper's television grids to find one of the few shows mentioned by critics. The next section of the report will discuss the utility of those grids for parents.

Part 2: A Closer Look at Newspaper Entertainment Sections

As mentioned earlier, the new FCC guidelines required broadcasters to begin identifying their educational programming on the air and notifying program guides of that programming as of January 2, 1997. These requirements were intended to make it easier for parents to know what shows were educational when they watched shows with their children and when they consulted their local television guides in newspapers.

On the newspaper end, unfortunately, the system has yet to work as planned. None of the papers examined between February and April of 1997 included educational designations in their daily TV listings and television grids. The only publication studied that did so was *TV Guide*, beginning in its March 1-7 issue. For shows broadcasters label as educational, *TV Guide* includes a boxed "E/I" throughout its listings.

In interviews, television editors and critics offered a variety of justifications for not including the designations. Several interviewees claimed that they are deluged with so much promotional information from broadcasters that they simply do not have time to sort through it all for educational listings. Those who read their mail more regularly said the educational notifications appeared to come in sporadically and that their job was made more difficult by the lack of a single comprehensive list. Other reporters complained of being stonewalled by networks when they tried to get more information about educational program listings. In all, only reporters and editors at the *Chicago Tribune* and *TV Guide* said they had definite plans to implement both content and educational ratings for children's programs; *TV Guide* began to do this shortly after the interviews were conducted. Reporters and editors at the *New York Times* and *Philadelphia Daily News* said they did not foresee using the E/I designation in their listings in the near future, and the remaining newspapers had not decided one way or the other.

Several themes run through these interviews. First, it seems clear that newspapers have been slow to respond to the new educational designations, despite the attention and debate the issue has received recently. Reporters and editors argue that deadline pressures prevent them from wading through the piles of information they receive from broadcasters. This rings somewhat hollow, however, as press releases are

an important source of leads and news stories at any paper, and part of a reporter's day is often spent looking through the mail. For television editors and reporters, in particular, this type of information is a primary source of information for grids and informative descriptions of everything from talk-show guests to prime-time plot lines that appear in each day's entertainment sections.

A second complaint raised in the interviews suggests another reason why newspapers have been slow to include the E/I designation in their listings. While soap opera columns are also rooted in network PR services but culled into syndicated columns sent to newspapers (and run in almost every publication included in this study), no single service collects the various network releases concerning educational programming and distributes the information in a single, comprehensive list. Reporters and editors may be able to do more in terms of sorting through their mail, but they appear justified in claiming that they are receiving little help from broadcasters. An editor at *TV Guide*, for example, said that only 431 of the roughly 1,300 television stations that regularly send their schedules to the magazine included the E/I designation at all.

Indeed, newspapers would be forgiven for not taking the broadcasters' word on what constitutes an educational or informative program for children. As discussed earlier, this was a concern raised at a 1996 Annenberg Public Policy Center conference, where critics said they were uneasy describing a show as good for children just because networks said it was. There is some early evidence that these concerns are not unfounded. At *TV Guide*, the only publication to include the E/I designation, editors have already noticed some dubious inclusions. Some of the more obvious problem candidates include the weekly basketball show "NBA Inside Stuff," reruns of "Leave It to Beaver," "Little House on the Prairie," and "Wonder Years," and several shows not ranked as "high quality" in a recent content analysis of children's programming (Jordan, 1996) such as "The Mask," "Life with Louie," and "Saved by the Bell." Faced with the time constraints of turning out a weekly magazine, editors at *TV Guide* admit they do not have time to check all of the supposedly educational shows and tend to simply include the E/I label with whatever shows the networks say are educational. Newspapers that tried to incorporate the label in their guides would face the same problem.

Reporters and editors also said there are technical problems with the E/I designation in their guides. Chief among these was the concern that it would be unnoticed in a crowded grid. Indeed, newspapers have taken a divided and gradual approach to including content ratings for prime-time network shows. Of the papers studied, only the *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *Boston Globe* include these ratings in their listings. Furthermore, the *Inquirer* did not begin doing so until February 19 and the *Globe* until March 11, despite the fact that broadcasters began using these ratings January 2.⁴

4 The *New York Times* already included the ratings when the newspaper collection section of this study began in the second week of February. It was not possible to receive the *Los Angeles Times* local edition in Washington, D.C. The paper's Washington edition does not include a daily television grid. The *Times*' Sunday television insert, however, did include these ratings, though it did not include the E/I designations.

Still, these three papers are able to include the other ratings without readability problems, and there is no reason to suspect that the letters “E/I” are any less perceptible than “TV-M.”

Conclusions

Like an earlier analysis of newspaper coverage of children's television (Aday, 1996), this project found that newspapers largely ignore children's programming in their entertainment sections, and that television critics rarely if ever cover the subject. Although papers run regular updates on soap operas and talk show guests, and a few include ratings of prime-time shows in their television grids, they do not provide similar information for shows aimed at children. This is the case despite the considerable attention the subject has received in the last two years, and despite new federal guidelines that make it easier for newspapers to know what shows broadcasters consider educational and informative. Having now examined nearly two years of newspaper coverage of this issue, this study and its predecessor lead to the conclusion that *newspapers fail to adequately inform parents about quality children's programming*.

There appear to be several reasons for this shortcoming, not all of which are the fault of newspapers. To be sure, though, newspapers could do more without radically altering their work routines or mission as objective sources of information. Critics could review the occasional children's show, particularly shows broadcasters claim are educational. This is not to say that critics should cover children's programming as heavily as they do prime-time shows, which are certainly more important to the majority of readers. But surveys such as that by Hart (1996) show that readers who also happen to be parents are concerned that they do not know how to find good shows for their children to watch. Critics could help these readers in the same way editors in many Friday "weekend" sections help parents find appropriate movies for children of all ages (Aday, 1996). To make it easier for parents to sort through the maze of currently listed children's shows, newspapers could also include E/I designations in their daily television grids (as *TV Guide* has begun to do).

The last suggestion seems on the surface to be the easiest and perhaps most useful way newspapers can improve their coverage of children's television. But for this to work, broadcasters need to be more responsible in applying the E/I designation only to programming that is genuinely educational, not merely entertaining. In addition, only about a third of television stations are including the E/I rating in the notification they send to *TV Guide*, perhaps in part because broadcasters may not have been prepared for the new regulations. Until they begin to fully comply with the new guidelines, however, newspapers and grid services will have a difficult time including this information. At the moment, newspaper editors and reporters may be understandably skeptical about including the E/I designation just because broadcasters tell them a show is educational. Newspapers have a right to be concerned about their own credibility with their readers.

And it seems clear that as far as their coverage of children's television is concerned, newspapers have already lost much of that credibility with parents. As mentioned above, a majority of parents surveyed said they found newspapers to be unhelpful in making decisions about what shows their children should watch. In addition, that survey found that parents were unlikely to cite their local newspapers as a main source of information about those shows, relying more on their own judgment, *TV Guide*, and word

of mouth. This is a worrisome combination of findings for newspapers because it indicates that parents may not be getting enough information from that source — one that, for many, could give day-to-day guidance on the family's viewing choices. Interestingly, this study found that *TV Guide*, the second most commonly used source of information about children's programming cited in the survey, is doing the most to use the new E/I designation in its grids. Newspapers, it would seem, might improve their standing with parents (and increase the likelihood that those parents would seek out the local paper for information about children's television) if they would follow *TV Guide's* lead.

So the problem appears to have many sources. Broadcasters are not applying the E/I designation uniformly and are not yet in full compliance with the requirement to notify newspapers and grid services; newspapers are not sure whether to trust educational ratings provided by broadcasters and do not feel qualified to make those determinations on their own; and parents are left as confused as ever about what shows would be good for their children to watch, making it difficult for them to support good shows and thereby encourage networks to create more like them. Indeed, these findings regarding the educational designation mirror the concerns voiced by parents and others about the ratings system put in place this year for all programming other than news and sports. Specifically, the ratings have been criticized for being inconsistently applied across networks and for not making clear *why* a show is assigned a particular rating (Mifflin, 1997).

The FCC guidelines are still new, and at least a few newspapers have indicated they would consider including E/I designations in their television grids. Perhaps this is simply a period of working out the kinks in a new system. But it is important to point out that in nearly two years of highly energized debate and action on the subject of children's television, newspapers have failed to perform the basic function of informing readers about this matter of importance to them. This is unfortunate, because perhaps the surest way to achieve the goal of higher-quality programming without increased government regulation of broadcasting is for parents to be able to find good shows for their children to watch, thereby creating an economic incentive for networks to create more of these shows. At this point, however, newspapers are not doing their part to further this process.

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Appendix: Television Critics Coding Guidelines

Story ID: The story ID consists of five parts: The publication the article appeared in; the month, day, and year the item ran; and the sequential order in which the item appeared. A full ID, then, might look like the following:

pi032496b

This ID would refer to an item that ran in the Philadelphia Inquirer on March 24, 1996 and was the second item in a critic's column. Note that months always consist of two numbers (e.g., 09 and 10 for September and October).

The publication abbreviations are the following:

pi = Philadelphia Inquirer
dn = Philadelphia Daily News
ny = New York Times
wp = Washington Post
bg = Boston Globe
ac = Atlanta Journal-Constitution
mh = Miami Herald
ct = Chicago Tribune
la = Los Angeles Times
dn = Dallas Morning News
tv = TV Guide

Paper: Fill in the number corresponding to the newspaper or magazine in which the item appeared.

- 1 Philadelphia Inquirer
- 2 Philadelphia Daily News
- 3 New York Times
- 4 Washington Post
- 5 Boston Globe
- 6 Atlanta Journal-Constitution
- 7 Miami Herald
- 8 Chicago Tribune
- 9 Los Angeles Times
- 10 Dallas Morning News
- 11 TV Guide

Critic: Fill in the number corresponding to the critic that authored the item.

- 1 Walter Goodman (NY)
- 2 Frederic Biddle (BG)
- 3 Allan Johnson (CT)
- 4 Tom Shales (WP)
- 5 John Carmody (WP)
- 6 David Jackson (WP)
- 7 Lee Winfrey (PI)
- 8 Bob Longino (AC)
- 9 Howard Rosenberg (LA)
- 10 Kate O'Hare — Kidswatch Column (MH)
- 11 Robin Dougherty (MH)
- 12 Ellen Gray (DN)
- 13 Jonathan Storm (PI)
- 14 Caryn James (NY)
- 15 Steve Johnson (CT)
- 16 Phil Kloer (AC)

Story Type: Fill in the number corresponding to the type of item being coded.

- 1 Review: A review is an item in which the critic expresses an evaluative opinion about a show that either has aired or will air.
- 2 Feature: A feature is an item in which the critic profiles an actor/actors or a show.
- 3 Commentary: A commentary is an item in which the critic expresses an opinion about a general trend in programming.

Not Children's TV: Fill in the number corresponding to the subject matter discussed in the item if the item does not discuss children's television programming. If the item does discuss children's television programming, leave this blank.

- 1 Network Prime Time Show (CBS, NBC, ABC only; Prime Time runs from 8-11 p.m.)
- 2 Fox Prime Time Show
- 3 Cable Series (e.g., Larry Sanders Show on HBO)
- 4 Network Movie
- 5 Cable Movie or special (including original programming)
- 6 Daytime Soaps
- 7 Daytime Talk Shows (e.g., Oprah)
- 8 Late Night Talk Shows

- 9 PBS
- 10 News/News hours (e.g., Dateline)
- 11 Sports
- 12 Mixed (i.e., the item discusses more than one type of programming)
- 13 Other

Children's Television: Fill in a "1" if the item discussed children's television; leave blank if it doesn't.

The following categories are only coded for if the item is about children's television.

Appropriate Age Range: Fill in the number corresponding to the age range a critic says a show or group of shows is appropriate for. Leave blank if the critic does not mention an age range (e.g., just says "children" or some other generic group label). If the critic mentions an age or age range that falls within one of the listed categories but isn't the entire category, fill in that number anyway. For example, if the critic says he would let his four year old watch "The Tick", fill in "1" for the 0-5 age group. If the critic mentions specific ages that overlap from one group to the next, fill in "4" for mixed.

- 0 None mentioned
- 1 0-5
- 2 6-11
- 3 12+
- 4 Mixed

Inappropriate Age Range: Fill in the number corresponding to the age range a critic says a show or group of shows is inappropriate for. Leave blank if the critic does not mention an age range (e.g., just says "children" or some other generic group label). If the critic mentions an age or age range that falls within one of the listed categories but isn't the entire category, fill in that number anyway. For example, if the critic says he wouldn't let his four year old watch "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles", fill in "1" for the 0-5 age group. If the critic mentions specific ages that overlap from one group to the next, fill in "4" for mixed.

- 0 None mentioned
- 1 0-5
- 2 6-11
- 3 12+

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