Perspectives, Problems And Prospects
To Children's Television In The Philippines

By

Feny de Los Angles-Bautista
Perspectives, Problems and Prospects of Children's Television in the Philippines
Focus on BATIBOT

by Feny de los Angeles-Bautista
Research and Curriculum Director
Philippine Children's Television Foundation

In the past three decades interest in television has intensified. Much has been said about television. The statements range from strong indictments that condemn television to heaping praises on the "magic box." Since 1963, when LOOK Magazine featured Albert Bandura's "What TV violence Can do to your Child" the exploration of the effects of television on children has continued in varied forms and fora from academic research to public hearings in legislative bodies in different countries to commentaries in books, magazine or newspaper articles. Seminars, symposia and conferences are organized to address the issues surrounding children and television. The debate goes on and it should. For as long as children watch television, it is best that these issues are explored.

This paper will not attempt to summarize what has been said for or against television in relation to children. It is clear that watching television per se has an impact on our children's lives just as any activity they engage in from day to day affects their growth and development. Watching television is one of the vicarious forms of experiences vis a vis concrete or firsthand experiences. As such it can affect children positively or negatively depending on the quality of the program and the quantity of time a child spends watching television.

It is also clear that television is here to stay. Since 1953, when the first television station made its first broadcast in the Philippines, Filipino children have been watching television. Over the years, there may have been changes in their viewing patterns and TV fare but it has become a part of the Filipino family's lifestyle. Today's generation of Filipino parents grew up with television and so will their children. It will be more productive for us then to focus our attention on how we can harness television's potentials for the benefit of this generation of children who continue to spend at least a fraction of their waking hours in front of the television set.

This paper focuses on one such continuing effort to maximize the potentials of television. Since 1984, the Philippine Children's Television Foundation has been producing BATIBOT ("batibot" is an old Tagalog word which means "small but strong"), a magazine format, educational television program for children. BATIBOT is now on its seventh season.
Living in Two Worlds

PCTVF was organized as a private non-stock, non-profit organization that committed itself to the development of supplementary modes of education for children through mass media and other non-formal means.

From its birth, PCTV was meant to live in two worlds. On the one hand, it was part of the Filipino children's support system, which assists them in the process of growth, development and socialization. The home, school, community and mass media are part of a child's support system. It is in the context of this environment that children grow and learn. In this world, PCTV is part of a process of nurturing and supporting children.

At the same time, PCTV is an independent producer of television and radio programs for children and has to prove itself within the commercial broadcast system in the Philippines.

The goal of contributing to the education of Filipino children was clearly a reason for PCTV's existence. But it was never presumptuous about being a substitute for the family or the school system. In the same way that books, playthings and activities facilitate children's learning and provide them with tools with which to make sense of their life's experiences, PCTV believed television, radio and print could be transformed into more educative tools beyond being forms of entertainment. So at the outset, PCTV intended to be a partner of parents, schools and communities in responding to the needs of Filipino children.

The other world within which PCTV has had to survive, at the very least, and at best, flourish is within the world of the broadcast industry. The Philippine broadcast industry is largely privately-owned and commercial in nature. It relies heavily on advertising revenue. Advertising is a profitable undertaking in the Philippines. The combined annual budget of 200 companies who are members of PANA (Philippine Association of National Advertisers) amounts to more than two billion pesos. Every television or radio program must compete for its share of the advertising peso. To stay on the air every program must make its mark in terms of ratings.

From its first season, BATIBOT had to prove itself first to its target audience, i.e. the Filipino children and at the same time to the advertising industry. BATIBOT never enjoyed the luxury of government funding even in its earliest years. At the outset, PCTV was realistic about the need to address this important aspect of its existence. The patterns of children's programs in the Philippines validates this. There have been many attempts to produce local children's programs but they were always "at risk" and often short-lived. As Lyca Brown, PCTV's Executive Director constantly reminds everyone at PCTV, "Good intentions do not necessarily make good television programs." It takes a lot of hard work and talent for an educational television program for children to survive within the Philippine broadcast
industry. Even if advertisers clearly recognize the fact that children are valuable targets in terms of marketing, resources allocated for daytime, children’s programming seldom approximate the allocations for adult, primetime programs.

Today, Batibot is aired nationwide via satellite from 10:00 to 11:00 A.M., Monday to Friday on ABS-CBN 2, a private station. The latest survey revealed a 19% rating for Batibot with an 86% audience share.

To survive and succeed in both worlds – to educate and entertain – PCTV has to keep working to sustain the quality of Batibot so it will meet the expectations of the audience and the advertisers. The challenge is to continue to innovate and still remain viable so it can stay on the air.

PCTV cannot sit back and bask in the glory of national and international awards given to Batibot and other programs produced by PCTV. The recognition is certainly gratifying but the audience ultimately decides and the advertising industry has its own basis for deciding what to support.

PCTV’s Assumptions About Children

PCTV’s assumptions about the target audience – their characteristics, needs and interests are central to our program design and guide decision-making in many ways. A basic respect for children and a continuing effort to understand their stages of growth, their concerns, their point of view is critical. BATIBOT and other programs produced by PCTV addresses children as fully thinking, feeling and dynamic human beings. They are viewed as active, intelligent learners with specific needs, interests and issues to address depending on their ages and stages of development. Thus the need to identify a specific age range as a target audience for a specific program was immediately recognized from the beginning. BATIBOT is specifically designed for four to six year olds. RADYO BATIBOT is specifically designed for seven to twelve year olds. The approaches and the content differ precisely because of the differences in their characteristics and needs and interests.

Throughout every stage of program development, pre-production and post-production, the questions are raised in a recurring fashion: Is this appropriate for children? Is it relevant to their lives? Will this interest them? Will this sustain their attention? Will they understand the message? What is a better way of communicating the message or teaching the concept?

Whenever possible we actually reach out to our audience to find out for ourselves how they really react to our programs. The research team of PCTV has tested programs for attention and recall over the past years. New formats or segment types are tried out with groups of children to gain some insights on their
reactions even at the development stages. Formats are then revised, improved or even shelved depending upon the preliminary audience feedback. Live shows presented at least once a year also provide PCTV staff members with additional opportunities to observe children's reactions to BATIBOT characters, songs, games within the context of a stage presentation. The way children respond to familiar songs and participate in recurring "game formats" also indicate whether they are regular viewers.

Since the sixth season of BATIBOT a different way of keeping in touch with the audience was introduced. The "interaction" segments are brief segments that actually feature drawings, letters, toys, photographs sent in by viewers. Viewers are invited to participate in a variety of ways. Hundreds of letters arrive at the PCTV office on a regular basis. It is a successful segment because it invites viewers to be a part of the show from their own homes. During the BATIBOT live show last December 1990 the coliseum resounded with a chorus of thousands of children's voices reciting BATIBOT's address on cue: "821 EDSA, Quezon City. Ang zip code namin ay 1100." Needless to say, it was reassuring to note that they watch the program frequently enough to memorize the address including the zip code.

BATIBOT's Strengths

The program features that can now be considered among BATIBOT's strengths were ironically those which were "risk-taking" points during BATIBOT's first years. These include choice of language, program emphasis in terms of content, character development, the use of original Filipino music, involvement of children as child talents, PCTV's position on advertising, ongoing collaboration between producers, writers, educators.

- Choice of Language - Filipino for Filipino children

From the beginning PCTV's founders did not hesitate to identify Filipino, the Philippines' national language, as the language for BATIBOT. The issue of choosing a language for an educational television program was a sensitive one given the fact that heated debate continues to center precisely on what language should be the medium of instruction in schools on one level and on a larger scale - what should be the national language. Filipino is Tagalog-based and this is partly what makes it controversial and unacceptable from the point of view of non-Tagalog speakers. There are also those who argue that Filipino children are better off learning English because it will equip them for academic life and later on, relating to the rest of the English-speaking world. The Philippines has a long colonial history which partly explains this point of view.

But the primary questions for PCTV at that point were basic and simple: What is the language that will be easily understood by most Filipino children? What is PCTV's role in contributing to the development and use of the national language?
Given the nature of television as an audio-visual mass medium, any educational television program would definitely be involved in the process of language development. PCTV chose to take a position on language teaching when it opted for Pilipino as the language of the program. By choosing Pilipino to communicate concepts, ideas and messages to Pilipino children, PCTV was convinced that BATIBOT would be better understood by its viewers. It would also communicate an underlying message more effectively. Filipino children will see for themselves that Pilipino can be used to teach them anything—from day to day household activities to more abstract concepts like feelings, fears or conflict resolution to scientific and mathematical concepts. Maybe this generation of children who are growing up on BATIBOT will not have to engage in heated and divisive arguments about the acceptability of Pilipino as a national language. It will not be necessary because they have grown up with it and can then assume ownership of Pilipino as their language.

- Program Content – Choice of Program emphasis

From the first season of BATIBOT the process of script-writing and production of programs was guided by a curriculum—a set of educational goals and objectives that clearly identified what was to be taught. This curriculum or plan for learning was organized in such a way that all aspects of a child’s growth and development would be addressed in keeping with PCTV’s view of the child as a “whole” person. Thus there were curriculum goals that addressed cognitive or intellectual needs (e.g. problem-solving, classification, recognizing symbols like letters and words, counting), moral and emotional development (e.g. understanding and coping with different feelings and emotions, conflict resolution, accepting rules and playing fair), social and cultural understanding (e.g. developing one’s identity as a Filipino, becoming aware of “things” Filipino), environmental issues and protection of the natural and man-made environment.

From the first season, BATIBOT emphasized curriculum goals that focused on social and cultural aspects to help Filipino children learn what it means to be Filipino and to appreciate their identity as Filipinos. This continues to be a part of BATIBOT’s thrust throughout the years. This is significant considering the fact that there are only 11 locally-produced shows out of the 57 children’s television programs currently on the air across the five television stations in the Philippines today. BATIBOT is the longest-running educational television program among these 11 shows.

For subsequent seasons there were additional aspects of the curriculum that were emphasized. This means that more scripts or shows were devoted to curriculum goals specifically related to that particular season’s emphasis. Sometimes special segments or formats were developed to highlight the season’s special focus. For example, the sixth season of BATIBOT focused on environmental protection and the children learned about environmental problems
e.g. domestic waste, air and water pollution, endangered animals, destruction of our forests. The initial stage involved developing awareness of these problems by identifying them and concretizing them for the children. The current season of BATIBOT continues to focus on environmental protection, this time highlighting solutions that children can actually undertake.

Choosing to focus on specific aspects of the curriculum is part of PCTV’s process of program development. It provides the entire staff with a sense of direction in terms of content. It helps to guarantee substance while PCTV continues to explore the more creative forms of communicating with Filipino children through television. What we want to say and how we want to say it are equally important.

- Character Development

All of BATIBOT’s characters evolve from brainstorming processes that define the personality, the role, the look, the possibilities. After conceptualizing human and puppet characters, scriptwriting and then art direction and finally interaction between the TV director and talent (whether child or adult actor or puppeteer) brings the character to life. At PCTV, character development is seen as an important and ongoing process. A character can be born in different ways e.g. a brilliant, flash of genius or a playful moment in one person’s mind or as a group effort. But it is always seen as an essential component of program development.

Characters are powerful ways of communicating explicit as well as subtle messages. They are among the most effective ways of translating ideas for children in concrete ways. For example, portraying non-stereotyped roles for males or females is deliberately done through characters developed in the program. Children are provided with characters who can mirror their own characteristics without being too explicit as to be threatening or even uninteresting. PCTV has learned its lessons well from the masters of puppetry in other countries but has adapted the technology to what is affordable for the production budget. The PCTV production staff constantly explores creative yet affordable ways of bringing characters alive through different formats, sets, costumes. BATIBOT operates on a production budget that is approximately U.S.$5,000 for every 45 minute episode. 60 original episodes are produced for each season.

- Using Original Filipino Music

From the first year PCTV invested its resources in original compositions by well-known as well as upcoming Filipino composers. The commitment to promoting original Filipino music instead of simply relying on available pop music or popular Western music paid off. It is actually a significant contribution to the development of music specifically for Filipino children.
addition to songs for recurring games or formats and segments that feature short songs that communicate specific concepts, background music for animation and live action films are usually especially composed for BATIBOT.

- Involvement of Child Talents

Children are involved in BATIBOT in different ways. The show's audience is also involved on screen as child talents. PCTV tries hard to involve children in an authentic way. Working with non-professional child actors is definitely more difficult and challenging for the production staff. But over the years, this is one aspect of producing the show that has been enhanced and is constantly being refined. The children have always been involved in ways that they are comfortable with and that are appropriate for them. They are asked to be themselves unlike other locally-produced programs that encourage them to mimic adults or show-off special talents in competition with other children.

During the sixth season, a new way of involving children in the program was tried. The more experienced child talents who were part of the child talent pool for the last three or four years were involved as storytellers for the popular storytelling segment. It appears to be an effective way of involving them. The audience will surely pay even more attention to the storytelling segments as child talents and children's voices are among the elements that contribute to high attention. They serve as positive models for other children and this will definitely contribute even more to developing a love for stories and literature.

On screen and off-screen (as voice-over talents for TV segments or as radio talents) PCTV treats children with respect.

- Advertising - Necessary but In the Appropriate Place

From the very first year, BATIBOT had to live with the reality of commercial spots. It was a survival issue. Since a magazine format was chosen, it was possible to provide for commercial gaps between complete segments and provide viewers with cues to signal a break from BATIBOT or a return to the program.

Considering the fact that most of the locally produced television programs for children in the Philippines are variety shows which allow advertising of products within the show itself, it is always more attractive for advertising agencies and their clients to derive instant gratification from hard-sell advertising within programs. Today, BATIBOT has been successful in clarifying its position on advertising i.e. commercials are placed in commercial breaks, not within the program. The popular and well-loved BATIBOT characters have never had to push specific products in exchange for their survival.
PCTV is committed to its audience and this includes protecting them from the pressures of hard-sell advertising. At the same time PCTV has to deal with the realities of surviving in a commercial broadcast system. PCTV has received support from reputable institutions and corporations. But this continues to be a pressing concern. Despite the fact that BATIBOT’s popularity is well-recognized, working for advertising support is always a complex process. Unfortunately, the children's visible reactions to BATIBOT characters on stage, numerous awards and media coverage or impressive ratings and figures that identify an 86 % audience share do not always translate automatically into commercial spots for BATIBOT. Marketing continues to be an area of concern.

- PCTV - A Continuing Collaborative Effort

PCTV was the first organization of its kind in the Philippines. It is not typical of production outfits in the Philippines because in addition to the production staff there was a Research Team and for several years, a Community and Extension Services Department. The organization reflects the two worlds of PCTV. It is also what makes it a dynamic one. There is a constant interchange between the production staff, writers, researchers, and educators throughout the process of producing programs. While the primary function of the research team has been to represent the audience - the children - and help the writers and production staff to better understand their audience, the writers and the production staff often came up with ideas for segments and formats or paid attention to details in the production process that reflected their own understanding of children's interests or needs. Suggestions for formats, storylines and production details could also come from the research team. While each had a role, over the years there is an increasing overlap because of increasing familiarity with the medium and the target audience. It is a natural result of an ongoing interchange among PCTV staff members.

During the early years there were inevitably more conflicts or difficulties because the roles were in the process of definition and very much was uncertain by virtue of novelty and inexperience. PCTV is now a smaller organization compared to the first years. Adjustments had to be made because of economic constraints. But it is apparent that productivity is high compared to the previous years. PCTV is working on three major programs simultaneously: BATIBOT, (a daily one hour program for four to six year olds), PINPIN (a weekly, one-hour Filipino-Chinese program for four to six year olds) and RADYO BATIBOT (a daily 30-minute program for seven to twelve year olds). There are other projects in addition to the three major programs: books, cassette tapes of BATIBOT songs, a live show that focuses on environmental protection, studio visits, language teaching.
tapes. The lessons learned from producing BATIBOT have been extended and applied to various forms each one enabling PCTV to reach out further to more children. For each of these endeavors, the standard operating procedure involves collaboration between and among PCTV staff members.

In the past years, PCTV has intensified its work with students from colleges and universities who join PCTV for a few weeks or a few months depending on their training needs. Technical and production staff members work with them throughout the apprenticeship program. PCTV serves as a training ground for young people who eventually branch out to other production companies or television networks in the Philippines.

BATIBOT's Future

As long as there are Filipino children watching television, there will always be a reason for BATIBOT to stay on the air. And the challenge for PCTV will be to continue to reach them and communicate with them in an innovative and relevant way. BATIBOT can continue to help take them to faraway places within the archipelago or even beyond so they can learn more about other people and places beyond their own communities. BATIBOT can continue to explain social realities in terms that they can really understand. BATIBOT can continue to help them figure out solutions that are within their capacity to implement. BATIBOT can continue to be there for them and help them understand themselves, their bodies, their feelings, their fears, the people around them, the day to day experiences that are part of their growing-up years.

Economic stability can never be fully guaranteed but PCTV continues to work hard on finding support that will sustain BATIBOT and keep it on the air. Ideally, increased institutional support for BATIBOT in the future and more joint projects with public institutions to broaden its reach can be worked out. PCTV's leadership has never rested in the search for ways and means to keep BATIBOT on the air and to expand in other directions. Continuing support from the advertising industry, the networks, private foundations and organizations will be necessary for PCTV's survival and growth.

In the meantime PCTV will continue to stay in touch with the Filipino children who provide the best reasons for BATIBOT's survival and growth.
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**Total No. of Hours**

- **A Day**: 10 Hours
- **5 Hours**
- **5 Hours**
- **5 Hours**
- **5 Hours**
- **5 1/2 Hours**

**Total No. of Hours a Week**: 51 1/2 Hours