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Regulation Of Children's Television:
The Australian Experience

By

Clare Petre
REGULATION OF CHILDRENS TELEVISION: the Australian experience.

By Clare Petre

Australia is one of the most regulated countries in the world in relation to television for children - a source of interest by some countries with few or no programs for children, and perhaps wonder by others who have a rich tradition of children's television and no need of government intervention.

Regulation of children's television in Australia goes back to 1977, and its hard to see this situation changing in the foreseeable future.

Why is Australia so regulated? I suppose for the same reason as this conference is being held - the belief that children are a significant and important group of consumers of television whose needs should be catered for. But they are also a group which lacks political power or a real voice within the television industry. There is strong community support for regulation as long as networks are reluctant to accept responsibility for this significant but powerless section of their audience.

The history of regulation of children's programming in Australian has essentially been a response to a lack of quality, age specific television programs for children, and a community concern to protect their interest. I regret that regulation is necessary, and that commercial networks in Australia don't willingly and enthusiastically assume the responsibility for children which is being forced upon them by the requirements of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal. But after 5 years involvement in this area, I remain convinced that without regulation, there would be no television programs made specifically for children.

Let me briefly outline the scope of the regulation I'm talking about.
In Australia all major networks broadcast nationally. The ABC, (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) and SBS (the Special Broadcasting Service) are both government funded, and neither comes under the responsibility of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, although they say that their charters take heed of the Tribunal's standards for broadcasting. There are three major commercial networks which are subject to the Broadcasting Tribunal.

In 1977 the Tribunal established a system of C Classification, that is, Children's Classification, C time, and a Childrens program Committee. This was in an attempt to improve the quality, and increase the quantity of children's programs. A series of standards for children's and preschool children's programs followed in 1984. These standards were reviewed in 1990, but the general objective is consistent - that is, that children have access to a variety of quality programs made specifically for them, including Australian drama and non drama programs.

Basically there are three levels of quotas. Each network must broadcasting 260 hours of C programs each year, during certain time bands which are set down by the Tribunal. Half these hours must be first run Australian product. This is basically the bread and butter of childrens television, and at present they are mainly things like game shows, quiz programs, nature and sport shows, often in stripe form. The rest of C Programs can be from overseas, and most come from the United States, Britain and Europe.

Secondly, networks must show the equivalent of 16 hours per year of Australian drama for children - I stress that figure - 16 hours per year.

Thirdly, networks must broadcast 30 minutes of P programs, preschool programs, each weekday.

So there is a quota of C, C Australian drama, and P programs that
each network must meet each year, and which must be approved in advance. These quotas can be increased from time to time.

Anyone who wants to have any program classified as a C, C drama or P program must submit an application to the Tribunal. My committee, the Children’s Program Committee is an advisory group to the Tribunal. It’s part time, and composed of 7 members who are drawn from the television production industry, advertising, and the community sector. It’s our job to view all applications for classification, both Australian produced and overseas, sometimes on script, sometimes in the form of completed programs. We then recommend to the Tribunal that the application either be granted classification or rejected for classification, and the Tribunal makes the final decision.

At this stage it’s important to stress that rejection for C, C drama or P classification does not mean that a program cannot be shown on television. All it means that it cannot be counted towards the network’s quota for children’s programming. It’s an important difference between regulation and censorship - the Tribunal regulates, and then only so specifically in the area of children - it has no censorship role in any area.

In many ways regulation sits uncomfortably in what is essentially the creative process of television production. Perhaps not surprisingly, there has been hostility towards the regulatory system, particularly from the networks. Inevitably there is dissatisfaction from producers whose programs are rejected for classification. But for everyone, successful or not, classification is another bureaucratic hurdle in the increasingly difficult area of making television for children. There is the major problem of raising finance, and in Australia, and probably in most places, this involves approaches to local sources of finance, the networks themselves, and usually with drama, co-production deals with overseas companies, - at each level another set of requirements.
We are acutely aware of the difficulties of making quality production for children. However, as we continually remind writers and producers - it may be difficult, but at least it’s there. Without regulation, I firmly believe that there would be little or no children’s television industry in Australia.

This leads me on to some one of the myths of children’s television. These myths have been the standard fare of attacks on the regulation process in Australia.

1. The first is that regulation stifles creativity, in that it leads to television which is worthy but basically boring.

I will refer to Childrens Television Standards 2 which sets out the criteria for C and P programs. These are the criteria against which my committee assesses applications:

A childrens program is one which
(a) is made specifically for children or groups of children within the preschool or the primary school age range
(b) is entertaining
(c) is well produced, using sufficient resources to ensure a high standard of script, cast, direction, editing, shooting, sound and other production elements
(d) enhances a child’s understanding and experience
(e) is appropriate for Australian children.

I defy anyone to show these criteria impose on producers a requirement for worthy educational material, and I mean that in the worst sense, at the expense of entertainment.

We believe that television for children can be controversial, funny, fantastic, experimental, unpredictable, imaginative, challenging, and informative. What we often get instead are programs that are well intentioned but boring, cliched, derivative, one dimensional, stereotyped, weak, and lacking in storytelling or humour.
2. A second myth about children's television goes something like - 'they don't want it, and they don't watch it'.

Support for this myth is offered in the form of ratings for children's programs, and these do suggest that this myth might be closer to reality. It's true that children's programs don't rate particularly highly, but I think the real reason has more to do with schedules and network support than much about the programs themselves.

Last year one of the networks bought a wonderful series called Round the Twist, based on a series of books by a well known Australian writer, Paul Jennings. Our Committee was thrilled with the scripts that we recommended for C Australian Drama classification - they were highly entertaining very funny, the characters were treated with respect, and there was none of the role stereotypes that we often see, particularly for female characters. The stories had many elements that young Australians love, including jokes about toilets, false teeth falling into the sewage system, ghosts, and people being buried in seagull droppings. In between the jokes and a highly entertaining romp, there were strong message about family relationships, fear, friendship, girls being leaders rather than followers, and loyalty. It was beautifully produced, filmed on location in a lighthouse on a wonderfully visual part of Australia's coastline, and terrifically cast and acted. It was clearly and specifically targetted at children, but because of its strength and high entertainment and production values, had a broad audience appeal as well.

So what did the network do with this gem of a series? They buried it. It was scheduled at 7:30 am on a Sunday morning. It got no publicity, and no on air promotion. The network was simply fulfilling its quota as required. But it was such a good series, that despite the network, children began to hear about it, and it ended up rating reasonably well considering its graveyard time-slot, but nothing like could have achieved in a more prime time slot.
Contrasted with this was another drama program, Ratbag Hero, about the life of a young Australian boy sent out to work during tough times around the turn of the century. A very strong story, and very entertaining. This time the network picked it up and ran with it. It was given heavy on air promotion. It rated extremely well.

3. A third related myth is that children would rather watch programs other than C classified ones, that is general family shows, or even programs for adults. There is no doubt that children love to watch adult dramas, sitcoms and movies. But I think it’s important to distinguish between children’s programs that children like, and other programs that children like. Some people claim that children don’t need special attention because they’re happy to watch the same programs as their parents and teenage siblings. They tend to forget that older children or adults often dictate television viewing in prime time, and so younger children go along with the family viewing patterns.

These same critics would never consider reading their children an bedtime story from an adult book. They usually read books specifically written for children and which they consider appropriate for their age and experience. In Australia we have some fine writers and illustrators of children’s literature and a huge community demand for quality children’s books. Yet this tradition does not carry over to television.

4. The last myth I want to raise is about education in particular the view that seems to say television has to be didactic to be educational. I am not talking about programs which are specifically linked with a school curriculum, which have support materials, and which are usually viewed in a classroom, with a teacher to assist with discussion.

I am talking about general television programming aimed at children, with some sort of educational or information objective. Children can learn a great deal from television, but in a differ-
ent way from the classroom. They can learn traditional literacy and numeracy, but they can also learn lots of other things.

This is what is intended in the Tribunal's standard which refers to programs enhancing a child's understanding and experience. It's considered important that as in literature, children be able to see their own view of the world - the chance to dream their own dreams, to feel a sense of location in their own culture and in relation to other cultures. Television programs which have good storytelling, entertainment and humour, can teach children about the joys and sorrows of being a child, about growing up, about their bodies and the way they change, about peer relationships and pressures, family relationship and stress. They can be exposed to messages about issues that affect them - safety, sex, drugs, coping with school, dealing with peers and adult, loss and separation, competition, fairness and injustice. The environment.

Regulation of children's television in Australia poses many problems. However, I believe that lack of regulation poses even more. A few years ago in describing what he saw as a crisis in children's television in the US, The Vice President for Research of the Children's Television Workshop Ed Palmer, said of Australia - I wish we had your problems.

Even with regulation, children's television in Australia is not a high priority. It's low in the pecking order of network priorities; it is not considered the glamour area for writers or producers; it is hard to raise finance for children's shows; networks often want to pay a lower price even though it costs no less to make a children's program than one for adults.

Regulation will protect us from the worst excesses, but unfortunately it will always mean that the minimum becomes the maximum, with few networks voluntarily exceeding the quotas set down by the Tribunal.

I'd like to finish by quoting Ed Palmer again, who in turn quoted