

## OPINION

### Children's media: clean the slate and start again

*Patricia Edgar and Barbara Biggins January 22, 2008*

We now have more televisions than people, and more mobile phones and portable video devices than televisions. Young people are absorbed, leading the technological revolution in ways no one predicted, yet the content we provide them is banal, exploitative and damaging to their wellbeing.

As Kevin Rudd sifts through John Howard's election pledges to identify those he can axe, he should consider the \$82 million promised to establish an ABC digital children's television channel. The proposal is an outmoded approach to the needs of children.

It is far from clear what would be shown on this proposed channel. The recently appointed head of children's programming at the ABC, Tim Brooke-Hunt, was given the opportunity to spell out his plans on ABC Radio National on December 6. Brooke-Hunt saw the "major attraction of the new channel" as "an ability to actually create a brand, a destination of choice, a very special place that kids can call their own". This is the kind of talk we have been hearing from Nickelodeon and Disney for more than a decade and has led to the commercialised programming kids are given.

How would this be achieved by the ABC? Brooke-Hunt intends "the Australian content to be what differentiates us from the competition". This is fanciful. The amount of money suggested over four years - \$82 million - won't go far if spent on new quality programs, so the new channel will show many repeats of programs children already see.

The ABC's managing director, Mark Scott, said in the *Herald* on December 8 that he "would not compromise the public broadcaster with advertising". But children's programming has been compromised on the ABC for the past 15 years. The program is the advertisement for the merchandise that ABC Enterprises sells in ABC shops and promotes on air to parents and children. *Play School*, *Bananas In Pyjamas*, and the overseas programs designed to accompany character-based merchandise are exploited by the ABC for revenue.

Examples of genuinely new approaches to children's television on the ABC or anywhere else on television in Australia are rare and it is unlikely we will see them. Broadcast television will not become the engine for renewal of the creative children's sector as producers comfortable in the old system will not be taking risks. And Brooke-Hunt plans to look after them. In the *Herald* on December 6 he said "marketing is a necessary aspect of the most successful shows so that producers can recoup some of the investment broadcasters make in them" - an approach that does not apply to most adult programs.

The case to justify regulation and subsidy of children's programming in Australia was always based around the need to serve the child audience, not producers. The attitude that the system is there for the benefit of the producer, now so deeply embedded in the children's production and broadcasting industry, has contributed

to the crisis for children now recognised by health professionals. Producers and broadcasters should reaffirm the ideals and principles we began with 30 years ago.

For children in the middle years, television is still important but it is often background noise while they play on their Nintendo DS or with other electronic gadgets that they reach for in the morning and take to bed at night. Yet we neglect the educational potential these media offer and allow the hucksters almost free rein.

A media revolution in programming for Australian children, relevant to their needs and interests, should be an essential part of the Rudd Government's plans for the education of children. We need to rethink literacy and learning and create new television and online programs that demonstrably support children's social, emotional, intellectual and physical wellbeing.

We need an innovative multi-platform service to deliver children's programs; a values-driven service whose mission to inspire learning is as great as its mission to entertain. Delivered via broadband, this service should empower children with opportunities to access, manipulate, create and share multimedia content that meets their needs and reflects their interests. Children will become producers and partners of this service, not just its consumers. Through a mixed economy model which blends public and private support, the service should protect children from purely commercial interests and the values that come with them. Rather than relying on old advertising models pushing product to children, ethical advertisers could be invited to be partners.

There will still need to be a subsidised, contestable fund for Australian dramas and programs produced by professionals as part of the mix. Broadcasters that have never accepted responsibility for children's programming could relinquish their programming role, but only if they are levied to support a well-financed development and production fund that would fulfil their responsibilities to the child audience as holders of licences in public trust.

No education revolution can succeed unless it encompasses all the media that dominate children's lives.

*Patricia Edgar and Barbara Biggins both served on the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's children's program committee. Edgar was the founding director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation. Biggins is a former president of the Australian Council on Children and the Media. This article appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald of 22 January 2008*