

Critical Eyes

Is television really having an adverse effect on new generations of viewers?
Dr Barrie Gunter suggests we should not be too quick to judge.

TELEVISION is a pervasive presence in children's lives. Nearly every child watches at least some television every week, although youngsters' patterns of viewing and programme tastes change as they grow older.

Concerns that children may watch too much television or be exposed to programmes which show things likely to upset or harm them have been argued about far and wide. One prominent view is that television *per se* is bad for children. The violence shown in popular drama series, for example, is believed to play a significant part in encouraging children to adopt aggressive tendencies from their early years which contribute to delinquency.

Television is often accused of being intellectually limiting. Watching is perceived to be a passive activity and that passivity as extending to other areas of the child's life. It is said to discourage children from reading or simply talking among themselves, and hence impedes the development of important conversational skills.

But are things really that bad? A new study, funded by the ITC's predecessor the Independent Broadcasting Authority, indicates that children may be far more sophisticated consumers of television than is often acknowledged. Under the direction of Professor Brian Clifford at the Polytechnic of East London, this research explored children's opinions about a wide range of programmes. In a series of semi-structured interviews, small groups of children (totalling more than 380) aged between eight and 15 years, were taken through a series of questions dealing with their viewing experiences. They were thus given considerable opportunity to express, at length, their personal views about programmes they had watched.

The research produced intriguing insights from children of different ages into the nature of their involvement with and response to television. These are well illustrated by their remarks about television drama.

Customary concerns about the influence of contemporary drama on young viewers were not strongly confirmed. Children

were found to hold open, and occasionally critical, attitudes towards both television drama made for their own age group and that aimed at more grown-up audiences. They commented readily on its realism, with older children showing a better understanding of storylines. Many were able to compare events in drama programmes to their own experiences.

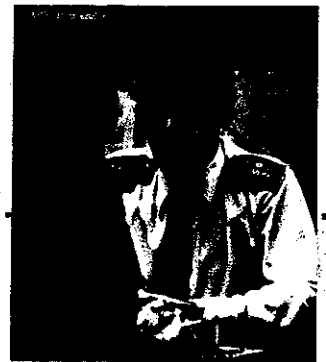
The police station in ITV's *The Bill* was seen as realistic, for instance, because of the high level of activity in it. In comparison, the station in BBC1's *Juliet Bravo* was seen as less so because it was so quiet. The apparent realism of its setting, however, did not necessarily transfer fully to all aspects of a programme. For example, the police as portrayed in *The Bill* were seen by some children as too casual when it came to chasing crooks.

Compared with American series, however, British-made police dramas were seen as more true to life. American researchers have observed that crime solution rates among TV detectives are much higher than the police in their country enjoy in real life. Children here were, interestingly, aware of discrepancies between TV and the real world (see below).

Children perceive social lessons in television drama and endorse this element as an important function of these programmes. Where serious issues are dealt with, though, they also believe that such matters should be handled with care and responsibility.

Another series, this time made for children, *Grange Hill*, has been the target of public criticism for its supposedly realistic portrayals of anti-social behaviour among teenagers, both inside and outside a school setting. The series has dealt with a number of significant personal and social problems teenagers themselves might experience, with dramatic illustrations of consequences and resolutions.

One sub-plot dealt with teenage shoplifting. Was this a good thing or a bad thing to show? Nine- and ten-year-olds held mixed opinions. According to



A FAIR COP?

THE BILL was seen to be less predictable than some American police series but was, nevertheless, thought to be characterised by nice, neat endings. Only occasionally did children perceive a departure from this norm with the crooks getting away. When asked whether the police really manage to solve crimes most of the time, children gave thoughtful responses.

DAMIAN (15) 'No - but they're not going to show us the ones that aren't solved are they? They're just showing you what they think people want...'

SHARON (15) 'Yeah, I mean, it's not really what the public want - they want a good story.'

And what about the realism of the crimes shown on programmes like The Bill?

HONOR (12) 'Some of these are a bit over the top, but I think it's pretty realistic.'

JULIE (13) 'They have the sort of things that really go on.'

SATRINDER (13) 'It's like every single police station in Britain squashed into one.'

ALEX (13) 'If they had normal crimes, it would be boring - there wouldn't be any action in it.'

Victoria (10): 'It's encouraging people to get up to things.' Another girl, Stephanie (10), concurred but also saw another aspect to it: 'And it also shows you what happens when you shoplift. So it's teaching you how to do it and it also shows you what trouble you get into when you shoplift.'

In discussing another episode for this series which featured drug-taking, some children did feel there were important lessons to be learned. The character involved made himself ill through drugs and this portrayal was thought to serve as a discouragement to children watching. But there were additional implications of such portrayals for forming early impressions of secondary school life among younger children (see right).

Even though the harm of drugs outweighed their apparent pleasures in this television depiction, some children still felt that such portrayals could implant the wrong ideas in susceptible young minds.

Television's dramatic portrayals can lead children to question stereotypes, although they are frequently accused of cultivating them. And rather than killing conversation, they provide children with topics to talk about.

The Australian serial *Neighbours* was easily the most popular programme among children at the time of this research. The reasons why children liked it included the cliff-hangers at the end of each episode, together with the attractiveness of the setting and authenticity of the characters, who were thought to have real problems with which young people in the audience could readily identify.

Analysis of soap opera performances in the past have highlighted a clear divide in sex roles. In redressing the balance, *Neighbours* depicted one leading female character (Charlene, played by Kylie Minogue) pursuing a career normally seen as the preserve of males – a motor mechanic. This was a source of inspiration and admiration for some of the teenage girls who were interviewed. While the girls liked and valued feminine qualities in soap female characters, a little added independence and ambition was welcomed as well. As one

13-year-old girl remarked about Charlene: 'Well – she's really... her own person... she wants to be a mechanic and girls often aren't mechanics, but she knows what she wants and she wants to really get it, and she doesn't care about anyone else.'

Boys were generally less willing to reveal any identification with soap characters, their reluctance appearing to stem partly



from a fear of being ridiculed by others for doing so. One exception was empathy with a sibling relationship in *Neighbours*. Here, young male viewers were able to identify with one character who was seen as being unfairly dominated by his elder brother.

Many children admitted that they regularly discussed the events of last night's episode of *Neighbours* or *EastEnders*, swapped opinions about how different characters behaved and tried to guess what would happen next. Clearly, those children who fail to keep up with what is happening on television are likely to find themselves excluded from the 'in-crowd' who do.

Talking to children about television and giving them an opportunity to describe their reactions at length can reveal a remarkable array of views. They are able and prepared to comment readily on many aspects of television and are not, as is commonly argued, duped by the box. Children's ability to follow what happens in programmes and to compare the world of television with their own world matures quickly as they grow older, but even pre-teenage children reveal a degree of insight and depth of opinion they are rarely given credit for. ●

Children's Views about Television by *Barrie Gunter, Jill McAleer and Brian Clifford* was published by Avebury in November 1991. Dr Gunter is Head of Research at the ITC.

SCHOOL SOAP

SOME children felt there were important social lessons to be learned from programmes like Grange Hill which dealt, in one episode, with drug-taking. They were put off themselves by the fact that the character in question looked 'all white and ill' after apparently taking drugs, feeling that this could deter young children from wanting to take drugs. Girls, especially, were put off.

EMMA (9) 'Well, I don't really think it's real – but I like it. But they take drugs and stuff and ... uhm ... it's not like a real school at all. It makes you frightened when you go up to senior school ... that's what it does. It makes you think "Oh God, they all take drugs here, they're going to make me start taking drugs" ... and things like that. I don't think it's a good idea to show it...'

ANGELA (9) 'It can teach people how to do drugs and everything – when they go to senior's and that.'

Are children taken in by portrayals of drug-taking?

BARBARA (9) 'No, because all the teachers are telling the people off who take drugs; the people who take drugs are taken to things like detention centres and it warns you not to take drugs or anything ... I think it's a good thing because you can be aware of what can happen to you if you take drugs.'

ANNA (9) 'I don't think it can encourage you to take drugs because it shows ... what happens if you do it and it shows how terrible it can be afterwards.'