

Growing up with TV

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OTTAWA (CUP) —

Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message" is engraved in the collective mind of today's university students.

McLuhan focused on how the media influences our behavior. But as the first generation to grow up with television, the music video and the Internet, just how far have our identities been shaped by "media culture"? Television has literally entertained and educated most of today's university population. In the '80s, our most formative years, television truly reigned supreme. Statistics Canada reports that in 1984 — when today's student was a mere tot — 60 percent of Canadian homes subscribed to cable, but only 13 percent had videocassette recorders. In 1994, in contrast, the average Canadian watched 22.7 hours of television a week, a drop of approximately 90 minutes over the previous decade. The result is that the children of the '90s watch approximately 30 minutes less TV than we did.

Geoff Pevere, an art critic with *the Toronto Star* and co-author of the Canadian pop-culture book *Mondo Canuck*, says today's university crowd is the first generation to become "more comfortable watching as much TV as possible."

"It is quite interesting that when you look at TV now, the bulk of the material is aimed at pre-teen and teen groups," said Pevere. "I don't know if this is necessarily the result of 1980s programming of shows like *Degrassi*, but I think it's probably more influential than we ever give it credit for."

Today's university crowd, of course, is not the first generation to experience the immense influence of the picture box, nor are we the most important. In fact, it may come as a surprise to many that one of our most devoted baby-sitters — *The Mighty Hercules* — actually premiered in September of 1963.

Alvin and the Chipmunks, which gained huge popularity in the 1980s, originally began in the 1950s through the introduction of novelty records. The episodes we remember, which were produced between 1983 and 1990, boasted cuter versions of the frightening original trio of rodents that starred in the 1960s program, *The Alvin Show*.

But who from our generation will ever be able to forget the lines "The ring Herc, the ring," or deny having at least one *Chipmunks* album in their family archives? On the Canadian front we all remember *The Friendly Giant*, which began production in 1958, *Mr. Dressup*, which was first produced in 1967, and *Polka Dot Door*, which was produced from 1967 to 1996. Surprisingly, today's 20-somethings have little programming directed towards them. This can be ex-

plained by demographics — our generation is smaller and has less money.

According to Jane Tallim, education co-ordinator for the Media Awareness Network, advertisers are currently working to gain the loyalty of two major markets: the baby-boom generation and the echo-boom generation. The latter are also commonly referred to as the "tweens," and are the offspring of younger baby-boomers.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that television has targeted '80s children explicitly and implicitly as consumers.

According to Tallim, television was in part a revolutionary invention because it presented advertisers with a new way of selling their products.

"If you look at advertisers, you don't see much directed directly at kids until the '60s or so. It's very subtle in the sense that it exists in the programming that kids watch," she said.

And there were at least some programs directed specifically at children growing up in the 80s, including *Sesame Street*, the *Smurfs*, *Ewoks*, and *Droids*. And many of these images have even endured — "Sesame Street" is currently in its 29th season and *Star Wars* has gained a renewed fame with the release of *Star Wars: Episode 1*.

On a distinctly Canadian note, *The Kids of Degrassi Street*, *Degrassi Junior High*, and *Degrassi High* are among our favorite childhood programs. Reruns continue to air on a regular basis. The *Degrassi* series was produced between 1980 and 1990, and took place in a multiethnic neighbourhood in Toronto. Many of us grew up alongside characters like Snake, Joey Jeremiah, Spike, Wheels and Kaitlin. The show was unique in that all of the actors were untrained and the scripts were revised by the actors. The result was perhaps the most realistic children's television show ever to air. Pevere says the *Degrassi* series had a unique impact on the children of the 1980s.

"It didn't condescend. It wasn't aimed at a demographic or consumer group and it wasn't just about dating," he said. This is now a rare quality in children's media.

Tallim explains that both the explicit, as well as the implicit, plights of marketers demonstrate that the industry is well aware that children are influenced by television to a great degree.

"There hasn't been any conclusive study, but marketers have armies of psychologists telling them what kids want and desire. The marketers know they can influence kids. You also see the effect in things like 'the mean and scary world syndrome.' Research shows that Canadians' perception of crime is greater than it really is because of the media," she said. Tallim also explained

that while programs are often divided into those that are educational and those that promote sex and violence, this separation is deceptive. In the first place, it is difficult to define what specifically should count as educational programming. Secondly, it must be acknowledged that educational programming is also packaged and sold to consumers. Tallim used the frequently heralded program *Sesame Street* to extrapolate. "Sesame Street created the prototype for MTV and Much Music — the sound-byte. After *Sesame Street* educators were expected to entertain as well as educate. Also, we have to remember the Children's Television Network is a corporation engaged in marketing," she pointed out. The music video was in fact one of the most significant and influential developments of the 1980s. Tallim says while children used to listen to their own music and create their own mental images, today these images are given to them.

In fact, the music video has revolutionized the face of music and has helped to define "television culture." Additionally, children's channels were another key marketing innovation developed in the '80s to target youth directly. While our parents were targeted with special time slots such as Saturday mornings, our generation has been the recipient of entire cable networks in the age of the 500-channel universe. Culture critic Pevere contributes this to the rise of the music video, but gives the Canadian music industry little credit for this proliferation. "While the 1980s saw a rise in independent record labels and community and campus radio, it was a time of very conservative music production," he said. "Most of the work was imitative of what was popular internationally. In Canada music never seemed more conservative or horrible. We ended up with Bryan Adams and David Foster — some real cheese."

For years now, we have been told that kids are spending more and more time in front of the television, but things are changing. Statistics from 1999 show that TV viewing among children has dropped 13 percent. Kids, however, aren't turning off the TV in favor of a good book, but rather for high-tech video games and the Internet. It is a case of technology replacing technology.

But despite the fact that TV is becoming old shoe, it isn't completely worn out just yet. The "tween" market is big money for corporations. A YTV study conducted in September 1999 revealed that in 1998 Canadian kids between the ages of 9 and 14 spent \$1.5-billion. The expanding world of technology is allowing advertisers to market their products in a variety of mediums in new ways. Leslie Shade, professor of communications at the University of Ottawa, says there are both positive and negative aspects to this expansion. "The use of the net to get different viewpoints is good — the opportunity is there to get things in an economic fashion. But the issue is also do I have the time and is the information accurate," she said. Media Awareness member Tallim adds that more and more product placement in television programs is one of the symptoms of this phenomenon. For example, "Dawson's Creek," one of the most popular shows amongst teenage girls, is currently completely outfitted by Eagle Jeans. Tallim also says that, ironically, what advertisers are currently marketing is individualism. She says this is due to the fact that there is a greater cynicism in children today than there has ever been — a cynicism towards institutions and authority.

"Everything in our society is branded, from our schools to our shows. Today, a brand is a statement about how cool you are. A lot of kids fall prey to this," Tallim said. "Teletubbies" is a perfect example of how programmers are targeting kids younger and younger. In fact, it is caused a controversy by the fact that it is the first program ever aimed specifically at infants and toddlers.

We have all heard the theories that Barbie epitomises the values and traditions of a patriarchal, consumerist society. Others believe that shows like *Ghostbusters*, and heroes like *She-Ra* and *He-Man* glorify violence.

On the flip side, there are many shows that have taught many of us valuable lessons about life — barring any commercial interests. Take, for instance, the incredibly unappreciated *Doctor Snuggles*. The clumsy *Doctor* helped children and animals with his creative inventions, and even when things didn't work out he maintained his incredible optimism. *Sesame Street* taught many children how to tie their shoes and how to deal with the loss of a loved one through the death of Mr. Hooper. *Mr. Dressup* encouraged creativity through drama, art and song. There are also some more obscure theories about the extent of television's message.



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