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ABSTRACT

To determine if children watch adult programs on weekday prime-time television because more suitable age-specific programming is unavailable, a study was conducted to assess children's viewing preferences using a forced-choice instrument. After a pilot study established the validity of the instrument, four popular children's programs were systematically pitted against early prime-time network programs in a questionnaire administered to 808 third and fifth grade students. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated a preference for their favorite adult programs even when children's programs were available. When a preferred adult program was unavailable to the child, however, the relative appeal of children's programming increased markedly. The results suggest that even popular children's programs would have trouble competing for the child audience against adult programs in prime time. Further, since much weekday afternoon programming is off-network adult television, children's programming would face similar difficulties attracting an audience if scheduled during that time. (FL)

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Theory and Methodology Division

PREFERENCES AND POLICY: SOME DATA  
FOR POLICY DECISIONS IN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION  
PROGRAMMING

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ABSTRACT

Critics of commercial children's television have asserted that contemporary program scheduling practices force the weekday children's audience to watch unsuitable adult programming. Scheduling reforms have been proposed based in part on the premise that, given a choice, children would prefer to watch programming designed for them. Two studies were conducted to: 1) determine the validity of a forced choice preference questionnaire in assessing children's television preferences and, 2) assess children's preferences via a forced choice instrument.

After the validity of a forced choice instrument was determined four popular children's programs were systematically pitted against early prime time network programs in a questionnaire administered to 308 third and fifth grade respondents. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated a preference for their favorite adult program even when children's programs were available as alternative viewing options. Some programming policy questions were also discussed in light of this data.

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PREFERENCES AND POLICY: SOME DATA  
FOR POLICY DECISIONS IN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION  
PROGRAMMING\*

In recent years, commercial broadcasters have tended to confine their schedules of children's television programming to Saturday and Sunday mornings. Critics of this scheduling practice have argued that the segregation of adult and children's television leaves the large weekday children's audience with no alternative to watching unsuitable adult television programs.

To remedy this and other perceived problems with children's television, Action for Children's Television (ACT), in 1971, proposed that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) adopt several guidelines concerning the quality, quantity and availability of children's television. Among these was the specific recommendation that broadcast licenses be required to provide age-specific children's programming at various times throughout the week, including early prime time.

Broadcasters typically took issue with this suggestion and defended their programming practices on the grounds that they already presented programs which children found entertaining and enjoyable. Among these they included many "family" programs, such as situation comedies.

ACT, nevertheless, maintained that offering family programs was not an acceptable substitute for scheduling age-specific children's programming. While ACT acknowledged the appeal that family and adult programs had for children, they attributed this to the absence of more suitable program

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alternatives. The concern they expressed was that "the schedule of what (was) being offered (was) so weighted against weekday viewing that the child (was) left little or no choice but to watch a program which was not designed for him."<sup>1</sup>

The Children's Television Report and Policy Statement, issued in 1974, recognized "the great overall imbalance" in the scheduling of children's programs, but it stopped short of adopting strict scheduling guidelines.<sup>2</sup> The Commission's action was subsequently upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington D.C.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their failure to win definitive program scheduling guidelines, critics of the status quo continue to press for more active government supervision of children's television. Indeed, the new FCC Chairman Charles Ferris, has recently expressed an interest in reviewing Commission policies with respect to children's television.

The argument for instituting scheduling guidelines, similar to those proposed by ACT, rests in part on the assumption that children would prefer to watch programs designed specifically for them if such programs were scheduled at times when they would compete for the child audience with family of adult television. However, this assumption has remained largely untested.

Children do not typically exercise exclusive control of family television sets, consequently, ratings data do not provide an adequate measure of children's program preferences. Additionally, current program scheduling practices tend not to place adult and children's programs in competition for the child audience. As a result, real world observations and viewing records cannot resolve the policy question at issue.

If it can be demonstrated that children would prefer to watch programming designed for them, given the opportunity to do so, the arguments advanced by ACT should gain credibility. If however, children indicate a strong preference for adult or family programming even when children's programs are available, then a policy enforcing such availabilities would have to be justified on some basis other than "market demand." In either case, research which addresses this issue should form the basis for more rational policy making.

Methodological Aside

The researcher attempting to address the issues of children's preferences in television programming faces the formidable task of accurately assessing children's television preferences. If a researcher could identify naturalistic settings, i.e. those where a children's show was pitted against an adult show he or she might be able to identify preferences. Alternatively a split cable arrangement might be used so that programs could be manipulated in the desired manner; the former represents a limited opportunity as such situations are not likely to occur due to commercial pressures, the latter an expensive and time consuming manipulation. Ideally the researcher would want an inexpensive and valid methodology that would allow maximum flexibility in manipulation. a paper and pencil self report form would seem to be a satisfactory solution to this problem if self report preferences correlated highly with a behavioral observation.

However the literature reports often contradictory findings on the general issue of self report validity. Walsh (1967) reviewed 27 studies on the validity of interview data. Of those 27, 13 gave an impression of high validity, nine report low validity, and the remaining five are ambiguous in their results. Bechtel, Achenpohl, and Akers (1972) monitored the self

report behaviors of 20 families in the Kansas City area and compared these reports to actual video-taped viewing behaviors. (Cameras were placed in the home to record viewing behaviors.) They reported a consistent trend in overreporting programs viewed as well as overreporting estimates of average daily viewing.

It appears, then, that the researcher wishing to use a self report form in assessing children's preferences cannot assume this report will mirror the actual viewing response. No evidence has been reported on this methodological issue in assessing children's preferences; yet it should be a serious concern to the researcher.

Our original intention was to make a determination of the relative appeal to children of adult versus children's programs. Through a series of forced choice preference items which systematically pitted well known adult and children's TV programs against one another. Third and fifth grade respondents would thus be confronted with a number of "make believe" choice situations similar to those which might confront young television viewers given the adoption of scheduling reforms. The frequency with which these respondents chose children's programs in favor of their adult competition constituted a measure of their relative appeal. However, as an examination of several self report studies offered contradictory findings, a pilot study was proposed to assess the degree of congruency between children's television preferences as measured by paper and pencil methodology and a more realistic viewing situation.

#### Pilot Study

In the Fall season, 1976, fifty third graders and forty-six fifth graders from a midwestern catholic grade school were randomly assigned to each of the two treatment groups. Students assigned to the videotape group individually

viewed four edited segments of three real world prime time shows, e. g. Captain and Tenille, Rhoda, and Little House on the Prairie constituted one segment. Four children's television shows, Pink Panther, Cosby Kids, Bugs Bunny, and Land of the Lost were randomly inserted into the original arrays (for a total of eight segments) e. g. Captain and Tenille, Rhoda, and Land of the Lost. The children were asked to choose a preferred show for viewing at the end of each segment and the preferences recorded. Students assigned to the paper and pencil group received a one page sheet and were asked to select their preferences for the same arrays as the video tape group. Figure 1 illustrates the procedure for each treatment group. e

	QUESTIONNAIRE	VIDEOTAPE			
The child is presented:	1. <table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"> <tr> <td>Captain and Tenille</td> <td>Little House</td> <td>Rhoda</td> </tr> </table>	Captain and Tenille	Little House	Rhoda	1. A video tape segment of the introduction to Captain & Tenille, Little House, on the Prairie, and Rhoda.
Captain and Tenille	Little House	Rhoda			
The child is instructed	Mark and "X" through the box that has the TV program you want to watch.	Which of these shows would you like to watch now?			
The process is repeated:	Each of the eight segments.	Each of the eight segments.			

Figure 1

## RESULTS

The children's responses were tabulated to determine the frequency of responses found in each viewing segment.

Using a chi-square analysis it was determined that no significant difference existed between treatment groups at either the third grade or fifth grade level. In addition, the correlation between the video group and the questionnaire group was determined by treating each show as an individual and using the frequency as a means of assigning a score. For third graders the correlation was .90, for the fifth graders the correlation was .80.

## DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

While the purist could argue that our video treatment and observations therein are not true behavioral observations we believe that the treatment does closely approximate the normal viewing situation. The experimenters were careful to avoid any covert cuing to the students regarding particular selections. The children were led to believe that they would have a chance to view the show of their preference. At the end of the testing session it was explained that due to time constraints we wouldn't be able to see the show and apologized. This was done with parental awareness and no child was overly dismayed.

For the researcher these results suggest that a simple questionnaire is an acceptable alternative to more intricate and time consuming methodologies in determining children's television preferences. Furthermore, an analysis of the responses indicated a preference for adult prime time shows in almost all cases.



Preference Study

As the results of the pilot supported the use of the paper and pencil form for determining children's preferences, the questionnaire was expanded and given to a larger sample. The selection of programs for use in the questionnaire, the questionnaire's design, the method of test administration and the sample are described below.

Program Selection

As Schramm, Lyle and Parker have observed, "It is clear that there is no distinct boundary between adult and children's programs, except at the extreme ends of the continuum."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, such distinctions are commonly made. This study did not attempt to identify children's and adult programming on the basis of specific content characteristics. Rather, it relied on widely shared intuitive categorizations to make adult versus children's program distinctions.

Adult programs. The adult programs used in the questionnaire were all network shows drawn from the "family viewing" time period (8-9 P.M. E.S.T.) in the fall of 1976. Programs were selected in the family viewing time for a number of reasons. First, they are by definition, programs designed to appeal not specifically to children, but to the entire family. Second, the commonly employed programming technique of "stripping" the same show across five weekday afternoons mandated the use of prime time, rather than afternoon, programming in order to insure an adequate variety of adult television fare. Third, because questionnaires were to be administered in sites under the influence of different television markets, programs in the questionnaire had to be regularly broadcast in those markets. This requirement precluded the use of programs shown on independent and public television stations.

Finally, the programs in the 8 to 9 P.M. period (7 to 8 P.M. C.S.T.) have a particular policy relevance, since they fall within the time period during which ACT recommended that programming designed specifically for six to nine and ten to twelve year-olds be offered.

To prevent the questionnaire from becoming too lengthy and fatiguing for the children, it was decided that no more than 12 adult programs, three network shows on four nights, should be included in the questionnaire. The 12 programs then, were network offerings at 8:00 P.M. on Monday, Tuesday, Friday and Saturday nights. These four evenings included two "school nights" and two non-school nights. Additionally, they offered the best balance of different program types: three variety shows, four drama/adventure shows, and five situation comedies. Each evening's schedule included two established programs and one program premiering that fall.

Children's programs. Four children's programs were selected for use in the questionnaire. These programs met two basic criteria. First, all had long and substantial ratings histories relative to other children's programs. All four programs were among the top three rated children's shows on one of the three networks during the 1975-76 season.<sup>5</sup> This criterion was established to maximize the probability that respondents would be sufficiently familiar with these programs to make meaningful preference selections. It should be noted, however, that this stipulation precluded the use of public television programs. Second, all children's programs had to be regularly scheduled in the fall of 1976. Again, this was done to promote program familiarity.

To insure some diversity in this limited sample of children's programs, 1976 program evaluation published by the National Association for Better Broadcasting (NABB) were used to identify two programs recommended for child

viewing and two programs not recommended. The four programs respectively were: Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids, Pink Panther, Land of the Lost and Bugs Bunny/Road Runner.

#### Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first ascertained the child's bedtime, frequency of television watching, control of the TV set, and programs usually viewed during family hour. The second section, which comprised the bulk of the questionnaire, contained the forced choice preference items.

The preference items systematically substituted each of the four children's programs for one of the three network programs in each night's schedule, as if a regularly scheduled adult program had been pre-empted by a children's program. These items appeared on the questionnaire as a row of four boxes shaped like TV sets (as per the pilot). The three left boxes on the left side of each row contained TV program titles. The right hand box was blank. The process of substituting children's programs into the family viewing schedule generated a total of 48 hypothetical program arrays. In addition to these hypothetical items, four "real world" arrays consisting of the three network options on each night were included to provide baseline preference data.

The order of the programs within the 13 preference items (12 hypothetical and one real world) for each night was systematically varied so each children's program appeared in the first, second and third position only once, and each prime time program appeared in the first, second, and third position three times.

The preference items were then organized into groups of four (one each from Monday, Tuesday, Friday and Saturday). One of the 13 items for

each night was randomly selected for inclusion in the first group of four. This process was repeated in cycles of four until all preference items were exhausted.

Four duplicate items were included at the end of the questionnaire as a check on the internal consistency of a child's responses. These items simply duplicated preference items that the child would have encountered previously in the questionnaire.

Finally, a second version of the questionnaire, in which the order of the 56 preference items was reversed was constructed. The second version of the questionnaire was intended to test for possible ordering effects.

#### Test Administration

Questionnaires were group administered to classes of third and fifth grade children. These two grade levels represented the latter two of three age categorizations identified by ACT for recommended age-specific programming.

The test administrator "walked" the children through the first section of the questionnaire, reading items aloud, and elaborating on the items as necessary.

After the entire class had completed the first section, the test administrator introduced the children to the first preference item, which was the same on both versions of the questionnaire. Children were instructed to pretend that these were the only three programs on at a given time and to indicate with an "X" which of the available programs each would most like to watch. A child could indicate that s/he would watch none of the available options by placing an "X" in the blank box on the right.

After completing the first item, the children were instructed to similarly indicate a preferred program in each of the remaining items.

Children were allowed to proceed at their own pace, with the caution that they were to do their own work and not to look at their "neighbor's" answers. The questionnaires typically took 12 minutes to complete.

### Subjects

Data were collected during the week of November 15, 1976 at two public schools in the Indianapolis and Cincinnati television markets. Approximately equal proportions of third and fifth graders came from each test site.

After eliminating 12 respondents who reported bedtimes prior to family hour, a sample of 143 third graders and 165 fifth graders was obtained. Fifty-three percent of the respondents were male, and 47 percent were female. Ninety-one percent of the respondents were white and nine percent were black.

### Results

The vast majority of respondents reported that they watched television almost every night. Further, almost all respondents indicated that they had some voice in deciding what TV program they watched.

Responses to items which ascertained programs usually watched during family hour on three nights of the week were, in effect, a type of aided recall viewing record. The nine programs involved were rank ordered on the basis of the total number of children in each test site who indicated audience membership of each program.<sup>6</sup> Audience ratings data for the Cincinnati and Indianapolis television markets, which encompassed both test sites, were obtained from the American Research Bureau (ARB). The total number of audience members ARB reported in the two to eleven year old category was similarly used to rank order these nine programs. Rank order correlations between the sample data and the ARB data were high for both markets ( $r = .93$  in each market).

Responses to the three viewing items were highly associated with the three preference items which contained the same program options. Cross-tabulations for each preference item by its viewing time counterpart produced three chi-squares significant at less than .01. In other words, reported program preferences were highly consistent with reported program viewing.

The percentage of agreement on the four pairs of duplicate preference items ranged from 72 to 92 percent. The responses of fifth graders were slightly more consistent than those of third graders.

#### The Policy Question

The essential question asked by this research is: Do children watch adult programs because more suitable children's programming is unavailable to them? In other words, does the child watch an adult program because it is the least objectionable option s/he has?

The questionnaire included four items which ascertained the respondent's preferred program among the network options on each of four nights of the week. With this information it was determined whether the hypothetical program arrays, which included a children's program (CTV), also included the respondent's preferred adult program (AVT). The respondent, in other words, indicated a program preference under one of two conditions: 1) the initially preferred adult program was available as a response option, and 2) the initially preferred adult program was not available. By counting the number of times a child selected a children's program, an interval measure score was assigned to each child in each condition. Scores in the first condition were divided by two to provide comparable score ranges in both conditions. Using grade level as one factor (A) and availability of preferred adult program as a repeated measures factor (B),

a 2 x 2 analysis of variance was performed. Table 1 presents the results.

TABLE 1  
DIFFERENCES IN THE NUMBER OF CTV SELECTIONS  
WITH THE PREFERRED ADULT PROGRAM AVAILABLE  
AND UNAVAILABLE

	Mean Number of CTV Selections		
	Preferred Adult Program Available	Preferred Adult Program Unavailable	
Third Graders (N=143)	2.59	7.43	
Fifth Graders (N=165)	2.16	5.79	
Summary of ANOVA			
Source	df	F	sign.
A (grade) . . . . .	1,306	8.55	p < .01
B (availability) . . . . .	1,306	53.81	p < .01
A x B . . . . .	1,306	11.13	p < .01

In summary then, the data indicate that the overwhelming majority of children would prefer to watch their favorite adult program even if children's programming were available to them. When a preferred adult program was unavailable to the child, however, the relative appeal of children's programming increased markedly. Both third and fifth grade children selected significantly more children's programs in situations where the preferred adult program was unavailable. Fifth grade children were, however, more inclined than third grade children to indicate that they would watch no program if their favorite adult program was unavailable.

### Discussion

Through the use of a pilot, the research methodology employed in this study was judged to be the best practicable way of measuring the program preferences of children.

It could be argued that the four children's programs used in the questionnaire do not truly represent "age-specific" programming. It might also be argued that true age-specific programming would by definition appeal to children of the appropriate ages. Such an assertion, however, begs the question. The fact of the matter is that no programs which cater to children of specific ages and which met the basic criteria for use in the questionnaire, exist. Consequently, the children's programs employed here were the best available representatives of children's programming. Each has enjoyed long and substantial ratings histories. Indeed, by design, these programs were among the most popular children's shows being broadcast.

The data suggest that even these popular children's programs would have trouble competing for the child audience against adult or family programs. It seems unlikely that age-specific informational or entertainment programming would fare any better against similar competition. Further, in view of the fact that much afternoon programming is off-network adult television, children's programming would face similar difficulties attracting an audience if scheduled during that time. Indeed, the problems facing children's programs are exacerbated by the fact that in home viewing situations, a child may have to share or relinquish control of the set to older siblings or parents.

Policy decisions of the Federal Communications Commission in the area of children's programming will hinge on a variety of factors. ACT's proposed guidelines for children's programming involved a number of issues not addressed in this research. For example, ACT's suggested ban on commercial sponsorship



of children's programming was, at least in part, an attempt to relieve broadcasters of the need to maximize audiences. Consequently, a program's ability to attract child viewers may be less important than other public interest concerns. It seems clear, however, that what we traditionally think of as children's programs would fare poorly if forced to compete with adult programs for the child audience. The consequence of this observation will have to be weighted by those who decide communications policy.

Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>50 FCC 2d page 24

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., page 8

<sup>3</sup>40 RR 2nd 1577

<sup>4</sup>Wilbur Schramm, J. Lyle and E. Parker, Television in the Lives of our Children (Stanford, University Press, 1961), p. 45

<sup>5</sup>The Television Audience 1975. A. C. Nielsen Company, New York, 1975, p. 186.

<sup>6</sup>Due to a network program scheduling change a week before the questionnaires were to be administered, an item ascertaining usual Saturday viewing was dropped from the questionnaire. This scheduling change did not, however, affect the use of Saturday evening programs in the preference items.

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