



Editorial

Are we getting the television we want?

Television. A presence in most of the homes in the land. A voice interpreting the world to most children. The sole companion of many housebound people. The bedtime story of countless children who have TVs in their rooms. Is television a reflection or a shaper of our society? Are we getting the television we deserve? Are we getting the television we want?

When I was a teenager in Britain in the 1960s, there were some fantastic programmes on. Of course, I tuned in to Top of the Pops every week, while my parents kept out of the way. But together we laughed at Fawlty Towers, Morcambe and Wise, Dad's Army, The Two Ronnies and many other comedies which we could watch as a family because, apart from being superbly well scripted and presented, they were, dare I say it, good clean fun! Other stand-out programmes that I remember 40 years on were The Symphonic Twilight, with Leonard Bernstein; Kathy Come Home, a documentary that woke up a nation to the plight of the homeless; plays by Denis Potter; Civilisation with Kenneth Clark; wildlife programmes by Jacques Cousteau, and David Attenborough....a rich menu of education, entertainment and inspiration.

Through television I was made aware of the work of Mother Teresa, which led to me working as a volunteer in Calcutta 10 years later. Through television I learned about Gandhi and Martin Luther King, about life on a tall ship and in a coal mining town; and it was on television that I first engaged with puppets, which are now the focus of much of my work as a children's entertainer. Muffin the Mule, Andy Pandy, Bill and Ben, Sooty and Sweep, The Woodentops and Rag, Tag and Bobtail! The daily fare broadcast by the BBC for young

children in the mid 50s was low-tech, slow, simple, funny and engaging, and made such an impression on me that I remember it 50 years later.

In this issue, I am embarking on a new role as editor of the VoTE newsletter by asking a variety of people what they would LIKE to see on TV. Let's dream about how television could contribute to our society, and use that dreaming to empower ourselves to demand a raising of standards. Only a small minority will chuck out the TV. The voice in the living room and the children's bedroom is here to stay. We owe it to our society to insist that that voice carries messages of hope and inspiration, illumination and enjoyment that can enrich the lives of those who hear it.

~ Mary McCammon

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Tribute to Glenyss Barker

VoTE owes its continuing existence over the last 10 years to Glenyss Barker, who worked tirelessly for the cause as Secretary over that time.

An indefatigable organiser, Glenyss also had an ability to involve other people, building a strong national committee in Christchurch. With her husband Gerald, who became the organisation's Treasurer and kept the accounts in impeccable order, Glenyss has been the backbone of VoTE in circumstances where it might otherwise have had trouble surviving. We owe Glenyss an immense debt of gratitude, and it is my hope that she and her husband will make a successful transition to life in Melbourne, where undoubtedly they will again involve themselves in the campaign to maintain traditional values in all walks of life.

~ John Terris



Above: Glenyss Barker (left) with President John Terris.

Tell TVNZ what you want

Early next year VoTE's President, John Terris, will meet with Rick Ellis, TVNZ's new CEO. John invites you to email him your likes and dislikes about television to pass on. His email address is jterris@xtra.co.nz. Don't forget that VoTE exists to voice **your** opinions on broadcasting.

Interviews with viewers

Interview with Sarah Gordon, teacher, mother of Luke (11) and Rosa (7).

Q. What would you like to see on TV?

A. Good quality drama for adults. Not made in America, unless it's really good. Movies without ads... not blockbuster movies, but ones you won't see at the mainstream cinema. And really good children's drama. There are lots of good dramas made in Australia and the UK.

Q. How much TV do you let your children watch?

A. Not a lot. We check the Listener and tell them if there are programmes we are happy for them to watch. Then they can choose. We watch DVDs. They can watch some cartoons, but not every day. No morning TV except at the weekend. The worst thing about children's TV is the manipulative advertising. It just cultivates an attitude of "want, want, want!"

Q. Do you think the Adults Only time should be raised from 8.30pm to 9.30pm?

A. Yes, probably. Even 9pm would be better. Most children aren't in bed by 8.30pm.

Q. What do you most object to on TV?

A. What I feel most strongly about is the advertising snippets (eg., for "Nip and Tuck"). Those flickering images do stick, and when they're shown out of context, you can't explain them. They show the most sensational parts of programmes when children are watching. Ads should be tailored to the target audience.

A lot of the "adult" programmes are verging on soft porn and sadistic violence. They're way too extreme. They're moving out of the realm of general public viewing. And the news is "hyperventilated", full of stupid stuff.

Q. What developments would you like to see in TV broadcasting?

A. Ad-free spots would be nice! I'd rather have a cluster of ads at the end of programmes, like they do in some other countries. It's ridiculous having ads every 6 minutes or so! I wish there was a level generally of agreement about what values should be portrayed. I wish that the lowest common denominator didn't win out all the time. I wish that broadcasters were given permission to exercise control over the material that's put out... instead of being ruled by ratings and the dollar value.

Carol Evans, Deputy Mayor of Christchurch, backs VoTE in its campaign to improve the quality of NZ television. Here she answers some quick questions.

Q. What would you like to see?

A. Not reality TV! It's degrading! More documentaries and more family-type shows.

Q. How much TV do you think children should watch?



A. It shouldn't be used as a babysitter. A bit of TV before and after teatime is fine.

Q. Change the AO watershed time?

A. Yes. It's not realistic to think that children are in bed at 8.30pm, especially in the summer time.

Q. What do you object to?

A. Advertisements that use young children to sell things. And all the borderline porn. Programming should be more appropriate to the time-slot, including the trailers.



How immigrants see it

Talking to immigrants brings a new perspective on television in this country. A class of recent immigrants interviewed at PEETO (a Christchurch migrant help centre) made the following comments:

"Television here is very different from the Middle East. We have no kissing on TV because of the children. Here my children watch unsuitable programmes, and it makes it more difficult for the family. Even some cartoons have bad things... The Government pays lots of money to help immigrants learn English. They should pay for a language learning programme on TV."

(Ahmad Lofti, Iranian Kurdish. Father of 2.)

"I would like to see programmes teaching skills. I would like to learn about home improvements, cooking, gardening. Christchurch is "The Garden City" But I don't know how to plant things. There are no gardens in Taiwan."

(Shirley, Taiwan.)

"I would like more sports. I want to see soccer, not just Rugby. More rock and hip hop."

(Abdikahin, 19yrs, Somalia.)

"I would like more sport, too. I object to seeing young people with bad behaviour, doing silly things and abusing people."

(Abdifatah, Somalia.)

"My children feel shame when they see some things on TV. They are watching a programme, and suddenly some sex scene comes on. Promotions should be appropriate to the programme (they are interrupting). I would like more programmes about different cultures."

(Nemutallah. Father of 6. Afghanistan.)

"Television should be for learning, for culture and for fun. New Zealand TV is a bad influence on my brother (16 years old). He is learning to become an American!"

(Aziza. Afghan Iranian.)

"There is not enough choice."

(Denny, Vietnam.)

This view was shared by all the participants.

Brickbats and Bouquets will be back next year.

Technology's invasive effect on schoolchildren

Broadcasters, the Broadcasting Standards Authority and the government were roundly condemned by president, John Terris, at VoTE's annual meeting in July.

"The death of the Kahui twins demonstrates dramatically that elements of our society continue to see violence as a solution to their problems, and the television channels continue to purvey violence as a means of grabbing and holding audience share. Is there a relationship between the two? Of course there is. Do the television channels care? Sadly, no," he said.

Mr Terris said a government working group – of which he was a member – investigated violence on television in New Zealand 18 months ago. "The working group made 31 recommendations for dealing with the fact that our levels of TV violence were among the highest in the world.

"The group included the chief executives of TVNZ and TV3, sociologists, psychologists, educators, producers and advocacy groups. Their unanimous view was that the effects of TV violence on young people represented a public health danger of some magnitude, and that a much better resourced Broadcasting Standards Authority should be instituted and its role expanded to hear complaints against broadcasters, carry out research and facilitate a constructive dialogue among interested parties. The report cost over \$300,000 to complete, but nothing has been done about it.

"As the only viewer organisation in New Zealand, we wrote to the Minister of Broadcasting as far back as February this year asking for an indication of progress, but have yet to receive a reply. We understand that a major review of the BSA's role and functions is under way, but have certainly not been consulted about it.

"The only way to achieve real and lasting change is to split the organisation up, sell off its commercial arm, commit the state television service to a non-commercial public interest role, and make its board truly representative of viewer interests, rather than those of political mateship.

"The kids of this country deserve a better deal than they are getting. The BSA says in its most recent report they believe it is important to have 'a strong expectation that material likely to be heard or seen by children should recognise their innocence and vulnerability'. Our experience suggests that our television broadcasters don't give a damn. They certainly are not prepared to give people who do so much as the time of day.

"Television violence is acknowledged all over the world as contributing to increased levels of crime and violence in society. It is surely of some significance that, while crime overall is decreasing in New Zealand, crimes of violence – and notably crimes of violence involving youth – are on the up. TV violence is a world-wide phenomenon, but we remain the only country in the Western world that I am aware of without a formal monitoring regime.

"Part of the problem is perceived by some to be the BSA itself, which often appears to enjoy an altogether too cosy relationship with the broadcasters themselves. It may be, too, that the BSA demonstrates a reluctance to want to rock the boat.

"Criticism of the BSA itself is unfair in some ways, in that it is merely a creature of statute. If it has become a toothless wonder, then it is the government that must make amends, not the BSA. They simply administer the system, which is 20 years old and in serious need of an overhaul. There is a certain inertia in the

government over this issue, which is disturbing given all the rhetoric from politicians about the need to act against the causes of violence in our society," Mr Terris said.



Panellists who took part in a discussion on broadcasting at the VoTE AGM were (left to right): John Terris, John McNeil, Judy Lawence, Marc Alexander and Kate Wilkinson.

Do the authorities understand the problems?

By Adrian Cooper

Television is no respecter of age. Children are influenced by what they absorb and it is carried into adulthood.

Surely the television authorities understand the problems of showing questionable material on our screens? Well, they do and they don't. News reports, for instance, of wars, battle fields, bombing and casualties are edited because some scenes may be too grim and could cause distress. There are responsible guidelines for news production and judgements in this area are rarely questioned.

It is a different approach in the entertainment field, where what is acceptable has gone from the mild to the repulsive. The word "explicit" has achieved new meaning and pornography masquerades as art. Violence has escalated to brutality, serious assault, savagery, killing and torture. Yet the obviously repellent is excused as "a reflection of contemporary society", "not be taken out of context" or "considered unlikely to offend many viewers". Any question of unhealthy influence is brushed aside. Censorship, it is claimed, interferes with freedom of expression and only the most extreme cases justify using the scissors.

Public disquiet was soothed when the 'watershed' was introduced so that adult material would not be shown until 8.30pm when children would (or should) be in bed. Similarly, films were classified according to content, "Choice" became the buzz word- you were informed and could watch what you wanted. But the price was the broadcasters were absolved of responsibility for standards and values. "Don't look!" is not enough for those most in need of guidance. Do you think that NZTV shows sufficient responsibility in its control of language, sex and violence, and what do you expect with more channels in the years ahead?

(Continued on P4)

