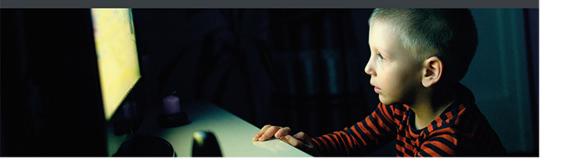# CHILDREN AND TELEVISION

Barrie Gunter and Jill Gunter

Children and Television

Does violence on TV lead to violent behaviour? How does screen time impact child development? What is the effect of advertising on a child's behaviour? Twenty years after the publication of the first edition of *Children and Television*, these issues remain as pertinent as ever. In the new Classic Edition of this core textbook, Gunter and Gunter present research evidence into the effects of television on children and their responses to it.

This comprehensive work examines a wide range of issues, including children's knowledge of television and how it impacts social roles, aggressive behaviour, advertising, health orientation and both good and bad behaviour, and concludes that children are sophisticated viewers and control television far more than it controls them. The Classic Edition includes a new preface to the current context of the book, exploring the emergence of new TV channels, enhanced home recording capacity, archiving and streaming services replacing traditional forms of viewing with non-linear viewing and their impact on children.

This book is essential reading for postgraduate and undergraduate students taking courses on child development and family studies.

Barrie Gunter is a psychologist by training who worked in the broadcasting industry before moving to the academic world. He has specialised in the study of the psychological impacts of television and the Internet. He has produced seventy books and more than five hundred other publications on media, marketing and business topics. He is Emeritus Professor in Media at the University of Leicester.

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Children and Television

Classic Edition

Barrie Gunter and Jill Gunter

Contents

Preface to the classic edition

When the first edition of this book, then titled *Children and Television: The One-Eyed Monster?* was published in 1990, there was widespread concern about the psychological effects of television on children, not least about the potentially harmful ones believed to stem from watching televised entertainment imbued with violent, sexual and profane content. Six years later, a second edition was published titled simply *Children and Television*, with updated content and a new chapter about the health-related influences of television. We noted then that in the six intervening years, children's television environment had changed, but mostly in terms of the numbers of television channels. Yet, as this book is released again in 2019, those changes seem as nothing compared to the far-reaching technological developments that have occurred in the twenty-first century that have fundamentally changed the nature of television as a medium, expanded the diversity of screen entertainment and, more significantly, completely re-oriented young viewers in terms of how they engage with it.

From 1990 to 1996, the key changes to television were manifest mostly in relation to the growth of cable and satellite channels. In the 1980s, in most developed countries (the United States being the main exception), including the authors' home country, the United Kingdom, children (and adults) had access to just a handful of terrestrially transmitted television channels. They needed to make appointments to view because these channels offered fixed schedules of programmes transmitted at times of the broadcasters' choosing. By the end of that decade, a tiny proportion of households subscribed to multi-channel television packages transmitted via satellite or cable links. Re-scheduling of televised broadcasts was possible for some households via very crude home video-recording systems that permitted making one recording at a time and often did not allow viewers to watch live television while a recording was taking place. Six years later, there were more channels available and some of the cable and satellite subscription services introduced slightly improved home recording systems and embryonic electronic programme guides (EPGs), but otherwise few other changes.

Move twenty-plus years and the home entertainment environment that has become the norm for children today is unrecognisable compared to the one

described above. Television channels have multiplied still further and the emergence and exponential growth of the Internet and the evolution in networked home computing and mobile telephony have created many new interfaces through which audiovisual entertainment can be accessed and enjoyed. Channels are routinely searched with EPGs, some of which are now voice activated.

Children's programmes have been largely removed from mainstream channels and are now shown on dedicated 'children's channels' in traditional linear formats and also on other non-linear, interactive services. Much of children's viewing, however, has moved away from the linear "appointment to view" formats towards non-linear and personalised viewing choices derived from online repositories and streamed services or home, self-recorded video libraries stored on hard drives that can capture hundreds of hours of content.

Another big change in the twenty years since the Second Edition of this book was published is that television viewing is no longer restricted to television sets. For the younger generations, and especially today's children, the 'TV set' is just one among many devices that represent normal ways of consuming audiovisual content, with desktop computers, and portable devices such as laptops, tablets and most of all multi-functional, advanced-generation mobile telephones often being preferred. The television set has evolved as a technology. The latest generations of computerised, Internet-enabled sets provide direct access to the online world and bestow them with interactive interfaces that give users much greater control over what happens on screen. This means that viewers can engage with content and control the way it is received. Viewers can "freeze-frame" the show they are watching and then re-start it from that same point when they return to viewing again. They can view the same events from different camera perspectives. They can also access non-broadcast content through their television set, including interactive games where they can become part of the on-screen action.

The competition that television channels face for audiences no longer derives only from other linear channels but also from diverse and massive quantities of audiovisual and other content accessible via the Internet from the World Wide Web. The advances in technology have meant that young media consumers can also become content producers. Through these interactive technologies, users can create their own content in text, audio, image and moving video formats that can then be uploaded to web sites where it can be consumed by others.

In this transformed media world, television remains a significant device through which to gain access to popular entertainment, but it no longer dominates in this respect among younger audiences the way it did when this book was first written nearly thirty years ago. One might ask therefore whether this book still has relevance to our understanding of the contemporary media environment and the way children engage with it. The answer is that it does. Despite changes to the nature of television viewing, to the increased amount and diversity of entertainment that children can access and to the way a wider array of technologies is now used to engage with mediated content, many of the same concerns about the effects of audiovisual entertainment (and information) content still prevail.

Questions are still being asked about the way children consume television and other devices, about the amount of time they devote to this type of activity, and the impact all of this has on different aspects of their lives and their behaviour. There remains a concern about the impact of new forms of television and other related technologies on children's cognitive development and educational performance. There are continuing debates about the influences of television and other technologies through which audiovisual content is obtained on children's self-perceptions, adoption of different social roles and upon their propensities to display prosocial and antisocial behaviour.

As television and other technologies have developed, the ways these media are used to engage with children as consumers have also evolved and raised new and important questions about the regulation of commodity and service advertising and other forms of promotions. New forms of brand promotion have emerged that have initially escaped the restrictions and controls of regulations that were written for simpler media systems.

The worries that many have voiced about the effects of television and related audiovisual media on family life still persist. Initially, these concerns centred on the implications of the growth of multi-set households in which children had their own sets in their bedrooms. Not only did this mean that parents were less able to monitor their children's viewing habits, but it often also meant that children were watching more than was good for them late at night and this disrupted their sleep patterns. Once television sets were usurped by smaller mobile devices with screens, children could watch audiovisual content under their bed covers and while in transit outside the home. These devices reduced still further the ability of parents to exert control over their children's viewing habits.

Each new generation of parents often believes that these issues with which they are confronted are new to their generation of children. The evidence reviewed in *Children and Television* shows that these concerns have been around for many years. Lessons have been learned from past generations of parents and media researchers about the kinds of problems that can arise from children's use of television, but sets these against the positives that can arise as well. These past lessons have also provided insights into how parents might intervene to support their children in learning how to cope with different kinds of media content and also how to internalise their own controls over their media behaviour.

Yes, the world today is technologically more complex than it was when this book was first written, but the core principles of understanding how children get involved with media technologies such as television, then how they learn to understand and interpret the different types of content they receive through these technologies and acquire constructive media-related behaviours, with a healthy balance achieved between media consumption and other important aspects of life, have not changed very much since the 1980s. This book is a useful reminder that we do not face the challenges presented by the always switched-on world of modern technology with a blank canvass of know-how. Many contemporary debates about and

criticisms of television and mobile audiovisual technologies presume they present new social risks to children that require a complete re-write of laws, regulations codes of practice and parental practices, when the history of research in the field shows that this is not always the case.

Barrie Gunter and Jill L. Gunter (formerly McAleer)
January 2019

Preface to the second edition

THE HOME ENTERTAINMENT EVOLUTION

Since the first edition of *Children and Television: The One-Eyed Monster?* was published in 1990, the home entertainment environment has undergone evolutionary change. The standard television set now represents the receptacle for a plethora of information and entertainment channels delivered through a variety of distribution systems. Since the beginning of the current decade, the average household in Britain has acquired a greater range of home entertainment equipment. In 1989, just under 500,000 households had a satellite dish receiver and just over 300,000 were linked to a cable television system. By 1994, nearly 3,000,000 homes had satellite television and over 1,000,000 had cable.[1]

Today, family households use TV sets for a great deal more than simply watching broadcast television. With around one in six homes with children (17 per cent) possessing a video camera, many now increasingly engage in producing their own video material. Young viewers these days want to interact with and actively control events on screen, and approaching half of all homes with children have a home computer linked to a TV monitor (45 per cent), and the same number own video games.[2]

With the profound and rapidly occurring changes that have taken place with television in the past few years, it is timely to take a fresh look at children's involvement with television. The first edition of this book covered research up to the late 1980s. This second edition revisits the topics examined before, bringing each one up to date with a discussion of the latest research evidence to emerge during the 1990s. In addition, a new topic has been added, which examines the role of television in shaping children's health-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviours.

NEW TECHNOLOGY AND PARENTAL CONTROL

Even with the many new technological developments on the home entertainment front, standard television viewing remains a popular pastime for many millions of people, children included. Many of the old, established public concerns about

the allegedly harmful side effects of too much telly-watching by young viewers, or of exposure to certain kinds of unsuitable programming, persist to this day. Indeed, with the expansion of subscription-based, satellite and cable television reception through which audiences can gain access to much more adult-oriented material than ever before, public anxieties about the possibility of children watching programmes containing explicit sexual material, graphic depictions of violence or 'adult' language have, if anything, become more acutely focused.

Concerns about violence on television in the United States in the 1990s have placed such political pressures upon broadcasters that, in early 1996, the leading American television networks and cable companies agreed to adopt a voluntary ratings system to warn viewers about levels of violence in programmes. In conjunction with this new policy is a new technological development in the form of a computer chip, nicknamed the 'V-chip', which can be built into the TV set to enable parents to scramble programmes they believe to be unsuitable for their children. The chip works by reading a code transmitted with the programme which identifies whether the programme contains certain categories of material: violence, sex, bad language or possibly an age classification similar to that used for cinema films. This facility is believed by its supporters to offer an important new weapon in the parental armoury, giving them greater control over what their children are able to watch, even when parents themselves are not physically present to control their youngsters' use of the set. Meanwhile, critics have voiced concerns that this device may give broadcasters an excuse to transmit even more salacious material, knowing that parents have the power to block out any programmes they don't want their children to watch. Other observers have pointed out two further problems. First, the coding of all programmes will be expensive and needs careful thought as to the classification criteria to be used. Second, given the lifespan of the average TV set, it could be twenty years or more before everyone has a V-chip set. People are likely to hold on to their old sets, however, and many of them will probably find their way into children's bedrooms.

Of course, even if all these practical issues were resolved, in the end the effectiveness of any new technology always boils down to the willingness of people to use it. The control of children's viewing ultimately rests, as with all other aspects of a child's early socialisation, primarily with parents. Parents generally accept that they share responsibility with broadcasters for what their children might watch on television.[3]

Despite this admission, many parents do not know what their children watch and, indeed, given the growth of sets in children's bedrooms, cannot reasonably be expected to. Even so, as we will show in this book, while children do not accept everything they see on the small screen at face value, when they are young some guidance can be helpful in enabling them to make important distinctions about different kinds of television content, to view television more critically and selectively and to control for themselves how much (and what) they watch. In an evolving home entertainment environment in which more and

more choice and control is passing into hands of the consumer, these are the
kinds of measures that are likely to work best.

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BG and JLM
April 1996

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Preface to the first edition

THE 'CHILD' VIEWER: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY

How does today's society perceive children and television and the interaction between the two? Are youngsters really spending a high proportion of their waking hours staring fixedly at a television screen, making little attempt to communicate with the rest of the household? Do they passively absorb all they see and hear irrespective of content or format? And has the continuous bombardment of media 'messages' been a prime factor in increased breakdown of family life or encouraged spates of violent and antisocial behaviour amongst adolescents? If some of the sweeping generalisations quoted regularly in the daily press are to be believed, this and more is the 'true' effect of television—or is it?

Back in the nineteenth century and earlier in this one, concerns were expressed about the harmful effects that the growing avalanche of 'pulp literature' such as 'penny dreadfuls', cheap novelettes and comics would have, both on the young and the less well-educated. Nowadays, although some concern is still expressed about the content and quality of children's literature, notably comics and the ubiquitous Enid Blyton, it is a mere 'drop in the ocean' when compared with the amount of criticism levelled at television. But how much of this criticism is based on 'myth' and therefore unjustified and how much is reality?

THE CONCERNS: WHAT ARE THEY?

In Britain today, 98 per cent of all homes possess at least one television set, the majority of them (particularly those with children) more than one, yet in the early 1950s only a handful of people had the desire or the means to purchase a set. However, from the late 1950s onwards, there was a phenomenal explosion in the number of television households, with a parallel increase in the amount and type of programming. More and more, educationalists, politicians, as well as other authority figures started to voice their fears about the social and educational impact that this new medium might have, fears that continue to be expressed

today. For example, it is not uncommon to read stories in the press about individuals committing a violent crime, the idea for which arose from something seen on television. We are told that television can provide examples of bad behaviour which young viewers especially may copy, or that seeing well-known television characters using violence to solve their problems provides some justification for young viewers to emulate their heroes: 'If the members of The ATeam can do it, why can't I?'

It is said that television can teach lessons about the world, but that this is a world in which certain types of people predominate, a world in which they behave towards each other in certain ways and play certain types of roles. Television, in other words, is a very stereotyped world. Women, for example, tend to be portrayed in domestic roles more than professional ones and, as opposed to men, are more often the victims of crime. They are also portrayed as more emotional and less independent than men on television. These portrayals, it is claimed by some writers, can cultivate, especially among children who know no better, stereotyped beliefs about the sexes which serve to limit their career aspirations and their attitudes towards men and family life.

Educationalists have been worried that television viewing would displace reading and harm children's school performance. Other critics of television have argued that it is a disruptive influence in the family context both through its presence in the household and through the lessons and values it may teach.

Television is criticised as giving a low priority to family life in that it rarely depicts happy, intact families on screen. It is seen as having a deleterious influence on family interaction—family members no longer talk to each other as they used to—leading to a breakdown in the essential bonds that are so crucial to a stable family environment and to the development of socially responsible children. These then are the concerns, but how justified are they?

In this book, we shall examine evidence for the role television can play in children's intellectual and social development. Despite the emphasis given to possible social ills of television, we believe a more balanced view of the medium's impact on children is warranted. Television can be of general benefit to children. It can bring them into contact with aspects of life they would not otherwise become aware of. It can provide a valuable tool in the home and at school not simply to keep children occupied but also, if used appropriately, as a constructive way to use their time.

There are many myths about television and children. These include misconceptions about how youngsters use it, how actively they respond to it, and how much and in what ways they are changed by it. There is a bias towards thinking ill of television when the medium deserves a fair hearing. Television is not a 'one-eyed monster' lurking impishly in the corner of the living room, kitchen or bedroom waiting to exert an evil influence over young members of the household. It is a channel through which a range of entertainment, drama and learning can be obtained and experienced and increasingly these days is under the control of the viewer.

BG and JLM
April 1990

Chapter 1
What is the nature of children's viewing?

VIEWING PATTERNS

Television may be almost a universal feature on the domestic scene, but it is not used in the same way by everyone who has access to a set. To begin our look at children and television, we shall examine some basic questions about television viewing:

- When do children begin to watch?
- How much viewing goes on?
- What kinds of programmes are watched?
- In what ways does viewing change with age?
- How does viewing interact with other activities?

MEASURING TELEVISION VIEWING

There are various ways of finding out from people how much and what kinds of television they watch. Some researchers draw a distinction between 'online' and 'off-line' measurement of television viewing. 'Off-line' techniques include questionnaires, telephone interviews and, arguably, paper and pencil diaries, and are characterised by the fact that they obtain information from viewers about what they have watched when they are not actually watching. 'On-line' techniques, such as people meters and direct observation, obtain viewing measures while individuals are in the process of watching television.[1] The most popular techniques used include traditional data collection via *questionnaires, diaries* and, more recently, *electronic meters* (none of which is able to produce viewing figures of guaranteed accuracy), plus *observation methods.*

Questionnaires, popular with researchers because they are cheap and convenient to produce, invariably require viewers to estimate retrospectively the amount of television they have watched for a given period of time. Diaries, which usually consist of a weekly booklet divided into timed segments or programme listings, have to be completed by a pre-selected panel of viewers as they watch. However, the measuring tools most heavily relied upon by the

broadcasting industry to estimate audience ratings (i.e. the number of people who have watched a particular programme) are either the electronic set meters or the more sophisticated people meters. Electronic set meters, commonly used in conjunction with diaries, record when and how long a television set is switched on, and which channel it is tuned to at a particular time. People meters are also set meters, but with an electronic rather than a pencil and paper diary, whereby individuals push buttons on a handset to indicate their presence or absence when the set is switched on.

However, all of these methods are usually dependent on the reliability of viewers themselves. For example, how many people who complete questionnaires really remember the exact number of hours they watched the previous day or week? How many more fail to push the button on their people meter each time they enter or leave the room and, once their viewing presence has been registered, how much of their attention is then directed at the screen?

Observation

On rare occasions researchers have observed television viewing directly. These studies have generally been undertaken—either via participant observation where an observer joins a household, or via direct film or video recording of behaviour in front of the screen—to offer insight into the use of television by families which are, by and large, unattainable by more traditional methods.

Photographic records of a family's viewing behaviour have been made by placing either a time-lapse still camera or video camera in the home. Observers may record activities by using a structural log or by less structural note-taking. These methods can produce a wealth of detailed information about how people watch television; they also raise questions about the accuracy of viewing figures obtained by more traditional methods.[2]

An investigation of the way people watched television in the United States started out with the principal aim of testing the accuracy of viewers' personal questionnaire or diary estimates of how much they watched. Video cameras were installed in the main television viewing rooms at the homes of twenty families who volunteered to take part. One camera was mounted over the TV set and filmed the family while watching; the other camera was aimed directly at the set so as to film the programmes actually being watched. These pictures were then relayed to a video recorder in an equipment truck outside the home.[3]

Participants also filled out a variety of questionnaires designed to estimate viewing behaviour. These consisted of a five-day diary, with each day broken down into fifteen-minute segments. Families had to mark off the intervals during which they watched television. Two questionnaires were also administered. One asked the families to indicate which programmes they had watched on the previous day and how much time they spent with each programme, and a second given at the end of the observation period, asked for an overall estimate of the amount of time spent watching over the five days.

The level of agreement between what people entered into their viewing diaries and what they were observed to watch ranged from 92 per cent agreement in the best case to 54 per cent in the worst case, with an average agreement of 71 per cent. The researchers found that underreporting of viewing time (5.5 per cent) was rare, whereas overreporting was relatively frequent (24.8 per cent).

Questionnaire estimates of viewing produced less agreement with observational evidence than diary measures. When required to produce an estimate for the five-day period, the average level of agreement with camera evidence was only 44 per cent. One complicating feature of this study was the fact that the researchers unfortunately did not determine whether families were basing their reported viewing simply on the amount of time they were present in the viewing room while the TV was switched on or the extent to which they were actually watching the screen. Observational evidence has revealed that people do not always look towards the screen when the set is switched on.

Similar in-home, video-recorded observational studies of viewers' attention to the television screen have been reported by Dan Anderson and his colleagues. They installed time-lapse video cameras in the homes of ninety-nine families and recorded family viewing behaviour and what they were watching for ten full days in each case. The equipment automatically began recording when the set was switched on. In this study, emphasis was placed on children's attention to the screen.[4]

The relative accuracy of diary methods of viewing depended on the precise observational criterion used to corroborate viewers' own estimates. Anderson found, for instance, that families overestimated viewing when the criterion was eyes actually directed towards the TV screen. When diaries were compared with presence in the viewing room, viewers' estimates proved to be much more accurate. The diaries may therefore have been accurate records of what most people consider to be 'watching TV: normally being present in a room with a set in use.

It was found that parents' diary estimates of the children's viewing were accurate when compared with camera evidence of their youngsters' presence in the room when the set was on. Parents were generally better at keeping accurate records for very young children than for their older offspring, who more often viewed independently of parents.

As with all other methods of audience measurement, however, the direct observation technique is not without its problems. Many people are reluctant to be observed in the privacy of their own homes; low acceptance rates are therefore quite common. We must also ask questions about those people who do agree to participate. For example, are they representative of viewers in general? How much of their behaviour is normal, given that participants know they are being observed? Sample sizes are also limited by the expense of producing and controlling equipment and by the time taken to obtain the data. Usually few pieces of equipment exist, and if placements are for a week or longer it may take many months or even years to build up worthwhile samples. Bearing all these

problems in mind, what do we know about the time children spend watching television and how it fits in with other activities?

WHEN DO CHILDREN BEGIN TO WATCH?

The television is an integral piece of the household furniture and practically every house has at least one set. Thus, children are born into a world in which television is present from the start. But at what point during early childhood does viewing actually begin?

There are different sources of evidence on this. Parents' reports about their children's viewing have indicated that consistent viewing begins between the age of 2 and 3. Wilbur Schramm and his colleagues reported 2.8 years as the average age of regular television viewing based on the testimony of parents.[5] Following on from Schramm, other published observations have revealed a gradually growing attentiveness from about 2 years old. Under more contrived conditions, researchers have observed a sharp increase in the frequency of looks at a TV screen at the age of 2.5. This increase was correlated with a similar sharp increase in the amount of viewing the same children were reported by parents to do at home.[6]

Even though children are obviously beginning to look at television even as infants, the set by no means commands their constant attention. When 3-to 5-year-olds were monitored while watching *Sesame Street,* the children looked at and away from the TV set about 215 times an hour. Nearly 75 per cent of the looks were under six seconds in length. Lower frequencies of looks have been observed elsewhere, but even those corroborate the rapidly shifting nature of infants' attention to the screen while watching television.[7]

HOW MUCH VIEWING AND WHEN?

It has often been claimed that television can harm children. But anxieties about its undesirable side effects tend to be founded on ill-formed assumptions about the nature of children's television watching. We are told, for instance, that children watch too much television and stay up late to watch programmes that are unsuitable for them.

Another common belief is that children increasingly are exposed to heavy diets of violence-laden programming which can teach them examples of antisocial conduct or condition in them a callous attitude toward violence and its victims in real life. What are the facts of the matter? Are children spending large proportions of their waking hours slumped in front of the box? Are children staying up past what should be their bedtimes, watching programmes they are not ready for? And are children feeding off a television diet of violence, which may only bring out the worst in them? Such worries are understandable, but are they substantiated when we take a careful and considered look at children's viewing figures?

The official viewing figures in the United Kingdom are published by the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB). Currently, they are drawn from a national panel of some 4,435 households recruited and run by one of Europe's biggest market research companies, Taylor Nelson AGB. Data are collected electronically through a meter system. Each TV set in panel households has an electronic meter attached to it which keeps a record of when the set is switched on and the TV channel it is tuned to. In addition, householders are supplied with a remote control handset, referred to as a 'people meter', with which they indicate their presence in front of the screen when the set is on. All this information is stored in the set meter which is automatically telephoned over night so that the day's viewing data can be pulled off and entered into a central computer. Projections from these data then provide estimates of viewing for the population as a whole or for particular sections of it.

Table 1.1 shows BARB estimates of average amount of viewing per day for a range of age groups, in each of two spells: from 1982 to 1984, and from 1992 to 1994. Focusing on the 4 to 15 years age range, two trends can be highlighted. First, viewing levels rise through ages 4 to 11 and average between two and a half and three hours a day. During the 1980s viewing for the early teenage group exhibited signs of dropping off, but in the 1990s this trend has shown signs of reversing. In the 1982–1984 period, viewing sank to its lowest point during late teens and early twenties but remained largely unchanged for this age group during the 1992–1994 period. At this age, of course, young people tend to go out a lot more. Yet, despite a developing social life outside the home, television viewing in the 1990s has remained a popular pastime among young adults. Second, the average amount of daily viewing carried out by pre-teenage children showed little change from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, while the average viewing for teenagers and young adults increased over the same period. This trend was also present for most of the adult age groups—the exceptions being the 45–54s. This increase in viewing time probably reflects a response to the expansion of hours of television output through the late 1980s into the 1990s with the growth of satellite and cable TV viewing. A number of the new satellite channels have been especially popular with children and young people. The youngest age groups exhibit the greatest preference for new channels delivered via cable and satellite. In the UK, these channels account for nearly two-thirds of viewing among children up to the age of nine. The channels which are targeted specifically at this age group, such as Cartoon Network, The Disney Channel and The Children's Channel, are favoured the most by young audiences.[8]

It should also be noted that the BARB measurement system changed its definition of viewership in 1984. A person was classified as a viewer if he/she watched for at least eight minutes out of any quarter-hour segment. This definition was changed to three consecutive minutes in any fifteen, and produced a slight overall increase in apparent viewing levels.

Before leaving Table 1.1, it is worth noting that, despite claims that children are nowadays spending far too much time watching television, they are by no

Table 1.1 Number of hours of TV watching each day

| | | | Age groups | | | |
	4–11	*12–15*	*16–24*	*25–34*	*45–54*	*55+*
1994	2.7	2.7	2.8	3.5	3.6	4.8
1993	2.7	2.8	2.8	3.6	3.6	4.8
1992	2.8	2.6	2.5	3.4	3.5	5.0
1984	2.8	2.6	2.2	3.5	3.8	4.8
1983	2.5	2.1	2.2	3.4	3.5	4.1
1982	2.7	2.5	2.4	3.4	3.6	4.2

Source: IBA/BARB/AGB, 1982–1984; Taylor Nelson AGB/BARB/AGB Television, (1992–1994)
Notes: Channel 4 started 1982
Breakfast programmes started 1983
Daytime (BBC, then ITV) from late 1986 onwards
Late-night services from mid-1987
BARB measurement system changed December 1984
Satellite introduced mid-1980s
1992–1994 figures are for 4–9s and 10–15s

means the heaviest viewers. In the 1980s, every adult age group (except the youngest one) exhibited a greater average number of hours a day watching television than children, while in the 1990s children do the least viewing of any age group.

AND WHEN DO CHILDREN WATCH?

This is an important question and becoming more so as television hours expand. The main worry is about children staying up late at night to watch television. One reason for this worry is that after nine o'clock in the evening, which broadcasters regard as a watershed, programmes may be shown which are suitable for adult viewing, but not necessarily for children.

Viewing figures produced for the television industry in the UK for 1995 show that children aged 4 to 15, watch television throughout the day. Peaks occur twice: first, in the morning and second, mid-evening. The morning peak occurs an hour or two later at weekends than on weekdays, and the weekend peak reaches a much higher level. On Saturday mornings, around one in four children watch television between 9.00 a.m. and 10.00 a.m. Peak viewing for children occurs between 5.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m., with viewing levels falling off rapidly after 9.00 p.m. on weekdays and Sundays. On Saturday evenings, children's viewing remains at high levels until 11.00 p.m. (see Table 1.2).

WHICH PROGRAMMES DO CHILDREN WATCH?

While concerns have been voiced that children may watch not simply too much television *per se* but also too much of certain types of programmes, a close

Table 1.2 Children's audience level across the day

	Monday to Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Time	%	%	%
6.00 am	0	0	0
7.00 am	3	3	1
8.00 am	13	15	11
9.00 am	4	26	11
10.00 am	3	2	20
11.00 am	2	1	13
midday	3	13	9
1.00 pm	4	9	9
2.00 pm	4	8	10
3.00 pm	3	9	11
4.00 pm	22	12	13
5.00 pm	30	17	16
6.00 pm	31	32	19
7.00 pm	26	39	26
8.00 pm	28	37	27
9.00 pm	19	24	21
10.00 pm	11	17	10
11.00 pm	4	12	3
midnight	2	5	1
1.00 am	0	1	0
2.00 am	0	0	0
3.00 am	0	0	0
4.00 am	0	0	0
5.00 am	0	0	0

Source: BARB/AGB Television
Notes: 1 Figures show TVRs (Television Ratings) which represent the percentage of all child viewers, aged 4–15 years, watching terrestrial TV (BBC 1, BBC 2, ITV, Channel 4) 2 Data are averaged for four weeks ending 26 November 1995

analysis of children's viewing diet shows that it can be as varied as the television schedules. The rapidly growing number of television channels in most modern industrial societies offer a varied mix of programmes, and children tend to sample liberally from the full range of material that is normally made available. There are certain categories of programmes, however, which stand among children's favourites. One key indicator of popularity is the extent to which programmes are watched. Table 1.3 shows the twenty most watched programmes among children, aged 4 to 15, for the UK in 1994. These programmes comprised movies, drama and light entertainment. There were eight movies among the twenty programmes most watched by children. The next most popular programme type was made-for-TV drama serials or series of which four featured in the top twenty. Clearly the most popular individual series among children were sitcoms, *Mr Bean* and *Gladiators,* each of which made three appearances.

One of the concerns which parents might have about their children's viewing is the extent to which youngsters are exposed to unsavoury material. Public opinion surveys have consistently shown that people are concerned about the

Table 1.3 Top twenty programmes for children aged 4–15 (January-December 1994)

Programme	Channel	Day	Date (1994)	TVR	Audience size '000s	Share
1 Honey, I Shrank the Kids	ITV	Sun	9/1	40.6	3,868	82
2 Gladiators Final	ITV	Sat	17/12	37.7	3,602	76
3 National Lottery Live	BBC 1	Sat	19/11	36.8	3,515	74
4 Gladiators	ITV	Sat	12/11	36.5	3,490	75
5 Do It Yourself, Mr Bean	ITV	Mon	10/1	35.7	3,399	78
6 Neighbours	BBC 1	Wed	23/3	35.5	3,383	79
7 Ghostbusters II	ITV	Sun	27/2	34.4	3,272	76
8 Three Men and a Little Lady	ITV	Sun	6/2	34.2	3,254	78
9 EastEnders	BBC 1	Thurs	27/10	33.4	3,189	88
10 Uncle Buck	BBC 1	Mon	3/1	32.0	3,050	68
11 Gladiators Celebrity Challenge	ITV	Sat	24/12	31.1	2,974	62
12 E.T.	BBC 1	Fri	1/4	31.1	2,961	69
13 Turner and Hooch	ITV	Sun	16/1	31.0	2,955	76
14 Casualty	BBC 1	Sat	19/11	30.5	2,919	75
15 Back to School, Mr Bean	ITV	Wed	26/10	30.5	2,918	63
16 EastEnders	BBC 1	Tues	25/10	29.8	2,847	86
17 Mind the Baby, Mr Bean	ITV	Mon	25/4	29.3	2,790	68
18 Vice Versa	ITV	Sun	23/1	27.9	2,654	70
19 Superman (Film)	ITV	Sun	3/4	27.9	2,654	70
20 Noel's House Party	BBC 1	Sat	15/1	27.8	2,649	64

Source: Taylor Nelson AGB/BARB/AGB Television, 1995 (p. 63)

potentially upsetting qualities of programmes which contain violence, sex and bad language.[9] These concerns may, understandably, become heightened where there is a possibility that children may be regularly exposed to such content.

Do children watch too much violence on television? Youngsters may well name certain action adventure series among their favourites. This does not, however, provide an accurate reflection of what their viewing diet contains. For example, one study in which children kept personal viewing diaries revealed that, on average, children watch two action-adventure programmes and two televised feature films a week. These, however, are interspersed among many other types of programmes. In fact, the programmes most popular with children are comedy and light entertainment made for the family.[10] The programmes listed in Table 1.3 corroborate this last point.

But boys and girls differ in their programme favourites. Boys watch more action-adventure and sport, girls watch more soap operas, while boys tend to watch more children's programmes than girls. With increased age, viewing of programmes made specially for children drops significantly, while viewing of general programming, particularly of feature films and light entertainment, increases substantially.[11]

DOES TELEVISION DISPLACE OTHER ACTIVITIES?

The introduction of television on a widespread scale in Britain in the late 1950s prompted concern among educationalists that viewing would displace reading and harm children's school performance. Although research at the time did not indicate an across-the-board reduction in all kinds of children's reading, once their family had acquired a television set, some displacement was evident.[12]

Thirty years on, the question of displacement of some activities (media-related ones in particular) by others has risen once again. The first half of the 1980s saw an unprecedented growth in availability and use of new electronic media. Increasingly today, homes possess not just one, but two, three, or even more, television sets. Furthermore, the set has acquired a range of accessories and attachments—video recorders, remote controls, personal computers, games consoles—which have significantly modified the way it is used.

Typically, children are more comfortable than their parents with each new medium or gadget as it comes along. They do not have so many hardened media habits to unlearn, they are more receptive to new ideas because they have fewer old ones to abandon and they often take to new gadgets as 'toys', if not for more serious purposes.[13]

Essentially, children are less threatened by new media than are grown-ups. But time is a limited commodity. Greater use of new electronic media or gadgetry must mean that less time is spent doing other things, and this possibly includes using more established media, such as books, magazines, newspapers and radio. Displacement of some activities—particularly something like reading, if it occurs—is as worrisome today as it ever was. To what extent, though, do television viewing and also (these days) the use of television-related equipment result in less time being devoted to other intellectual and social pursuits?

Television viewing uses up time. One observation is that if people spend more time watching television, they must be spending less time doing something else. This is a very simple statement, or at least it appears so on the surface. But in fact it has some very important implications concerning the impact of television. For instance, the displacement effects of television may be a crucial issue when they occur among young viewers during the development years of early cognitive and affective growth. The richness of children's learning environment can be measured in part by the quality and variety of available sources of lessons. Consequently, there is reason for concern about conditions under which a youngster's repertoire of activities may diminish due to a displacement from a competing activity. But which activities among children become squeezed when television viewing increases?

Two principal approaches have been used to ascertain whether or not television viewing displaces other activities. One method has been to monitor the effect on amounts of time devoted to other activities when television is introduced to a community for the first time. As television has become practically universal, however, it has become increasingly difficult for

researchers to find virgin territory with totally naïve television audiences on whom such tests can be run. The available evidence obtains from the efforts of far-sighted researchers during the earliest days of television in Britain and the United States, similar investigations conducted in countries to whom television came rather later, and from studies of anomalous cases of communities in otherwise widely penetrated television nations who, because of their geographical location, were unable for many years to receive a television signal.[14]

A second method is to find out relative amounts of time devoted to television, and other media and non-media leisure activities, among current television generations. The critical question is whether heavy users of television spend less time on other activities than do light users of the box.[15] A more interesting question which we shall also examine is whether viewing certain types of television (rather than overall amount of viewing *per se)* is related, either positively or negatively, to time spent with different leisure pursuits.[16]

Early research reported mixed and largely inconclusive evidence that television viewing displaced participation in social, recreational, hobby or work activities among children and families. Studies of early television generations in the United States indicated that children and teenagers soon learned how to accommodate large amounts of television watching without sacrificing other activities. Generations of children reared with television found ways to integrate extensive use of this new medium without finding it necessary to neglect other pursuits.

The basic idea of displacement, however, may take an overly simplistic stance where the dynamic interaction of television and other activities is concerned. The displacement hypothesis, in its simplest form, posits a symmetrical, zero-sum relationship between television and other activities. It states that the amount of time spent viewing television is directly related to the time spent doing other things: the more time spent watching television, the less time spent on various other activities; conversely, the less time spent watching television, the more time a person will devote to other activities. There are some problems with this assumption. For one thing, television, as an activity, is often conducted simultaneously with other things.[17] Another important observation is that television is not invariably the primary activity among those activities simultaneously engaged in. Up to 30 per cent of all television viewing may only be a secondary activity, being carried out at the same time as something else—reading, eating, holding a conversation or, in the case of children particularly, playing.[18]

Following the early introduction of television to a community in the United States, Eleanor Maccoby noted that schoolchildren devoted much more time to television than they took away from other media.[19] Similarly, Thomas Coffin, a few years later, found that a decrease in children's use of other media accounted for only 50 per cent of the additional time spent watching television.[20] Where, then, does the additional time devoted to television come from? Both Maccoby

and Coffin believed that it may have derived from non-media activities which went unmeasured in their studies. Even extensive time-budget studies which take into account a wide range of media and non-media activities, have not typically resolved this issue. One review of the literature concluded that, although television viewing did not reduce time spent on most other media, this could not fully account for all the time spent watching the box. There was certainly some evidence that other activities, such as hobbies and interests, might suffer to some extent, but that some of the television viewing time overlapped with the use of other media. Thus children learned to accommodate their reading and viewing by doing both at the same time.[21]

'THE MORE, THE MORE'

It may not simply be a matter of one activity displacing another. An alternative view is that television tends to displace 'functionally equivalent activities'.[22] According to this modified view of displacement, people most readily give up those activities that less effectively satisfy the needs that television serves. Thus, the functional equivalence between television and movies was cited as one reason for the decline in cinema attendance following the introduction of television.[23] Another, slightly different, view is that of functional reorganisation. This notion acknowledges that most mass media can serve a range of functions for individuals. When this is the case, the introduction of a new medium triggers a complex reorganisation of media-related activities such that parts of television might be used in respect of certain functions, while books may still be turned to for other types of gratification.[24] Finally, the marginal-activities hypothesis suggests that children make room for television in their daily activities by sacrificing 'fringe' or 'marginal' activities that are not clearly defined in terms of the functions they serve.[25] Much of the problem in addressing the marginal-activities hypothesis is that the type of activities of concern are by their very nature difficult to measure and most often ignored in the research literature.[26] A number of studies in the past fifteen years have shed further light on these alternative views about television displacement effects.

As television becomes increasingly pervasive throughout the world, it becomes more and more difficult to find people who have no experience of the medium. During the 1970s, however, several natural experiments emerged in which television-naïve communities were introduced to television for the first time. Fortunately, researchers were on the spot to record and measure the impact television had. Broadly, these investigations found that television did not simply replace time devoted to all other leisure activities, but bit into it selectively. Those activities or pursuits most likely to suffer were ones where television could provide the same sort of gratification, but more easily. In one natural experiment in Australia, researchers studied 98 families in a town without television (No-TV), 102 in a town with one year's experience with one government-run channel (Low-TV), and 82 in a town with at least two years'

experience of two channels. (High-TV). Parents were interviewed about the amount of time they and their children spent in each of seventeen categories of leisure activities.

Children in the No-TV town spent more time in other leisure activities than did children from the TV towns. The increased presence of television was related to less time spent playing sports, watching sports and other outdoor activities. There was also less cinema attendance, radio listening and record playing among television communities.[27]

A major study conducted in Canada (directed by Tannis Macbeth Williams) examined the impact of television on a community which previously had had no television reception. Once again three towns were compared. These three towns were labelled Notel, Unitel and Multitel. At the start of the study, these towns had no TV, one channel only and four TV channels respectively. By the end of the research, Notel had one channel, Unitel had two channels and Multitel still had four channels. The three towns were compared at the outset and then again two years later, in order to find out what impact television had had on other activities.[28]

Television apparently had little, if any, influence on the number of community activities available to people in each town, but it had a noticeable negative effect on participation in those activities. People, especially children and teenagers, were much more active when there was no television, and became progressively less so as the amount of television available increased. The introduction of television in Notel produced a marked reduction in many community activities and participation in sports. Television decreased attendance at dances, suppers and parties. In other words, in the case of activities which cannot easily be time-shared with television, participation tended to decrease when television was introduced or when the amount of it that was available grew.

One interpretation of the finding which revealed a relatively frequent usage of television along with regular participation in other leisure activities consisted of a notion termed 'the more, the more'. This posits that those motivations which drive an individual to view large amounts of television will similarly compel that person to pursue other leisure activities. In this view, television watching and alternative leisure activities are not seen as competitive but serve rather to reinforce one another—in other words, an interest in one activity stimulates an interest in others.

On the evidence accumulated so far, there are no firm indications that television viewing invariably has a negative impact on how much time is spent doing other things—although, and almost inevitably, not all researchers are in agreement about this. There is mounting evidence that television may replace some alternative activities, though not others, among children and teenagers. Different activities bring different pleasures. Young people today have an unprecedented array of media, media-related gadgetry and in-house entertainment facilities at their disposal. The decision to choose one item or