



Barrie Gunter
& Jill McAleer

CHILDREN & TELEVISION

second edition

Children and television

Since the first edition of *Children and Television: The One-Eyed Monster?* was published in 1990, the home entertainment environment has undergone evolutionary change. There has been an explosion in the number of television channels available and in the range of entertainment media on offer, such as CD-ROM and interactive video games.

This completely revised second edition of *Children and Television* brings the story of children and television right up to date. In addition to presenting the latest research on all of the themes covered in the first edition, it includes a discussion of the new entertainment media now available, and a new chapter which examines the role of television in influencing children's health-related attitudes and behaviour.

Barrie Gunter and Jill McAleer examine the research evidence into the effects of television on children and their responses to it. They conclude that children are more sophisticated viewers than we often give them credit for, and control television far more than it controls them.

Barrie Gunter is Professor of Journalism at the University of Sheffield. His previous publications include *The Anatomy of Adolescence* with Adrian Furnham (Routledge, 1989). **Jill McAleer** is Research and Information Manager for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

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London and New York

First published 1990
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Second edition published 1997

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-203-97637-1 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-415-14451-5 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-14452-3 (pbk)

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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.

BG and JLM
April 1996