

**Mass Media, Television, and Children's Socialization:
Making Peace with TV**

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In this paper, a conceptual framework is developed for analyzing one of the basic but comparatively overlooked functions of communication—the positive socialization of young people. Our question is: can television effectively promote prosocial values to children and adolescents? Various socialization theories are assessed from the standpoint of their usefulness in the study of prosocial TV programming. The authors contend that as a viable alternative to the prevalence of controversial TV messages, the choice of prosocial programs should be available. Given the rapid growth of electronic media and amplified content delivery possibilities associated with the migration to digital format, television's preventive impact and prosocial constructive potential should be re-examined and empirically tested.

Introduction

In 1961, Newton Minow, the Chairman of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, summarized the state of television programming in America as a “vast wasteland” (Minow & LaMay, 1995, p. 188). Alarmed with the amount of violence on television, he addressed American broadcasters with the question: “Is there no room on television to teach, to inform, to uplift?” Forty years later, Minow concluded, “it has only gotten worse” (Minow, 2003, p. 425). As the number of TV channels delivered in terrestrial, cable, and satellite formats nears a thousand, controversial content becomes widely accessible to children. School shootings in the U.S. have drawn scholarly attention to the issues of socialization of younger generations of Americans and the role mass media play in the process.

In April 2007, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) concluded a three-year investigation of the impact of violent television programming on children. Although it failed to clearly define what constitutes “excessively violent programming that is harmful to children” (FCC, 2007, p. 3), the FCC recommended that the United States Congress consider developing regulatory measures to curb televised violence. In his statement, the FCC Commissioner Michael J. Copps emphasized an epidemic nature of TV violence and characterized the situation as “extraordinary and alarming” (p. 27). Echoing Minow’s “vast wasteland” speech, it signaled that Congress might once again take a well-trodden regulatory path. However, this road ends at the First Amendment stop sign; therefore, it might be beneficial to consider other options.

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To date, media studies have focused predominantly on the negative effects of electronic media, such as the development of aggressive and antisocial behaviors (Pecora, Murray, & Wartella, 2007; Wimmer & Dominick, 2003) and the reinforcement of ethnic, occupational, age, gender, and sex-role stereotypes (Berry & Asamen, 2001; Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002; Signorielli, 2001; Strasburger & Wilson, 2003). Five decades of scholarly investigations have made scientists conclude that televised representations of violence may affect viewers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to a certain degree (Murray, 2007). Results of one longitudinal study, for example, indicate that young people who watch more than one hour of TV daily are more likely to be involved in aggressive acts in their late teen years and early twenties (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001; Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen, & Brook, 2002). However, evidence accumulated for more than 50 years of TV violence effects research has not established a causal relationship between media violence and social behavior (Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone, 2006). In contrast, significantly less effort has been devoted to studying prosocial TV effects (Mares & Woodard, 2001; Paik, 1995; Pecora, Murray & Wartella, 2007; Rosenkoetter, 2001).

In the 1960s, social scientists questioned the nature of children's socialization in a modern industrialized society: specifically, whether it should be guided and to what extent (Clausen, 1968; Lippitt, 1968). Clausen indicated that socialization could be regarded as a "mode of planned change" (p. 15) with different agents involved in the implementation of social change. These issues brought about a range of other pertinent questions that remain largely unanswered, for example, how much initiative should be left to the various socializing agents? Where is the red line between good intentions and social engineering? Overall, these concerns reflect the issue of "how a society aspiring to democracy may balance the right to persuade with the right of the public to free choice" (Sproule, 1997, p. 271). Communication scholars responded by studying the role of mass media in the process of socializing youth (e.g., Rosengren, 2000; Van Evra, 2004).

Based on the analysis of the pertinent literature and the authors' own research (Dumova, 2007; Dumova & Fiordo, 2007), the current paper applies a socialization approach to the problem of television violence. One aim of this conceptual paper is to examine the relationship between mass media, television, and children's socialization. In broad terms, can we develop a framework for understanding the positive socializing function of communication as it relates to children's television primarily and adolescent's television secondarily? Rather than focusing on the development of new limitations and restrictions, the authors advocate the need for empowering parents and children with an array of viewing choices, including prosocial TV programming. Another aim of this paper is to respond to the following question: can television programming effectively promote prosocial values to children and adolescents? The article delineates various socialization theories from the standpoint of their usefulness in the study of prosocial television programs for children and adolescents that aim to foster positive societal values and stimulate socially desired behaviors.

Prosocial TV programs are those specifically designed to promote traditional (defined by parents, extended family, school, neighborhood, and local community) societal values and to advance positive (caring, sharing, helping, and cooperation) behaviors for children and adolescents. The paper examines the socializing function of mass media and the role of television as an

agent of youth socialization. The authors conclude by suggesting a framework for utilizing the constructive role television can play in the positive socialization of children and adolescents.

Mass Media as an Agent of Socialization

The concept of socialization is central to a number of social sciences and is approached by scholars from a variety of angles. It is viewed as one of the basic functions of communication that affects nearly every kind of behavior (Crain, 2000) and continues throughout life (Bugental & Goodnow, 1998). The communication perspective on socialization explores the interaction between individuals and the mass media as well as other sources of socialization (Huston & Wright, 1996; Rosengren, 2000; Rushton, 1980; Van Evra, 2004).

Socializing Function of Mass Media

Early communication theorists considered the transmission of social heritage from one generation to another an important (mass) communication function (Lasswell, 1948; Schramm, 1973) which increases social cohesion, aids integration of society, reduces social anomie, and maintains cultural cohesiveness (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948; Wright, 1960). Contemporary communication scholars defined socialization as a complex dynamic process of transferring society's ideas and culture across generations and indicated that it involves a number of socializing agents (Rosengren, 2000; Van Evra, 2004). Specifically, the process deals with the transmission of shared social and cultural experiences and values to youth, reinforcement of accepted societal norms, and preservation of social order, harmony, and stability (O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1988).

In the 1960s, Bandura (1969) predicted that further advances in communication technologies will lead to a situation where parents, teachers, and other socialization agents would lose their position as the primary role models for youth to the mass media. In today's information age, saturated with electronic media, family, church, and school are no longer the main sources of knowledge about society. Given the diminishing role of the traditional positive influences and the growing accessibility in the mass media of images distorted for entertainment purposes, Rushton (1980) stated that we are facing the problem of "undersocialization" (p. 198).

Communication scientists (Meyrowitz, 1985) noted that with the advent of new computer-based communication and information technologies, children are socialized into adult roles earlier than any previous generation. If print media offered carefully crafted steps of socialization for children, electronic media blurred the boundaries between various socialization stages by making the same information available to children, adolescents, and adults. Meyrowitz hypothesized the homogenization of socialization stages and provocatively declared "the end of childhood" (p. 226). Even though this idea gained momentum (e.g., Buckingham, 2000), most observers agreed that childhood as a social category exists and should be preserved (Handel, 2006; Davies, 2001).

Travis and Violato (2001) claimed that to understand the socialization experience of youth, it is necessary to analyze the popular culture that forms their socialization background. In the for-profit mass media environment of the U.S., refined technologies of communication can combine with artful layout and style to "vulgarize everything for commercial ends" (p. 157). The sophistication of mass media in a consumer society creates artificial needs that saturate the

society. In spite of promoting individuality, spontaneity, and creativity, mass media homogenize the general viewing population in their opinions, beliefs, values, ideas, and behavior. Mass media content in general may contribute to a generation of young people who feel “jaded, world weary and hopeless”—that is, old before their time (p. 171). A prosocial approach to mass mediated programming may allow young people to face problems of an older age when they are older, yet develop in the meantime in a manner suitable to their age.

Television and Children's Socialization

Television viewing remains a major activity for many young people. An American child between 8 and 18 years of age spends over three hours a day in front of a TV screen (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). School-age children spend 1,023 hours per year watching TV, and only 900 of those hours at school (Real Vision, 2004). Thus, television retains its position as the primary channel for communicating with children and adolescents.

In 1980, Rushton argued that the “family is an increasingly ineffective socializer of children; the television system is socializing them in an increasingly antisocial direction; and the educational system is not socializing them at all” (p. 198). Other social scientists counter-argued that the socializing impact of television is subject to modification by other agents and that it can be reinforced or supplemented by conventional agents such as parents (Comstock, 1982). Critical theorists, in turn, specifically warned that the medium of television has the potential to usurp the socializing function of the family by inculcating the values of consumerism (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). Gerbner (2001) asserted that “the new symbiotic relationship of state and television” has replaced the “historic nexus of state and church” (p. 132).

Today, young generations are confronted with significantly greater opportunities, challenges, and decisions to make than at any time in history (Firestone, 2003). It is not accidental that one national survey reported that 76% of interviewed parents believed that they experienced more difficulties in raising children than their parents had (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2002, p. 12). Nearly three quarters were concerned about the impact of negative images in the media (p. 9). The majority (90%) agreed that coarse language and adult content increasingly proliferated on the TV screen (p. 14). On the other hand, only 22% of respondents considered the option of eliminating television viewing completely. Parents predominantly (82%) thought that television could convey positive messages and lessons to their children (p. 15). Yet, television’s role as an imparter of prosocial values still has to be defined.

With the help of family, young viewers can critically select prosocial TV programs based on interests, values, and philosophical worldviews: for example, entertainment, informational, and educational shows. The authors suggest that prosocial television programming would have a loyal narrowcast, rather than broadcast, audience. In the contemporary American society, where a distinction between right and wrong is often blurred when it even exists, there is no consensus about common prosocial standards.

Theoretical Perspectives on Social: Can TV Play a Constructive Role?

The theoretical underpinning for the present paper is derived primarily from two perspectives

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on socialization: cognitive-developmental and social cognitive.

Cognitive-Developmental Perspective

Piaget offered perhaps the most insightful and effective understanding of children's growth in cognitive-developmental stages. As to Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), cognitive progress occurs gradually in a sequence of four different phases: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. Contemporary cognitive-developmental perspective recognizes that the socializing impact of television depends on a range of factors such as psychological and physiological maturation, learning, and experience. Developmental differences between various age groups are considered critical among those factors (Strasburger & Wilson, 2003).

Most social scientists acknowledge that the essence of adolescence as a stage of human development lies in the transition from childhood to adulthood (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). If adolescence starts with puberty and lasts until children are able to assume adult social roles, early adolescence is a period when multiple developmental transformations happen in a very short time: namely, changes in "physical, hormonal, familial, relational, and educational processes" (Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1999, p. 5). Advances in information and communication technologies along with the shaping of a knowledge-based type of economy have placed new demands on the labor force (Cortada, 1998; Mortimer & Larson, 2002). The new demands have pushed the upper age limit of adolescence into the late twenties. The economic and social changes have also been accompanied by physiological changes. If puberty started at the age of fifteen during Rousseau's time, it begins in contemporary industrialized societies at twelve (Schickedanz, Schickedanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001).

Both developmental and educational psychologists emphasize that it is during adolescence that socialization is most critical (Bugental & Goodnow, 1998). Adolescence, especially in its early stages, is an important time in children's physical, cognitive, moral, and social growth. In accordance with Piaget's findings, it is the time of the acquisition of social knowledge and the development of both short-term and sustained social behaviors. Therefore, it is vital to address potential problems in children's social development before they may arise. Producing developmentally appropriate TV programs can assist children and adolescents with constructive socialization into adult roles and may ultimately help them become productive members of society.

Social Cognitive Perspective

According to the social cognitive theory of mass communication (Bandura, 2002), children acquire social skills by observing other people's behavior and imitating it. A child learns social skills by consciously or unconsciously modeling parents, peers, teachers, and other socializing agents. Modeling refers to the process of observing the actions of other people and subsequently imitating observed behavior. Modeling can be direct (live), and indirect (television portrayals), or synthesized (combination of both). The effectiveness of modeling behavior is associated with a person's willingness to act in accordance with the chosen model, characteristics of the model, personal characteristics of the viewer, observer-model similarity, social set-

ting, and reinforcement of acquired behavior. Knowledge gained through vicarious (i.e., indirect) reinforcement may serve as a predictor of whether the child will adopt modeled behavior.

From the social learning viewpoint, age is not critical but rather indicative of the social stages of development: preschoolers, school children, and adolescents. Indeed, observational learning is vital for child development at any age and varies depending on the level of individual's psychological and physiological development. Rather than focusing on developmental changes, the theory concentrates on explaining how the change occurs the acquisition of new behaviors and actions.

Social cognitive theory of mass communication places special emphasis on the role of electronic media in people's direct and vicarious observational experiences. The theory maintains that symbolic modeling is central to understanding the effects of mass media: "through symbols, people give meaning, form, and continuity to the experiences they have" (Bandura, 1994, p. 62). Social learning may occur at community and society-wide levels of environments created by modern communication technologies such as telecommunications (Bandura, 2002). Hence, by observing positive attitudes and behaviors depicted in televised stories, children are likely to make socially desirable choices that will serve as guidelines for their future "thought, affect, and action" (p. 121).

New Conceptual Models of Socialization

Unlike theories within the cognitive-developmental paradigm, social cognitive theory has been used to explain the short-term effects of television (Van Evra, 2004). A new conceptual model (Rosengren, 2000), originated as a result of a series of a quarter-century longitudinal quantitative and qualitative research on media use by minors. The model utilized a systems approach and viewed socialization as dependent on a range of socializing factors: namely, social and demographic background (i.e., environment), family, peers, school, and mass media. Rosengren (2000) pointed at eight large groups of agents whose influence is critical in communicating ideals, values, and culture to young generations in contemporary society: family, peers, work, religious groups, school, law agencies, social organizations, and general and specialized media of communication. Children's overall values, attitudes, social relations, habits, and activities were viewed as directly related to the results of the interplay between the socializing factors.

Van Evra (2004) formulated another integrative model of socialization based on an extensive review of communication and psychological research. This model provided a comprehensive conceptualization of the socializing influence of mass media, including TV, and integrated various theoretical perspectives such as social learning, cultivation, information processing, and uses and gratifications. Van Evra (2004) emphasized four major determinants of the influence of television on children's socialization: developmental differences, socioeconomic level, race, and gender. The model aimed to explicate the way young viewers use the medium of television, perceive televised reality, and the amount of time they spend with TV. The complex interaction of four determinants outlined by Van Evra helps predict the outcomes of socialization ranging from minimum to maximum effects.

A number of studies generated evidence that there is a positive relationship between

adolescents' prosocial orientations and personality characteristics, such as moral reasoning and academic achievement. In a meta-analysis of empirical evidence on the individual processes that contribute to children's progression to adolescence and adulthood, Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, and Laible (1999) concluded that early adolescents are more likely to be engaged in prosocial behavior than younger children. This conclusion supports Piaget's (1965) proposition that prosocial and moral behaviors in children increase with age. Between the ages of ten and twelve, most children usually "overcome the limitations of concrete operational thinking and begin to understand others' and societal perspectives" (Fabes et al., 1999, p. 10).

A longitudinal study of the impact of "prosocialness" (cooperativeness, helpfulness, sharing, consoling) found a strong positive correlation between prosocial behavioral patterns and academic achievement of 294 children in Italy (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). Earlier cross-sectional analyses of American youth (Wentzel, 1993) and Japanese children (Lewis, 1995) yielded similar results. Other researchers found that when young people lack positive influences from the family, church, and school, prosocial TV programming might become an effective socializing agent (Hattemer & Showers, 1995). However, more studies need to be conducted to examine the strength of the relationship between prosocial orientations of youth, personality characteristics, and prosocial messages in mass media.

While cognitive-developmental research concentrates on psychological factors of growth, several innovative approaches create a more comprehensive and balanced account of successful socialization into adulthood in the context of social networks and strong functional communities (Silbereisen & Todt, 1994). Novel conceptual foundations such as developmental assets, asset-building communities, and the youth charter approach, build upon knowledge accumulated by social sciences and educational practitioners and provide a sound foundation for using mass media as an agent of positive socialization (Benson, 2003; Benson & Pittman, 2001; Damon & Gregory, 2003). Recent analyses of the effects of community and family involvement in schools on child and adolescent development and learning demonstrate the benefits of collaboration among various socializing agents (Epstein, 2001; Gonzales-Mena, 2002) and suggest a promising direction for further inquiry.

In partnership with local communities and schools, community-oriented and locally produced TV programs can assist young people in making better decisions and choices that they will be facing in their adult lives. The authors do not necessarily propose to broadcast social values to mass audiences. Instead, it might be beneficial to narrowcast prosocial programs for selected youth segments at the community level. By watching prosocial portrayals provided in TV programs, young people in communities around the world may learn socially desirable behaviors, such as cooperation, kindness, generosity, sharing, and caring.

Prosocial TV Framework: Making Peace with TV

It has been argued that the overall negative effects of media violence are increasing (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Despite the existing variety of television programming types including entertainment, informational, and educational programs, as well as various combinations of those (e.g., edutainment, infotainment), there is no genre of American television that would purposely contribute to youth's positive socialization.

Prosocial TV Research

Can a TV programming genre be created to counterbalance the unintended adverse impact of mass entertainment? Before answering this question, it may be beneficial to survey the field of prosocial television research. Investigations of television's prosocial effects in the U.S. began in the 1970s with a large-scale social scientific research program that explored the relationship between symbolic violence on television and children's attitudes and behaviors. Although criticized for a behavioral theoretical standpoint (Rowland, 1983), the U.S. Surgeon General's Report *Television and growing up* (Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee, 1972) and a sequence of research studies conducted in the 1970s (Collins & Getz, 1976; Friedrich & Stein, 1973; Liebert & Poulos, 1976; Rubinstein, Liebert, Neale, & Poulos, 1974; Stein, Friedrich, & Vondracek, 1972) were imperative in understanding the potential of TV for positive socialization. Reviewing the outcomes, Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, and Roberts (1978) affirmed that television "should be considered a major agent of socialization, although its influence is often indirect and contingent on interpersonal relations and other factors" (p.14).

Evaluation of TV's constructive role continued through the 1990s. Research evidence supported a hypothesis that television functioned as a powerful source of socialization along with other sources of influence such as parents, family, school, church, peers and community (Christenson & Roberts, 1983; Greenberg, 1980; Himmelweit, 1980; Rushton, 1982; Wartella, 1994, 1996). After testing the concept of prosocial effects in laboratory and field experiments, a positive relationship between prosocial content and subsequent behavioral outcomes was identified (Eron & Huesmann, 1986; Johnston & Ettema, 1982). Results partially confirmed the hypothesis that by viewing TV programs, children could learn not only specific types of behavior—prosocial and antisocial—but also ideas and attitudes that could guide their behavior throughout life. Several meta-analyses demonstrated that the overall impact of prosocial content exceeded that of antisocial (Hearold, 1986; Mares, 1996; Paik, 1995).

While prosocial behavior can be understood as voluntary behavior contributing to the well-being of others (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998), altruism can be viewed as a group of reciprocal behaviors based on an empathy that includes helping, sharing (Smith et al., 2006), cooperation, generosity, and kindness (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989). In the communication field, the term "prosocial" is applied not only to altruistic or helping behavior as in psychology, but also to a broad variety of socially valued behaviors and to media content depicting mainstream societal norms and rules.

Rushton (1995) identified four types of prosocial TV content that proved to be effective by laboratory and naturalistic experiments: programs altruistic in nature, demonstrating friendly behavior, self-control, and coping with fears. The category of altruistic behavior involved generosity, helping, and cooperation; self-control behaviors included adhering to rules, resisting temptation, and delay of gratification. Lovelace and Huston (1983) proposed a number of effective strategies for presenting prosocial messages to children: prosocial portrayal, dramatized conflict, and prosocial conflict resolution. With Fisch (2004) noting that the examination of prosocial TV effects focused predominantly on preschool children, more research is needed to determine the impact of prosocial TV programming on the social behavior of adolescent

viewers.

Despite encouraging results from experimental studies conducted since the 1970s on the effects of prosocial TV and attempts to establish “an applied science of prosocial television” (Johnston & Ettema, 1986, p. 149), a general profile of children’s prosocial television programming has not been completed. Johnston and Ettema (1986) produced a synthesis of scholarly research of prosocial TV and proposed a conceptual definition. They defined prosocial TV as “television that models socially valued behaviors, responses, attitudes, or beliefs” (p. 143). Prosocial TV effects research has set the stage for successful practical implementation of the idea of prosocial television as a TV genre in its own right. Other helpful suggestions can be found if one takes a careful look at the history of children’s television in America, especially, at programs such as *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* and *Barney & Friends* that were specifically constructed to convey positive images and messages.

Prosocial TV Programming

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* was the only program on national television that had “as its prime concern the emotional and social growth of the child” (Stein, Friedrich, & Vondracek, 1972, p. 276). *Mister Rogers’* began in 1968 on WQED-TV, Pittsburgh and had been in production until 2000. It started as a low-budget local show but quickly turned into one of the prime staples of public television in the U.S. The show was designed for early and middle childhood viewers and was specifically “devoted to examining values, feelings and fears” (Brown, p. 277). The programs encompassed a full range of themes related to children’s socialization, including “rejection, physical handicaps, going to the dentist, disappointment, death” (p. 277).

Launched in 1969, *Sesame Street*, in addition to teaching preschool children how to read and count, also aimed to develop viewers’ positive social skills and attitudes such as cooperation, taking another person’s point of view, and cultural awareness (Cook et al., 1975; Lesser & Schneider, 2001; Mielke, 2001; Truglio, Lovelace, Seguí, & Scheiner, 2001). Building upon the success of *Sesame Street*, a whole generation of programs targeted at school-aged children developed in the 1970s within various noncommercial broadcasting outlets: *Electric Company*, *Square One TV*, *Schoolhouse Rock*, *In the News*, *Freestyle*, *Zoom*, *Big Blue Marble*, *Villa Allegre*, *Infinity Factory*, *Vegetable Soup*, *ThinkAbout* and *Inside/Out*. Integrating many prosocial features, these shows aimed primarily to complement, extend, or supplement traditional classroom curriculum (Fisch, 2004). The success of *Sesame Street* determined the overall orientation of children’s TV towards merging educational content with entertainment (Fisch, 1998; Palmer & Fisch, 2001), and the success of *Sesame Street* made “edutainment” synonymous with prosocial programming (Luke, 1990).

The early 1990s were marked with the tremendous success of another television series for preschool children—*Barney & Friends*, developed by Connecticut Public Broadcasting. Through creative plots, music, songs, and dances, the *Barney* show highlighted the themes of family, friends, and neighborhood and explicitly emphasized caring, sharing, helping, and positive interaction (Singer & Singer, 1998).

Socially positive content may be included in programming with minority characters,

such as the Hispanic characters in *Dora the Explorer* (aired since 2000) or *Go, Diego, Go!* (since 2005). These animated TV programs promote minority characters as well as teach cultural diversity in order to enhance the lives of both Hispanic and non-Hispanic young viewers (Artze, 2000; Bortree, 2006; Fernandez, 2005; Popp, 2006; Sigler, 2003).

Yet, despite the existence of high-quality TV programs for preschool and elementary school-aged children that incorporate prosocial themes and messages, there is a shortage of such programs for early and late adolescents. In contrast to well-established shows with prosocial messages, such as *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* and *Barney*, the production of new programs is “caught between the industry’s perceived responsibility to provide safe and educational programming, and the network’s status as a for-profit entry” (Mitroff & Stephenson, 2007, p. 26).

Contemporary media researchers view prosocial television broadly as any positive content conveyed by TV programs (Calvert & Kotler, 2003; Fisch, 2004; Wicks, 2001) and, more specifically, as one that is designed to produce socially positive outcomes and encourage positive social change (Harris, 1999, 2004). And only a few argue that prosocial television be distinguished from entertainment and educational programming (Calvert, 1999).

The authors acknowledge the view that society bears responsibility for the content available to young viewers on TV screens (Lemish, 2007). Prosocial programming specifically designed to teach children right from wrong should serve as a counterbalance to television’s negative influences; such programming should be available to children, parents, and families worldwide. Lessons learned from the Children’s Television Workshop model of producing educational programming—namely, sequencing, reinforcement, involvement of viewers, high production standards, and integrating formative and summative research (Fisch & Truglio, 2001)—can be applied to the creation of prosocial TV as a genre of its own.

Why We Need Prosocial TV for Children and Adolescents

As Bandura (2002) emphasized, transmission of cultural, moral, and social practices in society would be impossible without the benefits of observational learning. To be specific, television may function as a significant and perhaps one of the most powerful contributors to children’s overall socializing experiences. Electronic media perform an ever-increasing role in this process by expanding the scope of human experiences on the basis of symbolic representations of society and human relationships. The authors of this paper maintain that socialization of youth should be guided proactively. It is important to keep such long-established and highly regarded socializing agents as parents, family, school, and community involved in this process. Community-based prosocial TV could be instrumental in bringing traditional socializing agents together. Local public television stations, community access cable channels, and school-based TV productions can function as prosocial TV hubs that effectively contribute to young people’s general socialization.

Examples of locally-produced prosocial television programs exist. *The Friday Zone*, a weekly children’s show produced by WTIU in Bloomington (Indiana) “aims to excite children about their community and the world around them.”² Featuring various activities, local guests, and community events, this award-winning program has been successful in stimulating young viewers’ interest in their local communities. Another local broadcast, *News Six* (WBGU in Bowling

Green, Ohio)³, covers school news, community traditions, local landmarks and people. *News Six* has stayed on the air for over thirty years and is one of the longest running locally produced and distributed television broadcasts for children in the U.S. Most recently, *The Biscuit Brothers* (KLRU in Austin, Texas)⁴ has focused on community values and personal qualities through music education and critical thinking activities.

The context of prosocial portrayals underlies the effectiveness of modeling outcomes. Scholars have indicated that TV effects are embedded in the specific contexts of local communities (Lemish, 2007). Televised images of parents, classmates, school teachers, neighbors, and community members that are familiar and easily recognizable by youth can all become potential sources of internalized socialization. Researchers should focus on specific characteristics of positive role models presented in TV programs and see them as sources of modeling influences.

Conclusion

There is high agreement among social scientists that socialization constitutes a major function of communication and that society needs to assist the younger generation in becoming productive and contributing members.

As the process of communicating societal norms of right and wrong to young members of a pluralistic democratic society, socialization should be considered prosocial by definition. Based on the propositions of the social cognitive theory of mass communication, enriched by insights of developmental and educational theorists, one can view prosocial behavior as a function of prosocial messages conveyed by televised representations of social reality. As an instrument of socialization, prosocial TV might contribute to children's well-being and might be used by society to its best advantage. Recent developments in video production and the transition of television to the digital format create an opportunity to consider prosocial television as a genre of TV programming designed to promote socially trusted behaviors and assist in the socialization of youth. The authors argue that television can successfully promote prosocial behavior to children and adolescents in society

If it is not likely that one can broadcast prosocial values on American national television, one can likely narrowcast prosocial programming targeted at different ages at the community level. Digital TV provides local communities with the opportunity to offer prosocial programming and promote healthy social behaviors due to its increased channel capacity and technological innovations. In partnership with families, local communities, and schools, prosocial TV programs can contribute to curtailing delinquency, social transgression, and ethnic stereotyping among youth. Prosocial programming has the potential of maintaining America's best democratic traditions and values and diminishing long-standing negative values such as racial and ethnic discrimination.

The authors assert that prosocial programs can appeal to established societal values that satisfy a range of children's needs. The authors neither advance nor prescribe a pre-ordained or sanitized notion of prosocial behavior, for they are both open to social change and remain supportive of freedom of expression in broadcasting. As the Federal Communications Commis-

sion (2004, 2006, 2007) updates children's programming rules for digital TV broadcasters in the U.S., it is critical to determine the directions for digital TV's future development. Television retains the untapped capacity to deliver programming specifically crafted to help children and adolescents become beneficial members of their communities and society at large.

Television's constructive potential to reinforce esteemed societal standards of behavior should be re-examined and empirically tested. Based on the knowledge of a dynamic interplay between symbolic modeling, developmental factors, socializing agents, social networks, and communities, research on the positive socializing function of television should be carried out proactively with its recommendations evaluated by a community of scholars and the community at large. The authors maintain that communication scholars should shift their focus towards exploring ways of developing prosocial television programming: a shift that can perform a vital service in a pluralistic society.

Notes

1. <http://advancing.indiana.edu/enrichment/fzone.shtml>
2. <http://www.nwoet.org/newsix/>
3. <http://www.biscuitbrothers.com/>

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