

# TELEVIZION

International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)

Special English Issue No. 12/1999/2: "The Teletubbies"

*Sue Howard and Susan Roberts*

## "Teletubbies" downunder: The Australian experience

### Introduction

Broadcast at 7.30 a.m. on Australian television and scheduled alongside other programmes intended for preschoolers, it's highly likely that only a small percentage of Australia's population has actually watched an episode of "Teletubbies" and most of those viewers would be under the age of 5. It is clear, however, that the evocative name 'Teletubby' has entered the Australian lexicon and has currency and cultural meaning for Australians in general. For example, Shane Warne, an Australian cricketing hero with a weight problem was referred to as a 'sporting Teletubby' by a writer for the national daily newspaper (*Australian* 19/12/97). Again in *The Australian*, in an article presenting research into childhood obesity, a subheader proclaimed 'Overindulgent, overprotective parents are turning their children into "Teletubbies"...' (*Australian* 1/9/99) - an accompanying photograph depicts an overweight primary school child, eating potato chips and drinking soft drink, slumped on a sofa in front of a TV set.

As these examples show, the meanings that the "Teletubby" epithet (with or without a capital T) have generated are somewhat contradictory - they are part pejorative, and part lovable. To put it crudely: champion leg-spin bowlers and young children = good; fat and television = bad. What we would argue is that these contradictory meanings (particularly for people who have never watched the programme) are largely attributable to the critical media attention that the series attracted even before it went to air in Australia early in 1998. On the one hand, ardent Teletubby-fandom among the young and the cuddly appeal of the Teletubby characters has been frequently (and often anxiously) acknowledged, while on the other, the series has been subjected to a barrage of criticism (largely about language and lack of cognitive content). In addition, written commentary has linked "Teletubbies" to such controversial topics as drugs, homosexuality, rampant consumerism and so forth. The language used in much of this writing relies on militaristic metaphors where the child viewer is constructed as the innocent victim powerless to deal with the rapacious and corrupting force of "Teletubbies". All this amounts to a classic case of 'moral panic' in our view.

What we wish to do in this paper is to examine the controversy that has accompanied the screening of "Teletubbies" in Australia by looking at a selection of the print media's commentary and criticism. We will tease out the main critical themes and show how these can be related to deeper anxieties, as 'moral panics' tend to be. We will then describe a study

of our own which is attempting to uncover what it is about "Teletubbies" that young viewers are responding to with such enthusiasm.

### **The media's view**

Although articles on "Teletubbies" have appeared from time to time in Australian women's magazines and magazines on parenting, we restricted our survey of the print media to newspapers published during the period December 1997 to September 1999. For our target papers we chose the national daily *The Australian*; the major daily in the state of New South Wales, *The Sydney Morning Herald*; the major daily in South Australia, *The Advertiser* and we collected a few pieces from other minor publications. We ended up with 49 articles which, in our view, amounts to a lot of column inches for a programme aimed at the very young.

Our first strategy was a straightforward content analysis to identify the main themes which writers were addressing in their articles and we identified three major ones: the first was what we called 'Sex and Drugs', the second concerned 'Language Issues and Dumbing Down' and the third related to the 'Merchandising' associated with "Teletubbies".

#### *Sex and Drugs*

From the time when "Teletubbies" was first broadcast in Australia (February 16th 1998), the programme attracted claims that it either contained alarming references to drugs and homosexuality or was suspiciously appealing to drug-users and gay men. The language of 'cults' and 'addiction' has also often been used to describe the phenomenon of "Teletubbies" popularity. It is interesting to note that very few of the journalists writing about the series appear to have actually viewed an episode. Most of what they write is recycled, sensationalism lifted from the British and other overseas press.

Even before the programme aired, Robin Oliver in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (9/2/98) wrote a lengthy piece warning of the imminent arrival of the "Teletubbies" series. In the article he describes Tinky Winky sardonically as:

*"... a largish dumpy chap in purple suit, with a sticking up bit something like a sardine-tin key on his head, a somewhat limp wave and, er, a handbag."*

He then manages to put an unsavoury spin on the way the "Teletubbies" express physical affection for each other: 'They roll around in a cocoon of happiness. They'll be group cuddling soon'. To leave the reader in no doubt as to the underlying agenda of "Teletubbies" he adds:

*"There are reports that [...] Tinky Winky has become a cult hero among homosexuals [...] Andrew Medhurst of Sussex University, gained some popular press by proclaiming the handbag-wielding Tinky Winky as the world's first preschool gay icon." (Sydney Morning Herald 9/2/98)*

*On the day before "Teletubbies" screened for the first time in Australia, Adelaide's Sunday Mail (15/2/98) perpetuates the 'gay' angle when it claimed that the characters '...have a cult following among young British trendies, particularly among gays who have adopted Tinky Winky...'*

A year later, a piece in *The Advertiser* (14/1/99) revives the sexual innuendo about Tinky Winky: 'Tinky Winky has been suspect for his colour purple, his antenna triangular-shaped like the gay-pride symbol, and his carrying a purse...'. However, it was not until the Reverend

Jerry Falwell 'outed' the character in his U.S. *National Liberty Journal* that parents were directly advised to guard their children against the corrupting influence of Tinky Winky. *The Advertiser* (12/2/99) reports that Falwell had taken his action:

*"... after collating evidence of what he claims is the character's homosexual nature. Carrying a handbag, being purple and having a triangular antenna are all clear signs and children may be in moral danger...."*

*The Australian* (10/2/99) also cites the 'tell-tale' gay symbols and quotes Falwell as saying 'These subtle depictions are no doubt intentional and parents are warned to be alert to these elements of the series.' Although Falwell later retracted his statements in a revisionist moment (*Australian* 20/2/99), another report claimed that the US-based Christian Action Network had demanded that an HC tag (for Homosexual Content) be shown before each "Teletubbies" programme so that parents could be warned about inherent dangers in the content (*Advertiser* 25/2/99).

Disappointingly, it was left to writers of Letters to the Editor, not feature writers and journalists, to challenge all this absurdity. One letter writer complains about '... the extraordinarily prominent coverage (almost a full page) given to Jerry Falwell's illogical, bizarre remarks about the children's programme, "Teletubbies".' Another ironically writes: 'Let's look on the bright side of this absurdity: if Tinky Winky is gay, Dipsy, Po and Laa Laa are teaching our little children not to be homophobic by playing happily together'. (*Advertiser* 16/2/99 & 17/2/99)

The linking of "Teletubbies" with drugs follows a similar pattern to that adopted with the sexuality issue. Comment and critique are rarely the product of first-hand viewing but instead consist of reports of reports emanating from elsewhere. Even before the series was broadcast in Australia, for example, *The Australian* (13/12/97) describes how "Teletubbies" gained notoriety with some overseas critics because:

*"... with its hallucinogenic visuals and its blithe disregard for reality, the show was, they claimed nothing less than a televisual homage to the transformative powers of the drug ecstasy - an impression seemingly confirmed when, in one infamous segment, the 'Tubbies gathered round a giant letter descending from the sky. A letter that turned out to be (coincidentally?) a large, phosphorescent E." (Australian 13/12/97)*

A week before the show went to air, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (9/2/98) reported in two consecutive short paragraphs that there were accounts of babies as young as 6 months being 'addicted' to "Teletubbies" and that British drug addicts were also manically devoted to them. The link between young children and drugs is cleverly not explicit, but has, nevertheless, a powerful metonymic effect. The article then goes on to report:

*"According to the New York Times, which delved into the youth culture of British hip magazines, teenagers like to come home from "all-night, ecstasy-fuelled raves", switch on "Teletubbies" and attempt to unravel encoded drug messages..". (Sydney Morning Herald 9/2/98)*

One day before "Teletubbies" went to air, Adelaide's *Sunday Mail* was making even more exotic claims:

*"Teletubbies have been both attacked and adored for supposed symbolism that analysts say ranges from fascism to 'religious rituals' to drug inspired behaviour*

*'potentially more dangerous to the psyche than smoking crack'" (Sunday Mail 15/2/98)*

The language of addiction is apparent in even quite innocuous pieces about the programme. Anne Wood, the "Teletubbies" inventor and producer, is claimed to have invented other creations (e.g. Roland the Rat, Rosie and Jim) that have '... turned toddlers into television addicts...' (*Australian 7/7/98*). The programme 'glues [2 - 3 year olds] to the screen' (*Australian 17/10/98*) and one journalist claims that her two year old nephew 'was hooked' on "Teletubbies" 'within 24 hours of first exposure' (*Australian 10/1/98*).

What is disappointing about the press reports about these issues is that they tend to recycle previously reported sensational accounts of how this or that group has been outraged by perceived drug or homosexual references and symbols in "Teletubbies". There is little attempt at first-hand analysis to support or challenge these views. Ironically, the most clear-sighted assessments of "Teletubbies" come from the writers of Letters to the Editor, who are most likely to be the parents of Teletubby fans and therefore rather more familiar with the source material than the journalists appear to be.

#### *Language Issues and 'Dumbing-Down'*

As if sex and drugs weren't enough, "Teletubbies" has also been subjected to quite scathing criticism concerning the characters' use of language and a perceived lack of educational content in the programme. The main focus for the attack is the fact that the "Teletubby" characters talk to each other in 'baby talk' and this is considered to be an inappropriate model of language for pre-verbal toddlers. This, despite the fact that each programme generally provides different models of language use and proficiency ranging from four year olds with Cockney accents to the upper class articulation of Penelope Keith, the actor.

Again, many of the claims are reporting British concerns rather than examining the programme itself. The following excerpts from the Australian press are typical in the recycling of British anxieties about children imitating "tubby talk" instead of learning to speak properly:

*"The colourful Teletubbies live in Teletubbyland and use toddler talk - often leaving out verbs and pronouns in their speech. They communicate with looks, laughs and words which are not necessarily accurate. Parents and educators in the UK have voiced their concerns over children copying the ``tubby talk'', rather than using correct English." (Advertiser 15/2/98)*

"Teletubby language, what there is of it, is clipped, 'dumbed-down' is the way many parents and educators have described it. Instead of promoting proper words and leaving small children to come to grips with them, Tubby-speak comes ready-slurred and the process by which children, great imitators, have always learned to talk is usurped. Baby talk rules: the scooter ridden by Po, the baby of the group, becomes cooter, custard is tustard." (*Sydney Morning Herald 9/2/98*)

*The Advertiser (12/11/98)* at least claims evidence that Australian parents and educators share their British counterparts' concerns:

*"Many Aussie parents also are feeling irate about the program. The problem with the "Teletubbies" is that they talk baby talk. So, linguistic flavor of the month at kindy these days is ``uh-oh" for ``hello", ``coo-ta" for ``scooter" and ``cu-ded" for ``custard".... Adelaide childcare workers have been expressing concern at the way in*

*which little ones are using Tubbytalk instead of conventional English." (Advertiser 12/11/98)*

Interestingly, one article that does indicate that the writer has actually viewed the programme and drawn his/her own conclusions rather than borrowing second-hand opinions, comes from a review of children's computer games in the weekly computer supplement:

*"Teletubbies at first seems to break the 'no baby talk' rules of proper teaching; the Teletubbies say 'Ehoh' instead of 'hello' and 'gain a gain' instead of 'again'. This, however, is balanced by clearly spoken sentences explaining what the Teletubby is doing. There's no doubt that two-year-olds immediately relate to and enjoy the Tubbies and Baby Sun." (Australian 17/10/98)*

In addition to poor language models, "Teletubbies"' 'dubious educational value' is claimed to contribute to a general 'dumbing down' of television for young children (*Sydney Morning Herald* 9/2/98). Patricia Edgar, the head of the Australian Children's Television Foundation, appears somewhat ambivalent about the programme, largely because of what she perceives as its lack of intellectual challenge:

*"What children actually learn from the "Teletubbies" is actually quite controversial. Children [in the age group "Teletubbies" is targeting] are learning faster than anybody ever learns for the rest of their life. The colour is spectacular, the production values are excellent and the subject matter is good but it's not really extending them in any way at all." (Advertiser 11/2/98)*

Phillip Adams, a well-known Australian public figure and media commentator, calls "Teletubbies" 'execrable' and lumps this programme in with others, such as "Bananas in Pyjamas" and "The Wiggles" (both immensely popular in Australia), as being intellectually the equivalent of 'gooey custard'. He says:

*"Kids' programmes should help kids' minds grow. Help feed their joy in life and their curiosity. So let us, for heaven's sake, stop treating the pre-kinder set as brain-dead. I'm all for saying goo-goo to 6-month-old babies. But once a kid gets to three or four they deserve more than the televisual counterpart to gooey custard. There comes a time when kids have to view solids as well as eat them." (Australian 2/1/99)*

In a general policy statement about television and very young children, The American Academy of Pediatrics contributed to this debate about the so-called 'brain-deadening' influence of programming for the young. *The Australian* (6/8/99) began its report with:

*"Play School is out for children under two. So is Sesame Street and even the mega-hit Teletubbies - if the American Academy of Pediatrics has its way ...Far from being an 'electronic babysitter', the academy says TV should be banned for children under two, the crucial years for brain development."*

There followed vague and unsubstantiated claims charging that programmes watched by the under two's impede development during a 'critical stage' and encourage children to become mindless, dull and fat.

While rejecting the American Association of Pediatrics' advice to ban television for the under two's, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (5/8/99) reported that the Royal Australasian College of Physicians was advising general practitioners to quiz parents about the amount and type of

television watched by their children because, according to the director of health policy:

*"Television viewing could affect the mental, social and physical health of young people and this should be taken into account when doctors diagnosed illness, particularly behaviour and personality disorders." (Sydney Morning Herald 5/8/99)*

In this article, the RACP makes the link between watching television in early childhood and subsequent mental and personality disorders on the basis of one indicator - amount of television watched. A recent study (Cuppitt et al. 1998) released by the Australian Broadcasting Authority found, among many other things, that 30-month old children may be watching television for up to 84 minutes a day and that four year olds may watch up to 2<sup>1/2</sup> hours per day (*Sydney Morning Herald* 5/8/99). A flurry of 'shock-horror' headlines appeared in relation to this study: 'The T.V. addicts who wear nappies' (*Advertiser* 20/7/99); 'Children spend more time watching T.V. than in class' (*Australian* 20/7/99); 'Toddlers watch too much T.V.' (*Sun-Herald* 18/7/99); 'TV taking over tots' lives' (*Herald Sun* 20/7/99) and 'Slaves to the Box' (*Daily Telegraph* 20/7/99).

In all this press coverage, no mention is made of the considerable volume of research that has convincingly challenged the simplistic 'child-as-victim-of television' view that is being promoted here. Nor does it cite recent research that shows that even very young children do not sit mindlessly in front of the television but in fact use TV in much the same way as they use everything else in their environment, to think about and make sense of the world (see Lealand 1998; Howard 1998). The old behaviourist view that television 'effects' are inevitably one-way and corrupting (see, for example, Winn 1985) is alive and well in these reports.

There are two other surprising things about the press attention given to the 'language and dumbing down issue'. The first is that the critics show so little knowledge of television history. Several popular television shows in the 1950s such as "Watch With Mother" and "Bill and Ben" used characters who spoke 'baby talk', the latter coining such memorable neologisms as 'Flobabdob'! Since the 50's the alternative for Australian preschoolers seems to have been the incorporation of mute characters into their programmes with an adult host talking for them (e. g. Humphrey B. Bear in "Here's Humphrey"; Big Ted and Jemima in "Play School").

The second concern is that once again, there appears to be a reluctance to either engage in first-hand critical assessment of the show or to seek comment from experts in the field. In the 49 press pieces we reviewed only one article reported expert opinion about the structure of the programme and the models of language use it incorporates: a study conducted by researchers at Sheffield Hallam University concluded:

*"Linguistic experts have clearly been involved in the creation of these appealing characters, which are so skilful in their use of repetition and rhyme [...] The "Teletubbies" show spectacularly how popular culture can be a valuable stimulus for work in language and literature with children. [...] Children who would not normally be interested in writing fall all over themselves with excitement when they get the chance to write about these familiar characters." (Sydney Morning Herald 25/8/99)*

Other expert opinion is available. Lois Bloom, for example, the distinguished U.S. linguist has this to say about the potential value of "Teletubbies":

*"Here are the features that I saw as noteworthy.. One is repetition [...] the short segments are shown, and then shown again, and sometimes yet again, which means that the young 1- or 2 -year-old who didn't catch it the first time gets another shot at*

*it. Second, there are certain concepts built into the vignettes that echo research in normal language acquisition by myself and others: in particular, the use of relational words like 'more', 'again' and 'uhoh' and 'gone' - fairly basic concept-word connections for 1-year-olds [...] and the pace is slow, and easy, and colourful, and catchy, and incorporates expectation as well as surprise. [...] Will the use of so-called 'baby talk' be hurtful? Maybe there will be research out there some day to say that it is, but I seriously doubt it." (Bloom, 1999)*

Given the bad publicity about the language and the 'dubious educational value' of "Teletubbies", anecdotal evidence about Australian parents, kindergartens and preschools banning the "Teletubbies" programme, toys, books and videos is understandable. A more informed approach to discussing the series would have helped to minimise anxieties but, one has to admit, that would probably have made the topic far less newsworthy.

### *Merchandising*

Much of the reporting about the success of "Teletubbies" merchandising is set in a business framework and here the language used is redolent with militaristic metaphors: "Teletubbies" 'are marching to world domination' (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 9/2/98), 'are taking the world by storm' (*Advertiser* 25/8/98) and 'they've conquered Britain' (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 9/2/98) where their debut 'caused mini-riots and rationing last Christmas' (*Advertiser* 26/3/98). The mayhem continues in New Zealand:

*The "Teletubbies" are one of the hottest selling toys in ABC Shops in Adelaide and now the mania has struck New Zealand. Children yesterday were tipped from strollers and elderly women were shoved about when about 100 people stormed The Warehouse store in Hamilton, snapping up the first shipment of the "Teletubbies" in less than a minute. Police received several complaints from people who were trampled. (Advertiser 30/7/98)*

Much reporting in the business pages focuses on the money that "Teletubbies" merchandise has earned for the BBC - an amount estimated between \$A 50 million (*Australian* 2/1/99) and \$A 62.57 million (*Herald Sun* 18/7/98). There is awe at the sheer volume of sales in Britain during the previous Christmas where "Teletubby" dolls outsold Spice Girls dolls (*Advertiser* 11/2/98) and a "Teletubby" 'song' (consisting largely of baby noises) was a hit in the pop charts (*Sydney Morning Herald* 9/2/98). Another article reports that 2 million "Teletubbies" videos were sold in less than 12 months in the UK (*Australian* 12/3/98). There is clearly a certain amount of eager anticipation that the products will be equally successful in Australia: 'Demand for "Teletubby" dolls has far outstripped supply, a situation the Australian distributors are quietly confident will be repeated here.' (*Advertiser* 11/2/98).

Moving away from the triumphalist reporting in the business pages, a rather more ambivalent attitude towards "Teletubbies" merchandising success is apparent. As Buckingham (1993: 242) has pointed out, unlike the concerns generated by television violence (i.e. fear that children will become anti-social), concerns about television advertising centre on fear that children will become too compliant, too willing to accept the dominant materialist, consumerist ideology of capitalist society. There has always been a vocal lobby group against children's television advertisements and the marketing technique of linking merchandise to popular TV shows (e.g. Varney 1994; Kunkel 1994; Wartella 1980, 1984). They argue that these practices mislead children and are both exploitative and manipulative - a view characterised by Young (1986) as 'child-as-innocent and advertiser-as-seducer'. Some of the reporting echoes these concerns. The image of the young child being manipulated by

predatory 'Big Business' is implicit in the following extracts:

*"The program attracts more than 2 million British toddlers daily. In the marketing aisles that lead to the ubiquitous ABC shops, the word has been put out that the Teletubbies debut should not be allowed to become the subject of unwelcome controversy in the media. The reasoning is obvious. Consignments of Tubby products, books, videos, CDs plush toys, costumes, brooches, jigsaw puzzles, T-shirts and possibly food will start arriving in Australia before Easter, by which time demand is expected to be Tubby-tenacious." (Sydney Morning Herald 9/2/98)*

"While the media spotlight has largely moved off the "Teletubbies" in Britain, sales have continued to boom and the "Teletubbies" launch on the Public Service Broadcasting channel in the U.S. [...] has been judged by hard-headed business analysts as a cash-generating hit." (*Australian* 7/7/98)

An article in *The Australian* (7/7/98) headlined: *Creator grows fat on Teletubby fan fare*, reported that "Teletubbies" products had been such a marketing success that Anne Wood was going to be eligible to join Britain's *Sunday Times*' 'Rich List' (i.e. she is worth at least 20 million pounds). While the tone of the article is generally admiring (as the Australian press often is of those who contrive to get seriously rich), there is clear ambivalence of feeling in the article. The headline phrase 'to grow fat on' has pejorative and predatory overtones and in the article itself the predatory image continues with the success of "Teletubbies" toys overseas being described variously as 'a feeding frenzy', 'Tubbymania' and a 'march to world domination'.

There is a clear anxiety expressed here about making a great deal of money from something that is very appealing to the very young, however the arguments generally advanced to support this position are not canvassed. All the reader is left with is the impression that young children are at the mercy of the "Teletubbies" business empire and that some individuals and organizations are becoming incredibly wealthy, literally at the children's (or their parents') expense.

## **A Summation**

What conclusion should one draw from this brief examination of the way "Teletubbies" has been reported in Australia? Children's passion for the "Teletubby" characters and series is everywhere acknowledged but rarely examined. At the same time, innuendo links the series to homosexuality and drugs and the alarm is raised that "tubby talk" will lead to impaired language development in the young. In addition, the repetitious and simple content of the programmes is accused of being insufficiently challenging, leading to the "dumbing down" of Australian children. To cap it all, "Teletubbies" is unmasked as a marketing conspiracy to exploit young children.

How can one understand such a furore over a television programme designed for the under two's? In our view, it is the fact that "Teletubbies" is designed for the under two's - and is the first programme to be so - that is the reason so much anxiety has grown up around the series.

Throughout history, popular cultural forms have been the lightning rod for anxieties about social dysfunction and moral decline (see Pearson 1984; Barker 1984). Television, video, computer games and the Internet are simply the latest in a long line of 'new media' to attract blame for what social critics see as deteriorating sexual mores, the lowering of educational



standards and a loosening of moral values in general.

At the same time, Western ideological constructions have conceptualised childhood as a time of innocence and sanctity. As Sefton-Green puts it:

*"Modern industrial life has constructed the special and privileged space of childhood not only as a walled garden to keep out the concerns of the adult world but - to pursue the horticultural metaphor - to nurture from seed the adult plant."* (Sefton-Green 1991:1)

However, with increasing awareness of, for example, the incidence of child abuse, violent crimes perpetrated by children and drug use in younger and younger children this construction has taken a battering. To follow Sefton-Green's analogy, in the popular imagination the walls of the garden have been breeched and the seed's ability to grow straight and strong has been compromised. As a consequence, the period of sanctuary in childhood in the public imagination has shrunk to the early childhood years and Freudian-type myths that these years are the most crucial, not only for personality but also for cognitive development, are rapidly reappearing.

"Teletubbies", of course, is placed at the centre of these discourses. The fact that it is the first television programme deliberately designed for the under 2's allows it to be viewed as a battering-ram, in the guise of a new media form, attacking the last sanctuary of early childhood.

Like all new media forms, "Teletubbies" can also be seen as a target for broader social anxieties. In this way, the concerns about Tinky Winky's sexuality and references to drugs and drug use by the young can be explained. The criticisms about "Teletubbies"' educational content and "tubby talk" can be explained in terms of perennial social anxiety about declining literacy and/or educational standards. General uneasiness about corporate morality in a deregulated market gives rise to ambivalence about someone (a woman!) making a great deal of money from a good idea. At the same time, the accusation that very young children are being manipulated and exploited by 'Big Business' is a further example of the sanctuary of childhood being invaded, this time by crass commercialism.

"Teletubbies" is a product of our de-regulated times - the old, tacit understandings that it is somehow inappropriate to devise television programmes for the under two's and that we would certainly not try to tempt such young children with attractive merchandise linked to the programmes have been challenged and over-turned. In view of this, it's clear why "Teletubbies" has received such bad press, but what's not clear is why the series is such a phenomenal success. And that is what we decided to investigate.

### **Work in Progress**

As researchers keenly interested in the broad topic of children and television, we watched the initial "Teletubbies" programmes with great interest. A good deal is known these days about how preschoolers and older children respond to television - what intrigued us was how very young and pre-verbal children responded and so we decided to use "Teletubbies" as the stimulus material for a study. We chose "Teletubbies" because it was designed for the under two's not because it was controversial.

We designed an observation study that would enable us to record carefully the young participants' responses to a particular stimulus programme. This programme was chosen, in consultation with a number of colleagues who are early childhood experts, for a number of

reasons - one of which was that in the middle section where the video is shown, a jazz band played to a group of primary school children who danced to the music. Thus, we had an unusually advanced musical form (for very young children) and physical activity presented at the same time.

Our method has been to show this video to 40 children under the age of two. While they watched the "Teletubbies" video, we videoed them watching. Sometimes this happened in their homes, sometimes at a childcare centre; sometimes the children were already declared "Teletubbies" fans, complete with collections of merchandise, other participants watched television rarely and/or were new to "Teletubbies" altogether.

To enable us to analyse the children's responses, our technical assistants helped us to devise a way of splicing the "Teletubbies" video into a corner of the child-watching-"Teletubbies" video. In this way, we are able to see how the children are responding and precisely what images and sequences they are responding to (see illustration).

The work, as we've pointed out, is in progress so we cannot discuss our analysis in detail at this point. However, we can confidently say that, with the exception of the 14-month-old who fell asleep five minutes into the video, most children were riveted for considerable periods of time. Some were riveted and physically very still, gazing with a fierce intensity at the screen. Others were riveted and physically very active, dancing, patting the screen, pointing and so on. Points of universal pleasure were the Baby Sun and the appearance of the Teletubby characters themselves (especially, the baby of the group, Po). The jazz band generally left them cold but, interestingly, visual transformation puzzles (e.g. the shape of the clouds changing to the beat of a drum) seemed to deepen their absorption.

Detailed analysis of our results is about to begin and so further than this we cannot go just now. Suffice to say that we have lots of evidence that challenges two old bits of 'wisdom'. The first is that very young children cannot concentrate on anything for very long and the second is that children's brains are out of gear when they are watching television. Rather than being a threat to educational progress, it may well be that "Teletubbies" presents the very young with accessible, intriguing and fun stuff - just as Anne Wood said she designed it to do!

## REFERENCES

- Barker, M. (1984) (Ed) *The Video Nasties*, London, Pluto
- Bloom, L. (1999) personal communication
- Buckingham, D. (1993) *Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy*, London, The Falmer Press
- Cuppitt, M., Jenkinson, D., Ungerer, J. and Waters, B. (1998) *Infants and Television*, Sydney, Australian Broadcasting Authority
- Howard, S. (1998) 'Unbalanced minds? Children thinking about television', in S. Howard (Ed) *Wired-Up: Young People and the Electronic Media*, London, UCL Press
- Kunkel, D. (1994) 'Advertising regulation and child development; perspectives on social policy making', in S. Frith and B. Biggins (Eds) *Children and Advertising: A Fair Game?* Sydney, The New College Institute for Values Research, New College, University of NSW
- Lealand, G. (1998) 'Where do snails watch television? Preschool television and New Zealand children', in S. Howard (Ed) *Wired-Up: Young People and the Electronic Media*, London, UCL Press
- Pearson, G. (1984) 'Falling standards: a short, sharp history of moral decline', in M.

- Barker (Ed) *The Video Nasties*, London, Pluto
- Sefton-Green, J. (1999) (Ed) *Digital Diversions: Youth Culture in the Age of Multi-Media*, London, UCL Press
  - Varney, W. (1994) 'The playful sell: marketing through toys', in S. Frith and B. Biggins (Eds) *Children and Advertising: A Fair Game?* Sydney, The New College Institute for Values Research, New College, University of NSW
  - Wartella, E. (1980) 'Individual differences in children's responses to television advertising,' in E. Palmer and A. Dorr (Eds) *Children and the Faces of Television: Teaching, Violence, Selling*, New York, Academic Press
  - Wartella, E. (1984) 'Cognitive and affective factors of TV advertising's influence on children,' *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 48, pp 171 - 183
  - Winn, M. (1985) *The Plug In Drug: Television, Children and the Family*, New York, Penguin Books
  - Young, B. (1986) *Television Advertising and Children*, Oxford, Clarendon

## NEWSPAPERS

- *The Advertiser* (11/2/98) p. 50
- *The Advertiser* (15/2/98) p. 12
- *The Advertiser* (26/3/98) p. 33
- *The Advertiser* (30/7/98) p. 20
- *The Advertiser* (25/8/98) p. 44
- *The Advertiser* (12/11/98) p. 19
- *The Advertiser* (14/1/99) p. 20
- *The Advertiser* (12/2/99) p. 2
- *The Advertiser* (16/2/99) p. 17
- *The Advertiser* (17/2/99) p. 21
- *The Advertiser* (25/2/99) p. 20
- *The Advertiser* (20/7/99) p.5
- *The Australian* (13/12/97) p.11
- *The Australian* (19/12/97) p.22
- *The Australian* (10/1/98) p. 11
- *The Australian* (12/3/98) p. 12
- *The Australian* (7/7/98) p. 32
- *The Australian* (17/10/98) p.16
- *The Australian* (2/1/99) p. 14
- *The Australian* (10/2/99) p. 27
- *The Australian* (20/2/99) p. 11
- *The Australian* (20/7/99) p. 17
- *The Australian* (5/8/99) p.3
- *The Australian* (1/9/99) p. 11
- *The Daily Telegraph* (20/7/99) p.17
- *The Herald Sun* (18/7/98) p.15
- *The Herald Sun* (20/7/99) p.4
- *The Sunday Mail* 15/2/98) p.11
- *The Sun-Herald* (18/7/99) p.7
- *The Sydney Morning Herald* (9/2/98) p.4/5
- *The Sydney Morning Herald* (5/8/99) p.3
- *The Sydney Morning Herald* (25/8/99) p. 12

## THE AUTHORS

Sue Howard, PhD, is Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, University of South Australia, Adelaide.

Susan Roberts, PhD, is Lecturer in Media Studies, Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Sydney.

## INFORMATION

Internationales  
Zentralinstitut  
für das Jugend-  
und Bildungfernsehen

**IZI**

Tel.: 089 - 59 00 21 40

Fax.: 089 - 59 00 23 79

eMail: [izi@brnet.de](mailto:izi@brnet.de)

internet: [www.izi.de](http://www.izi.de)

## **COPYRIGHT**

© *International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)*

 [to the top](#)