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Stimuli, not set answers

The aim of children's programmes should be to support children in learning to learn. Such an effort does not require descriptive knowledge nor provision of set answers, but rather imparting the ability to apply problem-solving strategies.

Over the past few years television has developed a range of programmes in the information and knowledge genre unequalled in the history of this medium.¹ This trend is taking place despite the growing tendency by public television to invest less in children's television by advancing, for example, the commercialisation of children's programmes as well as concomitant cuts in programme funding that led to creating "children's programme slots" in public television. In spite of these dramatic changes, producers of children's television have developed and put into practice a series of programmes that serve a significant function for the young target audience. The high level of acceptance of comparable programmes for adults, such as *Galileo* (a knowledge magazine), underlines the audience's interest in such formats. The success of such programmes is due, undoubtedly, to the mutual interest of the target audience. While acknowledging the importance of this trend, the criticism I offer here is not intended as a fundamental objection to this type of programme nor as fundamental criticism, but rather as constructive discussion of this trend with recommendations for its further development.²

The thesis underlying the following points is that television today represents a key window to the world and that, compared to previous generations, we – and particularly our children – have never before known so much about the world as we do today. An additional consequence is that today's children take an active interest in many things in the world. This is best illustrated by their ecological interest in the deforestation of the rain forest and their commitment to children living in the world's trouble-spots. *Knowledge* programmes contribute significantly to interest in such events in the world and to broadening of the young generation's horizons. Together with the family and schools, television assumes a major role in the socialisation of children to the world. My intention, here, is to reflect on the responsibilities involved in this role and to map out a constructive perspective of how *knowledge* programmes on television can respond more aptly to the challenges of modern society, one which can be in fact termed the knowledge-society.

Learning to learn

One well-known characteristic of the modern world is its propensity to change relatively quickly. As a result, people, who also trigger these changes, admittedly, have to adjust to them. During the past few years, the importance of the media, especially the so-called new media, has grown enormously both in their importance in many people's daily lives and in their world of work. If we imagine that

children today have to be equipped to function throughout the remainder of this century with the ability to act competently and self-determinedly in a world shaped by the media, clearly the knowledge taught today is totally insufficient. In fact, what appears to be more important is learning to learn, to adjust to new situations and being able to cope with problems. Given this context, learning how to handle crises instead of all too familiar routines that dominate school-based learning, should become a significant goal for the transformation of learning. This is precisely the point where the media can contribute and should focus in transmission and presentation of the world to the children's audience. What do these considerations mean for the analysis of the genre of information and knowledge programmes aimed at children?

Knowledge instead of information programmes

The first factor for consideration is the term "knowledge programmes". On closer examination, this term blurs the significant difference that exists between information and knowledge. *Information* lacks reference to the world in which young recipients live. *Knowledge* constitutes information endowed with meaning and a relevant context. Many "knowledge programmes" are pure information programmes that afford insights into certain contexts without any clear evidence to indicate the value of the imparted knowledge for the children's

life and environment. Undoubtedly, children are interested in how the world functions. But, in my opinion, it is television's mission not only to cater to this need, but also to unveil the significance of knowledge.

Social, political and economic themes are grossly neglected

A striking feature in this regard is the extent to which many "knowledge programmes" for children focus on scientific themes and the animal world. Of course, everyday objects and how they function, too, play an important role in our world, but the overall picture reveals that social, political and economic subjects are grossly neglected. The result is that "knowledge programmes" tend to be one-sided, while factors that will influence children's lives later – society, career and leisure time – are glossed over. At the same time, a large number of the presentations in these programmes are clearly pure descriptions of the subjects, i. e. something is presented but nothing is explained. This particularly applies to subjects such as animals, sports and society. Conversely, when explanations of phenomena are provided they are mainly in the areas of daily life, technology (How does something work?), nature and media.

My examination of a portion of children's knowledge programmes on television as well as other experiences with this genre have led to the following recommendations for improving these programmes:

Many of the programmes tend towards an experience-oriented presentation, that is, they use a dramatic narrative format to build up to the moment of surprise in the young viewers. In doing so, they ignore knowledge-oriented educational aspects. Also, I consider it an important task of pedagogical activity to assist in the trans-

formation of learning so that it becomes part of the child's internalised experience.

What children need today in order to cope with the world of tomorrow will be self-derived knowledge

In my view, the argument can be applied to reform the present dominance of information over knowledge. As mentioned above, a marked trait of knowledge is that it can be related meaningfully to something else. Yet, the contents presented in many so-called "knowledge programmes" consist of "information", rather than knowledge, and they are devoid of any connection to the children's lived environment. However, this should be made clear and more strongly emphasised.

While many of these programmes transmit factual knowledge, what children need today in order to cope with the world of tomorrow is knowledge they have derived themselves. Frequently only simple mechanisms are presented, instead of the means for understanding and solving problems. Lifelong learning, however, requires the ability to adjust to unknown problems and to handle them competently. For this purpose children have to learn strategies that can be applied to analyse and to solve problems, not prescribed answers that in future will prove to be meaningless in almost certainly changing circumstances.

With few exceptions, most children's "knowledge programmes" continue to present just the results and answers to all the questions asked. This creates the impression of science being something sacrosanct, with little room for scepticism or unanswerable questions. Children should, however, be told the truth – science is not always capable of coming up with an expla-

nation or an answer, and that this situation often leads to raising new questions. Science should be seen as a process, not as something that produces unalterable truths or finished products.

Moreover, in my opinion, many discussions are presented in a one-dimensional manner, despite the fact that the presence of multiple perspectives is regarded today as an essential feature of knowledge transmission. Enabling children to understand clearly as well as view topics and phenomena from different perspectives allows them to develop their own position without blindly imbibing all they are told and shown. The phenomena of this world cannot be bound to merely one perspective. If children are to be able to form their own opinions, they have to receive many facets of information and views associated with the topic under discussion.

The aim must be to provide children with stimuli, and not to serve them pre-packed material

In this context, it can also be observed that some – not all! – presenters of knowledge programmes tend to project authoritarianism. However, what is more appropriate, in my opinion, is demonstrating inquisitive, inquiring behaviour that can be easily integrated into a Socratic dialogue of dealing with "why?" types of questions. Such an approach takes children, their questions and curiosity seriously while encouraging and helping them search for answers themselves. All in all, I have to emphasise that all too many "knowledge" programmes are presented via a format that is an older form of learning, one firmly ground in traditional concepts of school teaching, namely that of instruction. Accordingly, the intention

is to funnel what is in the head of the instructor – in this case the producer of knowledge programmes – into the heads of the pupils, i. e. the young recipients. However, in modern pedagogy, this principle is no longer tenable. Today, constructivist approaches are preferred. Here the fundamental assumption is that the individual, the child, is involved actively in the construction of knowledge. The task of pedagogical activity must be, therefore, to provide children not with stock answers, but rather with stimuli that will engage them in the construction of their stock of knowledge. The older approach to instruction approach tends to produce “inert” knowledge, usually worthless, as the children do not know how to use it. While it is designed to transmit factual information and knowledge, the constructivist approach seeks to produce self-derived knowledge. Knowledge programmes for children should use the constructivist approach more intensively.

In the final analysis, television should become part of existing endeavours to create synergies in children’s use of the media and to step up co-operation with other media, such as entertainment channels and the Internet. While the latter media can provide what television cannot, namely interactivity, “knowledge” programmes can provide opportunities for inquiry and knowledge production that is relevant to children’s lives. The future of children’s media use will probably be embedded in a complex set of interactions between all these media. In summary, in order for “knowledge” programmes to promote children’s development of an autonomous view of the world, it is recommended that they seek to provide

- more knowledge than information
- more self-derived knowledge than factual knowledge
- more themes on society, social matters, politics and economics than just nature, animals and technology.

- more multi-perspectives than one-dimensionality
- more stimuli for construction of than instruction in knowledge
- more questions than answers

If producers and editors of knowledge programmes for children adopt some of these suggestions, then we can be better assured that television will make an important contribution towards equipping our children with both factual knowledge as well as the capabilities for producing self-derived knowledge that can be applied in an uncertain future. ■

Translated by John Malcolm King
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NOTES

1 The number of knowledge programmes for children over a period of four weeks in January 2004 came to 154 (excluding repeats), whose themes were distributed as follows: Animals/Nature (23 %), Everyday life (22 %), Society issues (12 %), Technology (12 %), Media (9 %), Sport (8 %), Health (8 %) and Science/Art (5 %).

2 The following reflections do not emanate directly from empirical studies, but rather are based upon observations and programme analyses.

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