

The child audience from TV professionals' viewpoints

Sara Pereira. Universidade do Minho. Braga

Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the viewpoints of a range of television professionals regarding young audiences – how they define children, how they see this special kind of audience, including its needs and interests, and how they view the role of television in children's lives. Focusing on these ideas, our goal is to understand how they translate into decisions about the format and content of schedules, programming, production, marketing campaigns, regulation measures and also research.

The material to be analysed was gathered from about thirty interviews with professionals from this specific field – programmers, producers, directors, script-writers, marketing directors, regulators and researchers.

Additional research objectives include discovering guiding criteria and the options available to children's programming executives of the Portuguese terrestrial channels, and also understanding how they programme in a multi-channel environment for a fragmented and demanding audience.

This essay will also trace the shifting balance between paternalistic, protective and child-centred approaches and the view of the child as a consumer and a social actor.

The audiovisual changes that began in the 1990s in Portugal have led to a new conceptualisation of the child audience. Children have become a powerful audience; however, this power is viewed by television programmers primarily in terms of consumption. Children are seen as sovereign consumers in their own right and through the purchasing power of their parents. In this sense, children are seen as consumers rather than viewers. In the current climate, it is important to discuss the notion of public service and its responsibilities towards young people.

Key words: children, audience, television, programming, media professionals

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of the relationship between children and television can focus either on television and the media or on the audience, namely, children audience. The current study focuses on the first option. However, despite its being concerned mostly with one of the axis structuring the analysis of the aforementioned relationship, that is to say, the institutional face of television and, specifically, programming for children, the study intends to help build a global frame that will enable both the analysis and understanding of children's relation with TV. Maintaining a holistic perspective of this field of study should be a real and constant concern.

Research has shown that the context and conditions surrounding child development and socialization influence a child's use of television. Several authors have stressed the fact that television consumption is influenced by a set of factors: age, gender, the family's social and cultural setting, household characteristics, life style and pace, as well as what television has to offer are the most mentioned without, however, it being possible to determine each one's role exactly.

The last mentioned factor, of great relevance to this study, was stressed particularly by Rosengren and Windhal (1989). These authors have operationalised the concept of «media use» in terms of «habitual consumption» and «real consumption»: the former refers to a certain consumption pattern and depends on stable factors, such as life style, social status, interests, needs and the media offer itself; the latter, which is mostly of a situational (conjunctural) nature, depends on the viewer's specific setting and on the media offer which is available at the time. What television has to offer appears then as a factor which can both influence and determine consumption.

Considering that one of the factors conditioning television use consists in the programmes being offered, and considering the importance television assumes in a child's daily life, our research sought to get to know and analyse television from the inside, focusing the analysis on the programming aimed at children. Research centred on the other side of the screen to get to know what is thought, conceived and broadcasted specifically for those on this side of the screen, in this case, a child audience. The data presented and analysed here refer to only one of the topics comprised in research.

2. THEORETICAL STARTING POINTS

This piece of research considered the changes which took place in the last decades in the Portuguese audiovisual scene. The current Portuguese legal framework, similar to that of most countries in the European Union, put an end to the state's monopoly over television broadcasting in the early 1990s and since then there has been competition between the public and private channels, with the former having a set of obligations understood as «public service». Insofar as children are concerned, according to

Portuguese legislation, it is only the public broadcasting service that is expressly compelled to consider, produce and broadcast programmes aimed at children.

The study also took into account that television is a product which is socially constructed according to specific interests, programme orientation and control strategies. Television, considered by Perez Tornero (1994) as an institution, technology, language and discourse, creates a certain representation of reality (which is appropriated differently by different social groups) according to different resources and rules, to a competitive market setting, as well as according to different forms of property and control. In this sense, programming trends which are prevalent at a particular time are also far from being «natural»; they are, instead, the result of choices and criteria originating in factors which are nowadays found trans-nationally. As programming is a social-historical activity produced under specific space-time constraints, it also assumes a chronological dimension, and as such the chronological time at which it is produced must also be considered: the time of year, days of the week and schedules of broadcasts which are being offered to the audience, in this case, children. However, this chronological time is also a social time, in so far as programming is determined, not only by the clock and calendar, but also by the pace and life styles of the potential audience.

Programming presents itself as a complex phenomenon which is strongly connected to each society's culture, conventions and social habits, reflecting significant representations of their social reality. It would be important to stress that transformations in programming models are not isolated from economic, technological, political, social and cultural change taking place in societies. As Cortés (2001) suggests, by reading and analysing the schedules, we can find signs of the times at which each was put together.

The several authors considered agree that all programming argumentation is developed according to the audience, which is thus a compulsory reference when constructing a schedule. In programming, the programmer, who in the new television model has a prominent and strategic role, acquires a special relevance. As stated by Lochard and Boyer (1995), their role is that of someone who organizes meetings between the programmes and the individuals. The programmer makes decisions according to products and audiences, having to relate them and ensure a connection between them, not only every day, but in every moment of the day, in a television flow which is virtually uninterrupted. Although the internationalization of programmes and formats may give the viewer the impression that channels are all the same, according to those who study programming (cf. namely Bustamante, 1999 and Mehl, 1992), schedules are only superficially similar. These authors admit the existence of a certain standardization of the «spices» used –the programmes– but support that there is always a touch of singularity to programming, each schedule providing its own particular flavour.

The heterogeneity which characterizes programming is horizontal (diachronic – a diversified programme offer), but also vertical (synchronic – a simultaneous offer of different broadcasts). Based on audiometer data, TV stations look to fit their products (pro-

grammes) to audience tastes, preferences and habits, not forgetting advertising investors, a vital financing resource for television which intervenes and conditions the construction of schedules and the broadcast pace itself.

These are some of the starting points on the broadcaster's side. This study has, however, also taken into account some principles which involve the viewer and television reception.

As sociological studies have shown, children are an autonomous social group which has detached and transformed itself historically and culturally, far from corresponding to a universal, natural category of obvious meaning. Besides individual differences, different social settings in which children live, social class and ethnicity, gender and culture are all important aspects in characterizing the social position each of them belongs to.

Following what sociological studies of children have tended to stress, and according to the spirit of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, this study is based on a conception of children as social subjects, not as an object of adult projects and initiatives. To consider children as social actors entails the recognition of their active role in their environment, of which television is a part. It is, however, important to stress that, by rejecting a view of children as passive victims of television, we do not wish to simply adopt the opposite view and replace the traditional image of innocence and vulnerability by one of an «active and autonomous» being. From our point of view, this concept of children is as indefinite and controversial as the one it wishes to substitute. Children are still spoken of as a universal category, instead of children who live in specific social, cultural and historical circumstances which place them in specific positions in a social structure.

According to studies developed in both Portugal and other countries, television plays a very large role in a child's day-to-day life. They spend a good part of their day and free time watching television, often left to themselves, with no alternative activities. As mentioned by Pinto (2000), «*television is often a baby-sitter, a companion, a story-teller, a window for imaginary travels, a refuge, an alienation, a provider of participation in its symbolic universe*».

Also according to several studies (cf. for example Brederode Santos, 1991; Pinto, 2000; Pereira, 1999), children believe they learn «something» from television, identifying programmes which are directed at children as an example of what is learned. There are, however, programmes for the general audience which obtain higher or identical children audiences when compared to the most watched children's programmes. Children usually watch those programmes with relatives, as opposed to what happens with the programmes which are aimed at them, which are normally watched by children either alone or with their siblings (Pereira, 1999).

It is, therefore, necessary, when thinking of and analysing matters of children's and youth programming, to take into account these background dimensions in order to analyse detectable tendencies and implications in this kind of programming.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research presented in this article is a part of a broader study on the offers and criteria in children's programming in the Portuguese terrestrial channels (two public – RTP1, RTP2 and two private – SIC, TVI) which involved both documental research and interviews to professionals connected to television for children. Considering this article's scope, only one of the themes covered in the interviews will be discussed.

3.1. Aims

In broad terms, this study sought to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between television and society and to raise awareness on programming for children in Portuguese television. Specifically, it was meant to characterize the trends in children's programming in the Portuguese terrestrial channels; to know the status of the professionals working in children's programming; to understand the guiding criteria and the options available to those responsible for this programming over a period of time and, finally, to understand how those professionals define children audience. This paper addresses these last two aims.

3.2. Interview procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with television professionals who had a varying range of experience and responsibilities in producing and programming for children. This technique allows us, according to specialized literature (cf. Lindlof, 1995; Patton, 1990), to collect information which is richer, more spontaneous and of a more significant depth. Besides that, it also allows the interviewer to restrict the subjects to be discussed, providing, however, a significant level of freedom to the interviewees, as they can voice their opinions without excessive constraint. In planning the interviews, three procedures were adopted: setting the goals, putting together a list of professionals to be interviewed and writing the script.

Bearing in mind that «*the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer*» (Patton, 1990: 279), a script was initially written which, given the diversity of experiences, had to be adapted for each group of professionals, which resulted in six versions. Despite the particularities in each script, the interviews were meant to:

- sound opinions, experiences, concerns and desires on the subject being studied;
- understand how different professionals perceive children's programming in all four Portuguese terrestrial channels;

- understand programming strategies and logics in television broadcasts aimed at children;
- understand the problems faced by programmers in their daily work;
- sound the professionals' opinion on the basic principles a station should follow when programming for young people;
- understand how those responsible for programming see and conceive children audience.

When making the list of professionals to be interviewed, we tried to ensure that there would be some diversity in terms of experience – TV directors, programmers, marketing directors, script writers, producers, hosts, dubbing technicians, television critics, researchers, representatives of media regulatory body, and the presidents of the viewers associations. We were interested in a diversity of views and perspectives on the subject. In all, 26 interviews were held.

All interviews were recorded, their full transcription being later made in order to analyse their content. Transcription resulted in approximately 500 pages. This information *corpus* was first submitted to a critical reading and exploratory analysis in order to create guiding lines. A list of theme categories was later elaborated which oriented the qualitative content analysis, namely:

- Perspectives on television for children in Portugal (in the 90s);
- **Notions of child and child audience¹**;
- Programming for children:
 - Factors conditioning programming;
 - Criteria used in programme conception;
 - Criteria present in programme conception and production;
 - Criteria present in programme selection and purchase;
 - Criteria guiding hosting;
 - Criteria present in dubbing;
 - The role of public service in broadcast offer for children;
- Ingredients for quality programming for children.

The analysis of the interviews was undertaken within the «*context of discovery*» and not the «*context of justification*», to quote Lessard-Hébert *et al.* (1990). By this we mean that the main objectives were to identify, describe, establish connections, interpret and assign meaning to the data. We sought to become familiar with and understand the meanings and interpretations given by the social actors to the matter being studied, the situations they are involved in and how they act.

¹ This being the category to be analysed in this paper.

Given the diversity in the interviewees' professional training, we tried to make the discourse constructed from the analysis reflect the diversity of opinions and the consensus among the different interviewees.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Perspectives on television for children

Despite having different perspectives and levels of involvement, the interviewees show some convergence regarding trends in children's programming. Most professionals, even some who work in television stations, stress how negligible children's programming is in the context of general programming, due to the lack of economic investment and the little relevance sometimes assigned to it by executive boards. These interviewees deplore the inferior status this field is sometimes relegated to and share the notion that programming for children is particularly important given the specificity of the group it is aimed at – children in a phase of development and character formation.

These data place us before a paradox. On the one hand, children are recognized and valued as subjects and as an audience (the importance of there being television programming broadcasted specifically at them is recognized), but, on the other hand, there is little availability to invest economically in this field. The way children and childhood are seen, which is certainly influenced by their importance in Western societies, their public visibility and symbolic value, are not always reflected in institutional policies and practices.

Although children are valued as an audience, economic interests lead television stations to give priority and attention to other audiences, for fear of losing them to other channels and due to the fact that certain schedules are even more valuable for advertising.

The issue of the criteria underlying the construction of programming schedules acquires special relevance when debating television for children with the interviewees. Their points of view and opinions centre around three positions:

- the first, an interventionist one, encompasses the points of view of those for whom television cannot be guided simply by its own criteria and interests – especially when dealing with children, who are a more vulnerable, a more easily influenced audience, and one which is not fully developed yet – and should be guided by rules defined and supervised by the State;
- the second, a liberal one, encompasses the points of view of those who stress the market rules of demand and supply; public interest is thus defined as what interests the public. Children are seen as consumers, possessing a critical ability of choice, who can choose what interests them the most;

– the third, an intermediate position, though accepting the market logic, considers that these rules cannot be the only criterion for action, and supports the existence of legal norms and obligations to frame and guide it. A child's television viewing must be monitored (as must other daily activities) by parents and other significant adults, so as to help them choose what interests them the most and to defend themselves against that which can harm them.

In the light of the «theory of social responsibility», which goes with the third position, television has obligations towards society that are beyond its own interests. As mentioned by McQuail (2003: 188), media organizations «are social institutions that perform important public tasks beyond their immediate goals of making a profit and providing jobs». The author adds that, though in the last few years the media have increasingly come to resemble industries, they are not just 'some business' nor do they necessarily cease to be social institutions. However, this does not mean that the economic reality must be ignored either, since they have to work, in whole or in part, according to the rules of a market economy.

Most of the interviewees from outside the television medium considered that, especially when dealing with children, public service should be extended to all stations and not just the public one, which means that all programmes aimed at children should be guided by civic, cultural and educational principles and concerns. However, considering that the working context of the television sub-system that has come to take its place in Portugal (and in Europe) – based on a market logic, therefore, one of demand and supply – can lead either to the gradual effacing of children broadcasts from programming schedules, or to a low quality offer, these interlocutors stood for a public broadcasting service (PBS) for the younger audience segments supported by that service's concessionary entity.

The PBS, closely connected to the notion of public interest, was identified as the warranty for pluralism, equality, diversity and safeguard of the rights and interests of more vulnerable social groups, as is the case with children. Public television was presented as the necessary and desirable alternative for television offer for younger viewers, there being widespread consensus on the goals it should serve. As supported by some of the authors we named in the first part of this essay to discuss the matter, most of the interviewees thought that children's programming should be one of the «arguments» of public television, which, as stated by the most recent *Concession Contract for the Public Service* (September 2003) must «oppose the tendency for the standardisation and massification of television offer, providing broadcasts which are not directly dictated by the objectives of commercial exploit» (clause 6, 1a), offering a programming that respects, or even supports and promotes, the dominant values in society, voicing the culture, language and art of our society, but of other societies as well, and attends to the needs of younger viewers.

4.2. Concepts of child and child audience

The notion of child was always discussed based on their role as a television viewer.

By analysing the interviewees' discourses, it is concluded that they are unanimous in considering children «a special audience», to quote Aimée Dorr (1989). The child is recognised as a subject of rights, and the existence of «a world children have of their own» is recognised, which is relatively different from the adult world. It is based on this that the need for a specific programming for children has been recognised, one that offers them programmes which adequately relates to them and is conceived thinking of their «superior interest», as defended by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

From the collected interview data basically three concepts of child have emerged:

– The first is grounded on the principle of a progressive development of the child's abilities and autonomy. That is, children are considered as being able to develop active and critical attitudes and practices towards television but they do need support, incentive and guidance. In sum, mediation is required. Those who stand for this notion thus do not consider children as naturally and spontaneously critical, having a need to develop that ability.

– The second concept may be regarded as a variation of the first position, albeit less enthusiastic about the reality of those child's abilities. The interviewees supporting this point of view stress the child audience's vulnerability, considering it easily influenced in relation to television contents. Children are thus seen as a target for commercial interests, possessing little experience or knowledge to react and resist, and therefore needing both protection from the possible consequences of their search for mere gratification and an active mediation from significant adults regarding media contents. The two extracts below illustrate these positions:

«We can't hope for all children to have the same instruments to evaluate and adhere to what they're being offered and that's the big problem here. It's evident that this kind of programming has mostly unfortunate and harmful effects on those children who, to start, are ill equipped to deal with all this and have no other instruments to gain access to certain goods, to gain access to a certain kind of language, who have no access to the education of taste – those are the ones who are especially vulnerable.» (President of the Institute for the Media)

«Nowadays we often hear: «children can make their own choices». I don't believe that. I believe they are extremely influenced. I am very anti-protectionist when it comes to television, but towards the home and the child I am very protectionist. I think kids are very sensitive to the addictive side of television. Videogames, in this aspect, are even more prone to cause addiction. From this

point of view they must be disciplined – there is a time to play Mega Drive, there is a time to watch television... It's a difficult task, as they are also often affected as are we, adults, by the addictive side of television.

(...) They are also very influenced by advertising. Everything they see on television, they buy, they want to buy, they want to have. Their first reaction is to believe the messages – if I take that, it will do that to me. Some deconstruction is needed.

I don't believe they are critical. I think we must develop their ability to be critical. More than that, I think in this sense school should have, not only for children, but also for teenagers, subjects that teach them *do* decode the media.» (television critic).

– The third emerging concept sees children as critical consumers and viewers. As opposed to the previous notions, centred on the child, the focus here is on the products. Audience results are used to justify certain kinds of programming. The child is seen as a critical viewer, but undifferentiated and out of context. Furthermore, this capability of theirs is justified, mostly, by their ability to change channels and look for another programme, by the attention they give to it and by the ways of constructing a meaning for what they see, their answers and the uses they make of television:

«The child audience is the most volatile one, because, and I am going to exaggerate a little, it is almost completely intuitive, it does not rationalize very much. And it is very demanding, especially since it does not rationalize very much. Children do not rationalize very much. If it's up, they like it, if it's down, they don't. If it's up, they watch it, if it's down, they turn away. And then there's that deadly, tremendous weapon, probably the most significant weapon of the 20th century, the remote control. That can ruin our lives. (...) I think they are hypercritical and, since everything's so impulsive, approval is immediate and so is rejection – if they don't like it, they don't like it.» (Programming director, SIC)

«They are the so called customer-spectators – they are not the customers, but they are so indirectly. And they're dynamic, because of that awful box right there, the remote control.» (Marketing director, SIC)

«They are quite active, quite critical, from age two they know what a remote control is. They change channels if they don't like something; they are possibly the most unfaithful viewers of all audiences. They almost learnt zapping when they were still using a dummy...» (Head of acquisitions, TVI)

The professionals from private stations clearly centre their points of view mostly on the third of these notions, though they also emphasize the decisive role mediation can play in the relationship between children and television, both in developing their crit-

ical attitudes and as a way of protecting the most vulnerable and most easily influenced younger viewers from the television's possible harmful effects. The professionals who are connected to the public station share a view which is more centred on the child, therefore placing themselves between the first and second notion².

In private stations, child audiences are seen mostly as consumers, as customers, as a share to be captivated, as stated by the marketing director from SIC:

«The most important "target" is the one that will make the most money. At the moment, this is how we are working; we weren't always, but it's obvious that, as in any business, it must be so. Audiences are meaningful only if they allow us to make money. The commercial director said that children, in the whole year, represent 5% of the station's investment. Investment is distributed differently along the year. The investment cake is in October, November and December because of toy manufacturers, school period and Christmas. 80% of all commercial investment related to children is made in that period. In those periods, we are packed with advertisements; during the rest of the year there are months with 1%, 2%, the average is 5%. Children cannot, therefore, be a priority, on that account. The older kids are always important, because they are a decisive factor for adults to watch television.»

«Children are an important group, not only during the period for children, but also during the rest of the day, because, as I'm telling you, they're the ones who took the decision to watch. If they, in fact, take that decision, and many adults watch it, if the audiometer is there and it's on and obtains adult audiences, then the advertisers will buy us advertising time in that adult target slot, but the children were the ones who decided to watch it.»

We do not mean to say by this that the professionals from private stations are not concerned with the «child-person» and those from the public station do not take into account the «child-consumer» in their decision-making. We are able to observe, in the programming philosophies in the private and public sectors, a concern towards chil-

² It is important to mention, however, that this is the private view of the professionals interviewed and which obviously has a bearing on programming schedules. This note draws attention to the fact that other professionals, working in the same context, might have different perceptions. When analysing RTP's offer for children, between 1992 and 2002, we realize the schedules didn't always reflect the concept of child shared by the professionals from this station who were interviewed. Over the 11 years being studied, it was possible to identify a period during which programming was characterized by a strong hesitation and the schedules showed an irregular alternation. This was, perhaps, the less creative phase of the public station and a great mimicry of private channels was observed. At this time, the programmer's attention seemed to focus more on the products than on children, perhaps because the people who, in that period, headed the department, had a concept of audience which was closer to the one shared by professionals from the private sector.

dren; the question is what weighs the most – the «person» side (as a «subject») or the consumer side. In the discourses from public television professionals the first one stands out; in the discourses of private stations the second one is stronger. The notion of child viewer arising from the study of programming schedules is in line with this analysis.

To a certain extent, the concept of child audience shared by private stations allows us to explain the gradual disappearance of children's broadcasts from the afternoon period from 2000 onwards. The child audience is seen mostly as an audience – an audience which is at all times measurable – and one of the key goals of the main stations is to reach the largest number of viewers. Therefore, when it became clear to the television executives that there was another, more valuable, audience available to watch television in the afternoon, they did not hesitate to take the primacy away from children in this particular time slot. The head of acquisitions from TVI and the host of the children's show *Batatoon*, broadcast by this network, corroborate this idea:

«When "Batatoon" came along, TVI held a 19% audience share and «Batatoon» held 25%; nowadays TVI holds a 37% share and «Batatoon» still holds 25%, which means it did in fact serve the network's interests for some time. When the network started growing, there was a drop in audiences there. Then we tried to produce shows, not so much for children, but for older people, mostly women, hence the change in programming. (...) There was in fact a break with children, in order to reach other audiences.» (Director of foreign programming and «head of acquisitions», TVI)

«For about four years, the show ("Batatoon") was broadcast live in the afternoons; now, because of changes in programming, it is a weekend broadcast in the children's schedule, which is Saturday and Sunday mornings. This because a market study was conducted and these things aren't completely stable. Broadcasts have a life expectancy and then they change. Even so, I think "Batatoon", was the child broadcast that lasted longer in the history of Portuguese television, that was stable for the longest time, right there, in the afternoon. Anyway, the gentlemen from the station conducted a market study and they thought they could get even higher audiences. As it seems, that is something which is computed in television terms. Housewives rather than children were the main target audience, so "Batatoon" ceased to be broadcast live in the afternoons and started being recorded to be shown during the weekend.» (Host for the children's show «Batatoon», TVI).

In public television, for some time, the protectionist model provided, according to the Director of Children's and Youth Programming for RTP, the basic principles for the Department's work. One of the members tells us how a concern with the child was above all else:

«When a broadcast was conceived and produced, the idea was not "how this can be watched by a larger audience", it was instead "how this can be more attractive to a child and at the same time, help it to learn". (...) I think the most important thing was to try to understand what that child was already able to understand and to what extent we can contribute to develop that understanding».

This does not mean that the concern with the audience was not present in programming criteria. From the analysis of the schedules, the importance of audience shares in programming decision-making was obvious in several moments, especially since television would have trouble existing were it not for the audiences as mentioned by the Director of Children's Programming for the public station:

«RTP is in that game [of competition] because of the audiences, and today I think, if we hadn't joined that game, no one would have watched us, because the "kids" broadcasts' had their "Turbo Rangers", but then, during the week, we only had soft stuff, with very high quality, made by famous people, but no one watched us. It was depressing.»

We would like to stress that the concept of child consumer is not present only in the discourses of professionals working in private networks; there are other professionals who see them as such. The general prevailing notion is that nowadays the child is, in fact, a consumer, not only of television itself, but also of other symbolic goods, material goods (food products, clothing, shoes) and services (schools, kindergartens, associations for the occupation of free time, clubs, etc.). We did, however, find clear differences in the way that role is formulated and characterised: in the political sphere it is linked to the idea of participation and citizenship whereas in the economic sphere it is linked to consumption.

Some interviewees note that, in relation to some television broadcasts, children are regarded more as consumers than viewers, because they are, in fact, more interested in the merchandising products associated to them than in the content of the programme itself.

To conclude, we would like to stress the fact that most of the interviewees share a view which is close to the one we supported in another piece of research on television in the family – «it is only by comparing and contrasting the perceptions children have of the messages they receive with the interpretations they make of them that some competence may emerge that is active, critical and creative towards television» (Pereira, 1999: 81).

It is also relevant to stress the reason why some of the interviewees do not peremptorily assume that children are critical and active viewers. In their opinion, a child's behaviour does not fit a single pattern and neither does childhood; the variety, diversity and specificity of contexts, routines and life situations of children must be taken into account.

This discourse agrees with the point of view of Schramm, Lyle and Parker (1965) on the role of children. These researchers stressed, as early as the 50s, their active role in the relationship with television, but suggested the need to bear in mind life contexts and not only one of their dimensions. In that relationship, therefore, it is not only the child factor or the television factor that must be taken into account, but also the social and cultural contexts in which this interaction takes place. Thus, Schramm's (1965: 1) statement from over forty years ago is still valid:

«Nothing of what is duly documented can just say that television is good or bad for children. For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial.»

During the so-called «golden period» of children's programming (from the mid-80s to the early 90s), the team in charge of this area of programming for the public television network, in an effort to obtain information on the needs and interests of children, conducted extensive research involving educators and children, academic essays and investigation reports, especially those from abroad. This was a time when schedules were constructed based on the «intuition» of professionals and audiometric data.

In private networks, audience shares are the number one evaluator of children's interests, tastes and preferences. The Marketing director for SIC, however, also tells us about the importance of market studies to perceive interests:

«In relation to what they want to watch, we have, for all programming, market surveys in which we ask what people want to watch, what they do not want to watch, what attracts them, what would make them change channels; it is also meant to get to know some programming trends. These surveys are a lot more complex to conduct with children, as you can imagine. We conducted a market survey, drawn up by a collaborator of ours, here, at the marketing section, precisely because we are repositioning children's programming in that sense – of what children want.»

Regardless of the specific goals of this survey, it allows for a sounding of opinions and an awareness of the points of view of children themselves on what they like and dislike watching and the reasons why.

This kind of studies with children is still rarely used by Portuguese networks, which are based mostly on the quantitative data provided by audiometers to define and evaluate programming. However, as was also stated by the marketing director from SIC, those data can be the starting point for qualitative studies, «they can help ask the right questions». Television networks, by investing in this kind of studies which seek to hear the children themselves would be, in fact, complying with the rights laid down in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* – the right to an opinion, the right to participate in matters that concern them and to direct consultation.

There is a significant number of professionals who work, not only in programming, but also in conceiving, producing and presenting the shows that, according to them, identify and know the needs and interests of children through the universal «knowledge» of child development, based on their own experiences of childhood, through contact with children (their own children, nieces and nephews, their friends' children, for example) and also based on intuition and maternal instinct.

Aware of this reality, the Director of the Children's Programming Department for the public network comments: «this thing, «what my children like» is a hassle; it's prevailing even in those who aren't specialists».

This trend reveals that the conception of children's programming in Portugal has been significantly supported by practical knowledge. It is not our intention to undermine the importance of personal experience and sensitivity, however it would seem that this area would stand to gain in stature and benefit from scientifically based approaches.

The way children's programming is conceived is also closely connected to the way children are seen as an audience and to the role television is perceived as having in their life.

The professionals working at TVI, for example, see television as a toy for children. They therefore try to make the broadcasts aimed at them take them to a world of imagination and adventure. That is actually Batatoon's main goal, as explained by the elements of the show's creative team:

«One of our concerns with the show is that it isn't too educational and pedagogical, because we have this notion that television is a toy for children. Although the show teaches children many things, our goal is not to teach... Those two hours are a toy for the child, a good toy – we want them to laugh, to be cheerful. (...) The main message is to play and know how to play. I think that's it, healthy children at play.»

«And so I thought that "Batatoon" had to be a kind of virtual toy, that the clown should be a communicator, and a friend, and there had to be a certain complicity with the kids – he should be a big kid – and that that object, which is a lot like a "knick-knack", had to gain some life and move, shake and play with the kids.»

A concern which is always present is that this «toy» not be harmful to the child, that it be appropriate.

SIC, according to its Marketing Director, tries to provide children with «a lively, appealing environment, with contents which are attractive to them». The network, he says, intends to create a generally pleasant environment, both for the network and the programmes aimed at them. With a view to making children loyal to the channel, and not only to specific programmes, they want to promote the «SIC brand for children». They seek, through the children's broadcasts, to make them identify SIC as their

favourite network – «the channel I like the most» – so that this preference may have repercussions in programming in general, and even in family choices. That is why, according to the Director,

«Children are an important group, not only in the schedule for children, but also during the rest of the day. We are unconditional leaders for ages 4-14 and we make a point of always having specific shows for that target and to have elements to attract that audience in all the programming.»

It takes a lot of work to achieve this goal, «not only to attract, but also to retain». The Director of Marketing adds:

«When dealing with children, this attraction is effected through good cartoons, which is something they like, but also because it has a good environment, a pleasant environment which makes them want to watch it and say, "I like to watch SIC". We want children to feel that.

(...) Children are "zappers", just like adults, they're just different. What we do to try to keep children is to provide some follow-up and always get them excited, to create some tension so they'll watch the shows.»

Once a child audience has been won over, it must be kept in the channel, and zapping must be made a rare practice, in order to ensure their loyalty to a product which is already known and approved of. After they go through the near frantic phase of remote control use, children are expected to know how to differentiate and be able to guide themselves through the different offers from a variety of channels and, therefore, of choices. This explains the great importance assigned to the establishment of this network's identity.

To sum up the analysis of results, we can affirm that with the liberalization of television broadcasting in Portugal viewers started to take on new roles. Children are starting to be seen by stations more as an audience (consumers), than as a public. This new concept has naturally had consequences on the offer – the advertisers' interests are now met more often than the needs and even interests of the child audience itself. We can say that it is not so much the children's interests that mobilize and determine the offer; the programmes are the ones that create and generate certain interests in children, which, in turn, help maintain a certain kind of programming.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Television is, simultaneously, an expression and an agent of children's cultures. On the one hand, the programming reflects and (re)produces ideas and representations about childhood, children and their social and cultural worlds; on the other hand, it is

an agent which takes part in the children's socialization process and influences the way they perceive the world they live in and the way they see themselves and others.

It is a fact that television is shaping. It takes on the features of an agent which constructs, enunciates and represents ideas, values, attitudes, beliefs and ideologies in a register which captivates and seduces the child audience. Messages interfere and influence the child's life context, in which the role of television has a varying degree of importance. We choose to distance ourselves from the different theories which emphasize the media's power of conditioning and modelling behaviours, but we can not, however, deny or underestimate the contribution given by television, in terms of both attitudes and conducts, although it is necessary to understand its impact within the larger social and cultural context in which this activity takes place.

Television offer for children must be considered alongside the growing institutionalization of childhood, the multitude of media (video games, computer games, CDs, CDROMs, Internet) children have access to nowadays, the «multimedia culture» it has given rise to (Livingstone, 2002), and also the lack of offers and leisure spaces for the development of autonomy (in urban, suburban and rural environments).

It is also important to consider that children – often seen more as «human beings» than as «human-beings» (Qvortrup, 1994) – are not a homogenous reality we can uniformly catalogue. In conceiving the television offer for a child audience, we must thus take into account the specificities, needs and interests of each of the segments composing it – one of the sides, identified when analysing the interviews, which integrates the picture of quality programming for children.

In the interviewees' dominant opinion, a programming guided by high and exacting standards and by excellence banks on diversity in terms of formats, genres, origin, techniques and audience. Such a television offer provides its target-audience with the opportunity to get acquainted with a variety of situations and problems which enable them to enrich their development and socialization process; the programmes shown are a means to broaden their horizons and even allow them to travel worlds and live adventures that, as a rule, daily life does not allow for.

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