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What Children Want

The Media Monitoring Project (MMP)'s latest research with children and media was conducted as part of the MMP's submission on the SABC's draft licence conditions, and was supported by Save the Children Sweden. The research findings challenge a number of preconceived ideas about children's programming and present challenges to current notions of children's programming, how it is understood, and how it should be regulated. The findings have potentially far-reaching implications for ICASA, in line with the best interests of the child.

What we did?

Together with North Primary School, the MMP carried out questionnaire-based research with over 140 learners, between 9 and 13 years of age, from Gauteng and the Free State. The child participants were both male and female, and were from a diverse range of socio-economic, provincial, and racial backgrounds. Drawing on the MMP's research in the Empowering Children & Media (ECM) project, the value of children's participation and their views are considered to form an essential part of the MMP's submission. The MMP designed a research methodology, which sought to establish children's views in three key areas:

1. What genres/types of programmes children wanted to see/hear more of on SABC television and radio
2. What times of the day children usually watched, and when they preferred to watch, television programmes
3. Their opinions on current levels of advertising

The story so far

The 11th of April 2005 was the deadline for the SABC's response to the SABC's draft licence conditions, as issued by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA). The SABC's response is sure to raise further debate about their licence conditions. The notice document released by ICASA provided individual licence conditions for each of the SABC's broadcasting services, in compliance with the Broadcasting Amendment Act of 1999, which details the reorganisation of the SABC into public service and public commercial services. The conditions also bring the SABC's services in line with other broadcasters, which have individual licence conditions for each service that they supply.

The licence conditions are of significant public importance as they address many key public service responsibilities, including the levels of African languages, drama, educational, and children's programming, informal knowledge building, and news. The



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conditions also address levels of advertising, a critical issue given the SABC's funding structure.

As has been the case with various media policy issues in the past, the MMP compiled a submission on the licence conditions, which was submitted to both ICASA and the SABC. The MMP welcomes the licensing process and believes the draft conditions provide many positive goals and outline significant public service requirements. The MMP's submission addressed key human rights-related issues concerning gender, children, race and disability within the draft licence conditions. In addition, the MMP's submission offers positive suggestions related to advertising, levels of the different programming genres, and groundbreaking policy suggestions.

The MMP works closely with Save the Children Sweden, an international, non-governmental donor organisation, which is politically and religiously unaffiliated. Save the Children Sweden draws attention to problems and influences society's institutions at national, local and regional levels. Given the MMP submission's focus on children, Save the Children Sweden endorsed those sections of the MMP's submission that are applicable to children, children's programming, and advertising aimed at children.

Key Findings

What do children want to see?

There is a common perception that the only types of programmes in which children are interested are cartoons and entertainment programmes. In contrast, the MMP's research indicates that, like adults, children enjoy a diverse range of programmes. One of the key findings of the MMP research was the wide variety of programming choices that the children selected. This finding disproved the myth about children's simplistic programming choices. While the findings showed typically high percentages of entertainment programming, 49% of all of the children interviewed expressed the need for drama programmes where children are the major focus. These results suggest that there is a clear gap and opportunity for the SABC to fulfil drama-programming requirements for children.

Other interesting choices and preferences highlighted by the child participants reflected that more than one-third of the child participants chose programmes that focus on children's issues as an important component of necessary children's programming on the SABC, while a further third of all participants expressed an interest in and a need for children's news and current affairs programming. A number of the child participants particularly expressed appreciation for the children's news programme, KNR (Kids' News Room), which is broadcast weekly on SABC 2. The SABC is to be commended for taking the initiative in broadcasting this programme. However, an analysis of the sources accessed within the broadcast of KNR shows that adults still dominate. While there are some instances that necessitate adult expert opinion and commentary, stories that focus



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on children's experiences of measles, as was the case, for example, in the broadcast of the 11th of March 2005, would be strengthened if children themselves were accessed for their comments. Another concrete example of how the SABC could ensure children's participation would be to include children in the production of KNR.

The right to meaningful participation: Programming from a child's point of view

The MMP welcomes ICASA's intention to ensure that children's points of view are included in the SABC's licence conditions. To fulfil this requirement, the MMP suggests that the SABC draw on growing international precedent, the MMP's recent research experience (the ECM project), the 2002 Opinion Poll (commissioned by Save the Children Sweden), and the SABC's editorial policies (Programming, p. 15), to focus on children's participation. It would seem bizarre to make a programme about the police and not access, consult, or feature any members of the police in that programme. This, however, is, in many instances, common practice with children's programming.

The concept of children's participation and involvement in matters that affect them is more than merely a good idea; it is linked to children's human right to participate meaningfully in matters that affect and impact on them. Both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the South African Constitution make special provision for children's rights, especially the right to participation. The UNCRC states:

The right of children, including adolescents, to express themselves freely must be respected and promoted and their views taken into account in all matters affecting them... We will strive to promote meaningful participation by children, including adolescents, in decision-making processes.

In "A World Fit For Us: The Children's Statement" of 2002, children themselves noted:

We are children whose voices are not being heard: it is time we are taken into account" (*A World Fit For Children*, p. 9, 2002).

The Children's Statement further notes the active participation of children

In all decision-making at all levels and in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating all matters affecting the rights of the child (p. 11).

The South African Constitution states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes...freedom to receive or impart information or ideas (Chapter 2: Section 16).



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Again, the South African Constitution presents a broad-ranging principle and right that directly addresses children:

A child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child [section 28(2)].

The 2002 Opinion Poll, which was conducted with 1200 South African children, commissioned by Save the Children Sweden, investigated children's rights. After the rights to a safe environment and protection from abuse, the child participants cited the right to be heard and to participate in decisions affecting them within their families, the community, and at national level, as the right most often violated in their lives.

It is clear from the above research, codes, laws and governing structures, that in order for the SABC to fulfil its mandate and responsibilities, not only is it in the best interests of the child to be involved and play a meaningful role in all of the elements related to children's programming, but that a failure to do so would constitute a violation of children's rights to participation, particularly, meaningful participation.

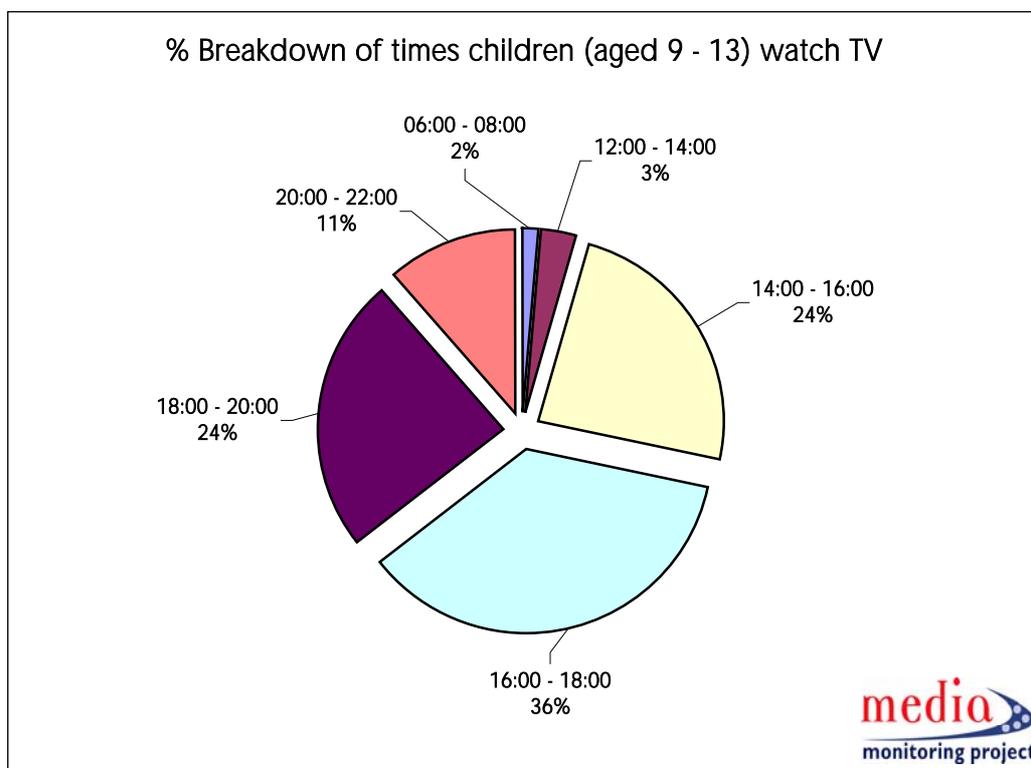
The UNCRC requirement of "meaningful participation" would mean that the SABC would have to be able to clearly demonstrate children's participation in all phases of the programming process. It is imperative for children to be involved and seen to be involved in the design, production and formatting of the content of those programmes aimed at children. The value of ensuring such participation, in line with the UN millennium goals, and South Africa's status as a signatory to the UN Rights of the Child, cannot be overemphasised in the context of the most progressive Constitution concerning children in the world.

Realising children's rights to participation is not only the responsibility of the SABC, but as the Constitutionally-mandated body, ICASA must ensure that all of its regulations and policies adhere to and are consistent with the rights outlined in the Constitution. As diversity in children's programming and children's right to meaningful participation are in the best interests of the child, and as children's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child, it seems reasonable for these considerations to be included in all of ICASA's policies and regulations that concern children.

Children's participation makes excellent "rights" sense, as well as adding quality, diversity, and originality to programmes. There are a number of misconceptions about the ability and value of the contributions that children are able to make. Such misconceptions are easily dismissed, however, the moment children are given the opportunity to contribute meaningfully. In addition, there are a growing number of innovative and exciting methods that enable children to participate in all areas of media. The MMP's own experiences working with children showed the value added by the child participants conducting their own research projects. A recent example of the value of children's

participation is children's presence in a major newsroom in Paris¹. *Mon Quotidien*, a leading French newspaper, invites children from all over France to its editorial meetings twice a week, and takes the children's opinions, interests, and preferences into consideration, so as to ensure that the paper reflects children's issues and concerns.

When do children watch television?



The research identified the times that children would like their favourite programmes to be aired, as well as the times that they tended to watch television. Although a number of children's programmes are broadcast early in the morning, (based on the MMP's schedule analysis of television programming, many of these appear to be repeat broadcasts) judging from the children's responses, only 2% of the children interviewed watch television during this period.

A number of child participants stated that they watched television between 4pm and 6pm daily. This is the time period allocated to the broadcast of many soap operas, thus the times that children are available to watch and actually do watch television are not necessarily the times that the programming specifically directed at them is broadcast.

¹ <http://news.ft.com/cms/s/c739f21c-892c-11d9-b7ed-00000e2511c8>, 1/3/2005



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Children's lives and the times that they are available to watch television have changed substantially in the twenty-first century; many children are not at home during the afternoons. Extra-curricular activities and sports ensure that many children do not arrive home until late afternoon, or early evening. In addition, given the high number of dual-income families, many children spend their afternoons at aftercare facilities, and only have access to television in the evenings. In order to adequately cater for children's programming needs, the SABC needs to take the current context into consideration and come up with alternatives for children's programming times.

Sudsy stereotypes, dirty values: Soap operas and children

The results of the MMP's research showed that an average of 40% of children aged between 9 and 12 watch television from 4pm – 6pm. A review of SABC television's current scheduling during this period displays some worrying trends. It would appear that at least 50% of this time, across all three stations, is devoted to adult programming. This includes adult news programming, adult magazine programmes, and soap operas.

The MMP's research also showed that a number of the children cited soap opera programmes as the kinds of programming that they watched, or cited the hours usually reserved for the broadcast of soap operas as the times when they were usually available to watch television. The basic storylines that tend to drive soap operas revolve around adult sexual relationships, betrayal, infidelity, incest, lies and deceit, and the inability of most of the characters to communicate with one another. While overt violence is rarely broadcast, with the exception of certain South African soap operas, such as *Isidingo*, gender-based violence is seldom challenged, and is instead, often condoned and stereotypically represented in soap opera narratives.

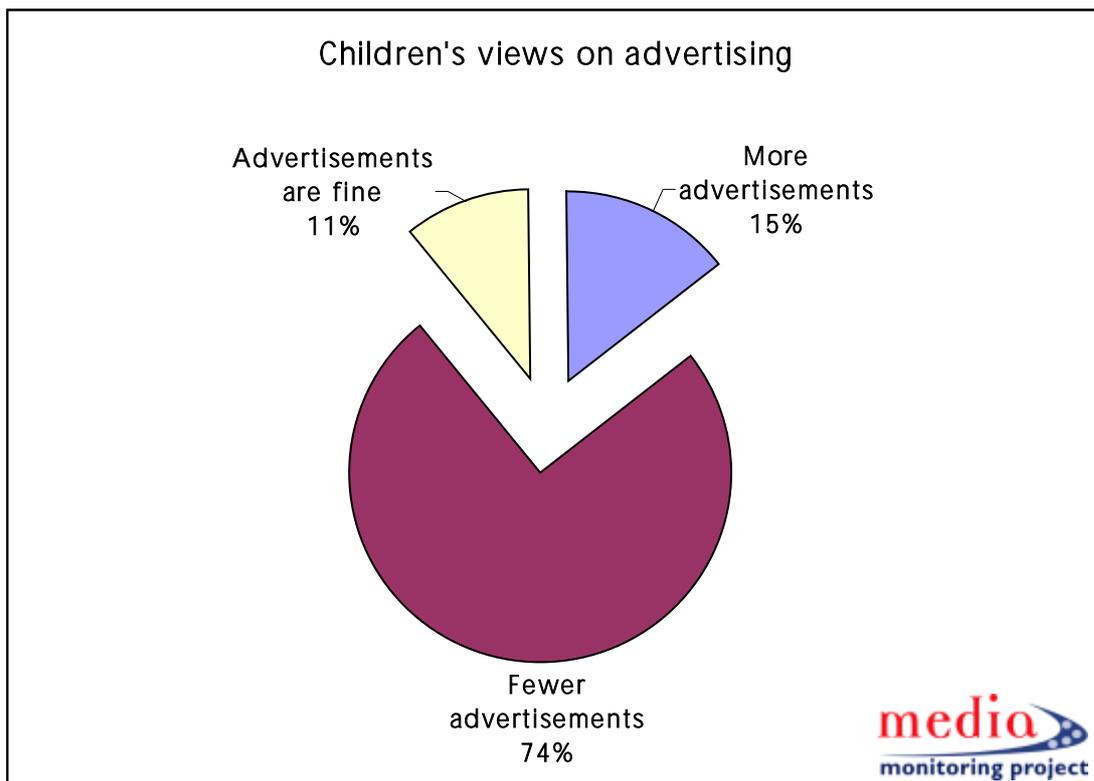
While children, like adults, are often able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, the morals, value judgements, escapist nature and types of family values inherent in soap opera programmes, provide concerning, disturbing, and (frequently) grossly irresponsible role models for children. Given the high levels of domestic violence, child abuse, and broken families in South Africa, the value of such programming, while not explicitly condoning child, woman, or gender abuse, needs to be questioned in relation to its representation of fathers, mothers, sisters, and other family members. It would appear extraordinarily difficult to argue in favour of the positive values that children may glean from watching *The Young and the Restless*, *Days of Our Lives*, and *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Aside from this, these soap operas are not intended as children's programmes.

The MMP's research showed that 35% of children aged 13 preferred watching television in the hours between 6pm and 8pm (23% during 4pm and 6pm). Again, a cursory review of the programming across the SABC television stations between this time reveals that at least a quarter of this time consists of soap operas, across all three stations. Taking into account the programming available on the other television broadcast services

(e-tv and M-NET) the review indicates a distinct lack of diversity in programming, both for adults and children. While the programmes are popular, given the responsibility of the SABC in providing diversity of programming, it is essential that children see the days of their lives and not just the Days of Our Lives represented.

"Advertisements make me crazy "

From the MMP's research, it is clear that 74% of the child participants clearly expressed that they wanted less advertising to be broadcast on television, which highlighted not only the need for reduced advertising on public service stations, but also the need for advertising aimed at children, or advertising broadcast when children are available in large numbers to watch television, to be regulated.



Some of the responses that the child participants gave in relation to the questions about advertising were:

"I don't like adverts because they take the time up" (aged 9).

"I don't like adverts because they stop the programme" (aged 9).



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"The advertisements make me craze [crazy]" (aged 10).

"I can't stand any advertisements" (aged 11).

"I don't like them all" (aged 13).

The Canadian Broadcasting Code provides an example of how to regulate advertising aimed at children. Clause 6 of the code states:

(b) No station or network may carry more than four minutes of commercial messages in any one half-hour of children's programming or more than an average of eight minutes per hour in children's programmes of longer duration.

The MMP submission suggested the inclusion of similar stipulations into the SABC's licence conditions.

Caring for children: Regulating advertisements

The MMP's arguments in favour of regulating advertising clearly address a broader issue, which applies to the SABC, as well as other broadcasters. As the public service broadcaster, it is appropriate that the SABC introduce and implement regulations for advertising that is aimed at children, or advertising broadcast when children are available in large numbers to watch television, within its licence conditions. There is growing international precedence for the regulation of types and forms of advertising. Given South Africa's progressive Constitution, especially with regard to children, it would seem highly appropriate for regulations for advertising targeted at children to be included in the SABC's licence conditions.

During 2004, there was extensive media coverage of obesity in children. This obesity was direct attributed to changes in eating habits, much of which are linked to the growth in the fast-food industry, but also to the increase in fast-food advertising. A recent article published on the Young People's Media Network led with the headline: "PepsiCo admits curbing adverts to children"². While the article focused primarily on a large soft drink and fast food supplier's attempt to tackle obesity in the USA, it suggested some interesting solutions to the problem of repeated fast food advertising to children. The article raised issues surrounding the exploitation of children as vulnerable consumers, especially of products like fast foods and beverages. Young children's developing knowledge of the world makes them particularly vulnerable to commercial practices, especially the approximations of reality portrayed in advertisements. The article noted that the voluntary restrictions on advertising aimed at children introduced by PepsiCo were not the first of its kind; Kraft, another US food group made headlines in January

² Published: February 28 2005 02:00. Last updated: February 28, 2005
http://news.ft.com/cms/s/c739f21c-892c-11d9-b7ed-00000e2511c8.ft_acl



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when it announced new preventative measures against fast food advertising aimed at children. Sadly, such companies in South Africa do not appear to be enforcing the same measures.

The MMP's own research highlighted similarly worrying trends about the impact of fast food advertising on children. Particular advertisements cited as examples by the child participants included advertisements for South African fast food chains and fizzy cold drinks. Some of the participants' comments in relation to these advertisements were:

"I think the Fanta ad where they burp "hello" is cool" (aged 12).

"I like the Wimpy ad" (aged 10).

"I dislike the KFC ads" (aged 9).

"I like the Lays chips one" (aged 11).

Poverty and malnutrition continue to plague South Africa. Efforts to reduce these problems require multifaceted approaches that involve both government and civil society. The SABC, as the public service broadcaster, also has a significant role to play in efforts to combat these social problems. While this role may be partly achieved through its programming, the SABC has the responsibility to ensure that none of its content undermines these efforts. Current advertising practice during children's programming across the SABC's television stations shows that a number of snack food, soft drink, and junk food advertisements are regularly broadcast on the SABC at times when large numbers of children are available to watch.

Another disturbing trend in the MMP's findings was the number of child participants who cited alcoholic beverages among their favourite advertisements:

"I hate the Hansa one coz [because] it shows more people to drink" (aged 11).

"I like the Castle Lager ad where he goes to different places" (aged 13).

"I hate [the] Hansa [advertisement] because he hates being black or white, [I like the] Castle [advertisement] because it is my favourite" (aged 10).

Given the well-documented negative impact of underage drinking, as well as the serious problems of alcoholism, alcohol-related violence, and other social and health problems, it is critical that both the Authority and the SABC do everything in their power to discourage irresponsible and underage drinking. The MMP submission, therefore, suggested that a clause for children's advertising be created, in order to limit the broadcasting of fast-food, snacks, soft drinks, junk food, and alcoholic beverage advertisements during, immediately prior and immediately after children's programmes, or at times when large numbers of children are likely to be watching television.



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Advertising propaganda: "they say the same things over and over"

In addition to limiting the advertising of particular foods and beverages, it is also necessary to limit the frequency of the broadcast of particular advertisements. A number of the child participants commented on the repeated broadcast of some advertisements:

"I dislike [the] KFC [advertisement] because it repeats. It drives me mad" (aged 10).

"I hate Outsurance because they say the same things over and over" (aged 12).

Rather than bombarding children with advertisements for a range and diversity of products, a growing trend in advertising aimed at children would appear to be the repeated broadcast of limited products. Clearly it is not by accident that such advertisements are regularly repeated. Rather, this is a clear advertising strategy that employs some of the classic principles of propaganda, of which the infamous Nazi war criminal Joseph Goebbels would be proud. Such a comparison may appear extreme, but in light of an advertising strategy that so clearly targets children, it is a fair comparison.

The research did not highlight any differences in programming needs between boys and girls, or across racial groupings. However, given the poor representation of the girl child and inequitable treatment of racial representation, as identified in MMP's Empowering Children & Media project, there is a clear need for further research to be undertaken in these areas, and critically, for the inclusion of such racial and gender issues into broadcasting policy and regulation.

To read the MMP's full submission, go to:
http://www.mediamonitoring.org.za/news_news.php

Comments, queries, or suggestions?

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