

**Review Article**

# New Quality Criteria for TV Channels and TV Narrative

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**Abstract:** Why we need a Children's TV channel in Chile and Latin America? This question seems idle in its apparent obviousness. Nevertheless, several responses have been offered, depending first on how child is considered. So, who is the child? Most often, children appear to be the subject of adult actions; these actions are intended to reinforce children's curricular learning and cognitive development in school, using television to ensure their cultural integration with the country, or to convey to them the idea that they are the recipients of public policy benefits. Others see the child audience as consumer of commercial products and thus a target for advertising in audio-visual programs. The second question to answer is what quality TV for children is? Quality TV is a very ambiguous expression. In this article, I discuss that quality TV for the specific children audience can be described with some new quality indicators afforded by child neuroscience and child epigenetic development; there is a reappraisal of the ludic and emotional genetic abilities of child brain to enjoy and comprehend ludic narrative fiction. But also, from a systemic view of the TV communication process; quality on children's TV depends not only on the program content but on the broadcast and on the reception. A review of children's TV channels, and a few dozen of the new programs broadcast, allows us to find several new criteria regarding the quality of children's TV and audio-visual content.

**Keywords:** Children's Quality TV, Channel Quality, Content Quality, Reception Quality

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Current Conceptions of the Child

Contemporary science has introduced a radical turnaround in the conception of the child. Neuroscience of the child's brain and epigenetic theories of development do not perceive the child as an object, but as an active and competent subject [6, 14]. From a juridic perspective, the UN stated in 1989 that the child holds rights; those statements erode the adult centrism in activities related to child.

These shifts therefore marked the emergence of a different conception from that held by behaviorists and which had shaped children's education, psychology, and children's TV for much of the 20th century. According to behaviorism, the child's brain was essentially void, a blank slate, and the learning or education is derived from the external environment.

Influenced by the new sciences, children's TV has more recently (at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st Century) acknowledged the child audience as possessing

genetic-internal capacities with clear implications for their screen interaction. This conception of the competent child audience has led to significant changes and a new generation of educational-entertainment programs. These new programs represent a capable and competent child on screen and allow for interaction with the young audience by challenging their internal competencies. The audio-visual language is consistent with the production of recreational programs aimed at developing socio-emotional competencies, which are complementary to cognitive intelligence<sup>1</sup>.

### 1.2. New Quality Criteria for Children's TV

These new insights have led to the creation of new children's programs on TV that began to emerge in the mid-1990s. The large audiences attracted to these children's programs led to the creation of segmented children's channels, firstly on cable and

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<sup>1</sup> To lighten this text, several citations have been omitted. Theoretical-academic support can be found in the book *La Nueva Television Infantil*. 2016. Valerio Fuenzalida. [10].

later as open TV channels. In most Latin American countries, cable TV broadcasts about ten segmented channels aimed at children; the top ten cable channels always include several children's channels. A review of children's TV channels, and several dozen of the new programs broadcasted, allows us to find new criteria regarding the quality of children's TV and audio-visual content. The complexity of TV for children needs a triple systemic relationship (broadcast, narrative structure of contents, reception of channels and content) and requires us to analyze these new criteria in the context of this triple relationship<sup>2</sup>.

## **2. The Quality of a Broadcast TV Channel Points to Four Quality Criteria**

### ***2.1. Quality Is to Create Channels Segmented for the Young Audience and Clearly Identifiable as Children's Channels***

Geoff Mulgan [18] wrote an article to show that TV quality could be defined from seven points of view; these points of view were not easy to articulate and combine. In this article, I discuss that quality TV for the specific children audience can be described with some new quality indicators afforded in the last two decades [10]. Children have moved across to watching channels segmented for children on cable TV, abandoning linear (real-time) open TV channels. Cable TV channels broadcast to the child audience 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Moreover, children increasingly view these programs on tablets and smartphones. Current technology allows the child to watch programs at any time and at any place from a very early age. Unlike these 24/7 cable channels, open TV channels segmented for children have a linear broadcast schedule from approximately 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. and the remaining hours are set aside for cultural or youth programs. Traditional open TV aimed at general audiences include some time slots for children during the morning, afternoon, weekend, and on holidays. Children have moved across to the segmented pay TV channels. With the reception technologies available today, this means they can watch TV whenever and wherever they want. These channels are recognized by children for their visual identity, which is used to draw their attention; some of them emphasize the channel's written brand (such as the Disney Channel, Nick Jr., Paka Paka); others spotlight the programs' playful characters (Doki and Mundi on Discovery Kids, a Lil Butterfly on Baby TV). These characters have been specifically devised so children-audience can see themselves as both represented and

receivers. To attempt to bring children back to watching linear time slots on open TV channels would seem doomed to failure, given that children have acquired other TV consumption habits, and enjoy sharing ideas and opinions about these new methods of watching TV. On Chilean pay TV, five or six children's channels are for years among the top ten for cable, and the child audience has all but abandoned the general-entertainment, linear open TV channels. They have become a highly valued audience (for advertisers but not for educators). We must be especially attentive to technological changes, as new forms of non-linear broadcast continue to surface, in Internet streaming (YouTube) that allows for non-linear, expandable coverage as well as content that is segmented for different audiences.

### ***2.2. Quality is to Offer Multi-platform Broadcast/Reception***

The child audience watches cable TV channels, but also streaming media, Video on Demand and YouTube channels ('ubiquitous' reception on a variety of devices at any time). Contents have been diversified into various platforms and genres (including cartoons, live action series, documentaries, news, songs, games, riddles, puzzles, humor). Quality means to broadcast according to audience new ways of reception.

### ***2.3. Quality Is to Place Children at the Core of the Channel Both as Audience and in Devising Programs***

In other words, neither adults, education professionals, teacher training nor commercial interests are at the core of a TV channel. Teacher-centered learning in school first inspired those TV practices, in which TV programs would portray adults in the central character roles, with names such as "aunt, uncle and teacher". However, the displacement of the adult as the central focus (adult centrism) and the emergence of the child within the channel/program as the more important portrayed subject did not occur without resistance or criticism. This new approach has engendered a substantial body of literature on how to represent the child in TV and in audio-visual programs; In the next section, we will take a closer look at the new forms of representation in which the child plays a central role.

### ***2.4. Quality Is to Produce Programs Segmented by Age Group***

Our improved understanding of child development, in terms of their perceptual capacities, as well as the attention and interest aroused by internal motivations, has led to the creation of channels segmented by age (e.g., Baby TV, up to two or three years old; channels for three- to six-year-old toddlers; and channels for seven to eleven-year-olds). Greater insights into the challenges and internal motivations of children (Erickson, 2000) have favored segmentation to the extent that children spontaneously abandon channels when the programs broadcast no longer appeal to young audiences' internal competencies. Anderson & Hanson [1] have drawn a distinction between Foreground and Background TV for children. Background TV programs are those received as background noise; the children's attention is intermittent, and programs are unable to engage their

2 What is quality TV for children? In most cases is thought in a negative way: the program must not to present content related to sex and violence. But what is quality in a positive consideration? What kind of representation ought to be present in a program? This text aims to a positive concept of quality TV for children. This text ought to be useful also to those decision-makers responsible for creating and managing an audiovisual channel for children and for the producers of audiovisual programs for children.

perceptual capabilities and interests. It is often the kind of broadcast seen in the company of older brothers and sisters or shown to the child in the absence of any conversation or mediation by parents. Foreground TV refers to the broadcast/reception of programs adapted to children's perceptual capacities; their attention is captured by his understanding and connection with their motivations; this is the kind of TV that the child finds enjoyable; it would also be useful and enriching for the young audience. Background TV is likely to contribute little; furthermore, in the absence of time control, suitability of content and mediation, reception could easily lead to disorders such as fears; nightmares; insomnia; physical-emotional reactions; uncontrolled and weak attention; less verbal language and other cognitive learning [1, 10].

### **3. As Regards Program Contents, Five New Quality Criteria Emerge**

#### ***3.1. Quality Is to Create Stories in Which the Child Is the Main Character***

Unlike short stand-alone modules (e.g. Sesame Street - episodes with modules averaging 1.3 minutes in length), the narrative and structural format of stories has been re-evaluated to include a beginning, middle and end; this marks major departure from previous models, as it allows the child to be portrayed as the narrative's main character, actively pursuing goals, achieving different feats, and creatively overcoming obstacles. The narrative format of central involvement allows first for the creation of stories in which a child is portrayed in terms of his or her executive abilities: planning towards goals; time management over the course of the narration; evaluation of achievements; teamwork. These types of narratives are typical for instance in programs such as Bob the Builder, Dora the Explorer, Handy Manny, or Paw Patrol. Representation of the prominent role of a character in this way can activate (through self-identification) internal capacities relating to "I can, and I want" among child audience as well as abilities and self-reliance [8]. The competencies represented are therefore socio-emotional attitudes rather than scholar themes. Secondly, child is represented also confronting unforeseen obstacles and must overcome hard opposition; he needs resilience and flexibility in decision-making. Bettelheim [2, 3, 4] appreciated traditional fairy tales where children confront powerful and destructive forces (as poverty, orphanhood, cruel stepmothers, witches, ogres). Greimas actantial scheme [15, 12] to elaborate protagonism to act and to resist opponent forces in fictional narrative allows integrate the active child representation with suspense, tension, and attention to storynew narrative imbricates the active child representation with ludic entertainment [12, 13].

#### ***3.2. Quality Is to Represent the Child Audience as Skilled and Competent***

Portraying the child as the narrative center allows to represent the child-audience's socio-emotional capabilities, such as the curiosity to explore; creativity; imagination;

self-esteem; personal identity amid diversity; inclusion; resourcefulness and action. It can also depict executive abilities in terms of reaching goals and achievements as well as resilience and strength in the face of adversity. The stories represent everyday situations, experiences and emotions that are relatively common to children. Children develop "theory of mind skills" between 3 and 5 years of age, allowing them to recognize facial and gestural emotions and intentions in others [20]. This is what enables the child audience to draw major distinctions between the fictional child portrayed and their own traits in relation to ethnicity, language, scenery, colors, clothing, social and cultural habitat. Audio-visual representation can be analogous (e.g., the drawing of human figures) or playful with cute-looking animals; the child representation through animals can be traced back many centuries, having appeared in Aesop's fables (Greece) and Phaedrus (Rome); Mesopotamia and India are also acknowledged for their ancient fables. This kind of representation therefore seems to be highly universal and encourages a clearer perception of human diversity and differences in behavior.

#### ***3.3. Quality is to Stimulate Interactivity with the Child Audience's Capabilities***

Formal interaction techniques seek to break away from mere attention to the on-screen spectacle and return to a state in which the child audience actively engages with the narrative portrayed, that challenges their perceptual, emotional and cognitive capacities. This involves narrative resources such as questions designed to fix the child audience's attention, to distinguish between objects, present them with riddles and puzzles, identify vocabulary used in other languages, resolving problems and so on. In each episode of Blue's Clues, the audience is challenged to locate three clues, to work out how to overcome three obstacles, and to solve three riddles or puzzles. Rather than just watching to the on-screen story as it unfolds, the audience is challenged to interact with it for the narrative to advance. Several channels have an accompanying website so that children have an opportunity to interact together with their parents. Other channels announce to parents before a program be shown that the subsequent episode will be useful for discussing a particular skill. The technique of holography applied to television narrative is almost certain to further expand the different forms of audience interaction in the future.

#### ***3.4. Quality in the New TV Is to Represent Children's Socio-emotional Internal Skills***

It is from this type of representation that the socio-emotional contribution of this new television programming begins to emerge; it is an autonomous contribution in relation to school, which is centered on literacy and math; but it is also complementary to the cognitive skills acquired via in-school learning. These socio-emotional competencies are innate, but they require environmental stimulation at home, at school and from TV. Competencies such as autonomy and interdependence;

self-confidence and self-esteem; personal initiative and inclusion/collaboration in group diversity; recognizing and managing one's own emotions and those of others; flexibility in resolving problems and adverse situations; self-analysis of behaviors with a capacity for self-transformation in the face of personal mistakes and deficiencies. One of the strongest criticisms levied at western education is its emphasis on cognitive and memory processes as well as the lack of attention paid to the cultivation of socio-emotional skills [17, 5, 19]. The latter are today considered by neuroscience increasingly indispensable for personal development, social and emotional interaction, citizenship, as well as professional development in innovation and entrepreneurship.

### **3.5. *Quality Is the Capacity of TV Programs to Represent Positive Emotions***

Emotions have been re-evaluated as playful learning markers; they are very important and are filed in the emotional memory - not always declarative using words [9]. Negative emotions can provoke fear and anxiety [14]; these have been witnessed in children exposed to television news that deeply affects them such as deaths, accidents, fires, disasters, wars, especially when children are involved. Positive and joyful emotions, on the other hand, accompany development, learning and memory. Pleasure reinforces playful learning; the enjoyment of audio-visual programs can encourage and motivate curiosity and exploration. Useful emotions for existential education on TV programs show a clear sequence in children's reception: emotional enjoyment – ludic entertainment – constructivism – personal appropriation – memory and learning.

## **4. At the Level of Audience Reception, Three Further Quality Criteria Emerge**

### **4.1. *Quality Is to Strengthen Constructivist Reception in the Pre-school Classroom with Teacher Support***

The constructivist activity of children in the classroom has been demonstrated as indispensable for the interpretation and appropriation of the educational existential meaning of history. Evidence suggests that the mere watching of programs, even when the children are paying close attention, is superficially perceived as educative by the child audience. Promoting active constructivism amongst children helps them to reconstruct in detail the sequence of the narrative anecdote, to specify the traits and competencies of the characters as well as problems they must confront and resolve through their own actions. Through our experience of working with public-school children in Chile, we have developed, in collaboration with the teachers, a strategy of constructivist reception for the classroom. Our evaluation results show high levels of achievement in terms of educative appropriation of audio-visual materials [11]. Constructivist reception also helps the audience to acquire autonomy and selectivity when it

comes to audio-visual programs.

### **4.2. *Quality is to Encourage Constructivist Conversation Between the Children and Their Families at Home***

Our experience classroom has played a role in helping households to stimulate family discussions about the programs which were commented on and enjoyed by students. The mere fact of asking children about the programs shown and discussing their preferences and interpretations, provides parents with simple resources with which to appreciate the contributory value and to reduce the anxiety that often derives from TV, in the sense that it can often give rise to feelings of blame and an inability to cope. This sense of confidence and social assurance is essential for the appreciation of a public TV channel for children.

### **4.3. *Quality in Reception Is to Prepare the Child for His or Her New Status as a Receiver-Broadcaster***

Audio-visual technology is populating homes today due to its low cost and continuous equipment miniaturization. Children and young people learn intuitively to handle these new devices, enabling them to produce progressively more complex photographs and audio-visual texts. Giving support in these processes helps to stimulate their ability to express views on issues faced at school such as bullying; inclusion and other prejudices; abuse; discipline and school performance; problems in the family and neighborhood; not to mention their hopes and dreams. The work of producing texts with their viewpoints leads to further reflection on the issues raised and to encourage a diversity of opinions. The process of communication provides a space for expressing diverse views. It can help in finding solutions to some problems at school. It also allows for ethical reflection on communication and cyber bullying on social networks. Hence, education for audio-visual communication becomes increasingly focused on learning through the process of communicating and reflecting on actions and behaviors.

## **5. Conclusions: Quality Children's TV for Quality Education**

The aim of this article is not an academic discussion of the concept of quality TV for children but how to produce children's quality TV. Quality TV is not only a content matter; has also to do with technical distribution to reach children and with the constructivist reception to produce appropriation of socio-emotional abilities.

As previously mentioned, the first channels segmented for children appeared on pay-tv channels halfway through the 1990s. The success of this TV programming led to the child audience crossing over to cable TV. There are about ten children's cable TV channels distributed among several Latin American countries which enjoy TV's highest viewing figures.

However, we should also bear in mind that an average 50% of Latin American households do not have legal access to Pay TV (recent estimates suggest at least 10% receive signals

illegally). Therefore, the sectors in most need of quality child TV enjoy neither the coverage nor financial capacity to access quality pay-TV channels for children. Latin American children need to be provided with easy access to segmented audio-visual programs, with new content that can improve skills through active learning. Yet, in view of the massive growth in streaming services and increasing access to reception technology, a channel aimed at children appears increasingly feasible for streaming, YouTube, and VOD. These new mediums also point to a significant reduction in costs. The concept of linear, analogue TV time slots for children has become obsolete. To present that linear TV time slots as an effective distribution format is to ignore these changes for the children TV audience.

Quality in program content means an autonomy of scholar contents and an emphasis in socioemotional capabilities. The quality indicators to produce this kind of content point to:

1. produce stories where children are active protagonists
2. represent in the program the child audience as skilled and competent
3. stimulate in the program interactivity with the child audience's own capabilities
4. represent children's socio-emotional internal skills
5. represent in the program positive emotions

With these new content quality criteria, a public audio-visual digital multi-platform for children can have huge social value in terms of its potential contribution to the quality of education; in particular, the benefits to the socio-emotional and executive function underlying skills development in pre-school education and initial childhood. We must not forget that the coverage and the quality in early childhood education today is the most effective investment throughout the learning cycle [7].

This new TV programming must be devised in such a way as to support the children's reception of content using a constructivist model. Children should exercise their ability to appropriate actively and creatively the meaning of programs, according to their own cultural interpretation and/or imagination. The new quality contents are necessary but do not go far enough; they also require constructivist appropriation by the child at the reception moment. A new digital open TV channel for children, as well as the use of other technologies, would help to forge a constructivist relationship between children, teachers and parents. Similarly, associated as it is with the classroom, children's TV should involve each country's Ministry of Education.

The in-field experiences at the public-school establishments of eight Chilean municipalities have not only proved successful, but have also been warmly welcomed by teachers, children alike. They also lay the foundations for a comprehensive implementation strategy, allowing for the broad introduction of socio-emotional TV programs into the pre-school classroom, with the potential to become firmly embedded in national policy frameworks.

Open digital technology and streaming makes it possible to provide a new generation of content for young viewers in Latin America. It offers an educational opportunity at the most

critical stage of human education; it is an opportunity for public TV to provide a joyful, high-audience and socially valued service; and it is also an opportunity to create programs for children with a distinctly Latin American edu-entertainment hallmark.

## Declaration

A shorter version of this article was published in Spanish in the Journal *Interacción* N° 61, 2019. CEDAL. Bogota: Colombia. The actual digital text contains important updates to the original.

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