

## CONCERN: Consciousness Raising

Action for Children's Television  
Maggi Cowlan

No individual group interested in video and kids has had more of a national impact than ACT (Action for Children's Television.) This organization of parents, teachers and leaders in many professions is primarily concerned with changing the nature of broadcasted programming aimed at kids. On one level ACT is about consciousness raising - in the past five years they have grown from a group of four Boston mothers to a powerful advocacy organization of over 100,000. But ACT is also about making specific structural change in children's programming. Maggi Cowlan's report outlines ACT's guidelines for better TV for kids and reviews a few of the specific actions they have taken.

"To those in power ACT is saying - clearly and loudly - that new guidelines for children's program-

ming must be adopted in which different kinds of programs are designed to meet the developmental needs of children at different age levels."

## CONCERN: Information Systems

Invitation to a Video Forum  
Anne Page

If you want something to happen, you do it yourself. Anne Page believes that kids should exchange the tapes they have made. In this article she offers to coordinate a Video Forum. Anne's idea is to have kids create tapes on particular issues and then to mail these through a network of places where a class or group shares the same interest. The project is initiated right here.

"I have recently been involved with a video-pal exchange between high school video classes. The results have been so rewarding that it has occurred to me that the principle of sharing tapes could be expanded. I'm willing to make this happen."

# The Video Carrot

JEFF STRICKLER

Kids wiggle and shout, giggle and wave when they first see themselves on a live television monitor. After the initial blast of self-recognition they begin to pose as tough guys or movie stars or popular singers or Kung Fu experts . . . provoking laughter and imitators. It's all very self-conscious, this trying on of images, almost a seeking to discover their own importance. Soon two or three will want to do a story. . . usually a copy of adult TV. . . or a monster story . . . or a fight scene.

But this takes organization. They have to get a space for action. How do you choose a camera operator when all want to do it? Who does what first? When do I turn on the camera? A group begins to coalesce around the task of creating a story. The action is frantic with advice or heckling from the sidelines . . . and maybe a hand or head in the picture. The result is played back. They again laugh and wiggle, or hide bashfully when they see themselves. But when the playback is finished they want to do it over, do it better, with more organization and fewer shouts and hands from the side. (And if they do it over, they can prolong the experience.) Here a group of children organize themselves to realize a goal, judging their progress toward that goal by periodic replays and altering behavior to produce desired changes. They reproduce in microcosm the kind of organizational effort used in the world around them. Plan, execute, evaluate, play, execute, etc.

## Levels of Organization

More than just social organization is taking place however. The original idea changes as they work on it. New ideas come up. They must be worked in or rejected. Actions must come in sequence. What comes first? Soon arguments over the interior logic



Jeff Strickler

of the story erupt. "How can you get killed and then walk home in the next scene?" The logic of the story must be preserved. . . not that it can't veer in unpredictable directions under the charged emotions of performing. After playing the tape back, they may want or need to change their old

plot to include the latest inspiration – or they may decide they'd rather stay with the original idea.

### The Carrot

It is at this point they need tools to help organize their story – to break it down into separate scenes which come in a defined order. Here is a need for writing. It is important for them to be able to set their story down on paper in order to make a more organized videotape.

If instead of a story, they have decided to interview someone outside their immediate circle – often the interviewer runs out of questions quickly. Then he thinks of one more question. . . and goes blank again. So. . . The camera is turned off. Suggestions from the side come forth and a list is made. Again writing is needed as a tool for the im-

mediate purpose of organizing.

Children want to use the medium well. As they become aware of more complex possibilities, more complex planning is required, and thus more writing. Videotaping leads kids to need writing to help gather information, put it in a chosen sequence, and present it to an audience just as if they were assigned to write a story or an essay. The writing does not necessarily appear as a neat and tidy product but rather it emerges in blocks of described action, in lines of dialogue, or as interview questions. The final videotape has dimensions as a record of the group which produced it, beyond the scope of the written core. They're proud of their tape but they want to do more – and better. They have eaten of the video carrot.

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## Don't Try to Understand Media—Know Thyself

GEORGE GORDON

I suppose the main reason I have been asked to write this article is because I was co-author of (and propagandist for) one of the early books written in English on how to use television for instructional purposes. The first edition was written in 1960 and published in 1961. Called Teach With Television, I think it is now out of print: a "classic!" (A "classic" is a book that almost nobody bought when it was available, but is still taken out of libraries to pad bibliographies for term papers!) It was a terrible book.

All of which reminds me of a sociologist I know who responded, when asked to lecture on the subject of cannibalism, "Do you want me to argue for it or against it?"

A dozen years ago, I would not have conceived, in my wildest dreams, of asking the same sort of question about the television - education mix. Today, I am asking, and am not a bit comforted by the reactions I get. Twelve years ago, you see, I knew all the answers. Somehow, young people - and I was about fifty years younger twelve years ago - are gifted with intense brilliance in the department of answers. (Maybe this has something to do with glands.) At present, I must admit I know few - if any - answers to questions people pose to me about teaching with television and count myself content that I have, possibly, over the years, been able to figure out a few relevant questions. What bothers me is that I suspect that satisfying answers to them do not exist. (Kids just won't believe that certain questions cannot be answered! Psychologists may explain this general attitude, but I don't like their answers either.)

What questions?

Well, they are nasty questions, hard questions, "put down" questions. They are designed to quench fires rather than light them, dim enthusiasms rather than illuminate them. The faded Toronto guru, McLuhan, who liked to fancy himself a "sparkplug" of intellectual electricity, turned out, in the long run, to be an embolism in the bloodstream of serious study of communications. His motives, however, were exuberant and benign. Mine are downbeat and passive. But I think that both of us end up in the same place: stuck with questions.

Looking for Answers

Let's start with a few easy ones, and then get down to the rough stuff:

Why does video education, to begin at the heart of things, work best on dead-head students, have no apparent positive effects on average students and bore and retard the brightest ones? Is it because they think of the tube with the word "boob" rattling in their subconscious? Is it because writers and "television experts" live in the mistaken notion that God has ordained that short-take, quick-cut, visual razzle dazzle is the only way to use the blasted medium to teach anything? That the aesthetic apogee of video is the cat food commercial? That any television production studio, even those loosely labeled "educational," was intended by nature to operate as a looney bin for insipid puppeteers, animators and people who make things out of Styrofoam? Or is it because good students need good teachers - and any good teacher with brains