

Child audiences becoming interactive ‘viewers’: New Zealand children’s responses to websites attached to local children’s television programmes

Ruth Zanker

Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology,
Aotearoa/New Zealand

Abstract

The paper explores how local children are responding to interactive websites attached to popular New Zealand produced children’s television shows. It asks what changes and what stays the same for children’s media spaces as emails, twitter, message boards, photo uploads, videos and other social networking tools become everyday creative tools for users and programme makers. It also asks: how do New Zealand children respond to modest indigenous websites when they have access to well marketed and funded corporate media websites like Nickelodeon that address ‘savvy global kids’(Hendershot). In turn the paper explores how producers imagine the users of these local web spaces. Do they address them in formats and appeals that emulate successful global corporate websites, or are they attempting to carve out spaces with appeals designed around ‘local difference’? How do producers, as key cultural intermediaries, interpret the responses of their child audiences now that they are constructed as web ‘viewers’? For example, do websites attached to local children’s programmes foster authentic participation in terms of shaping civic spaces for children in New Zealand because much of their budget comes from public broadcasting funds? Or do the rules for interactive participation simply represent new forms of recruitment of children to commercial media because the choice to commission programmes remains in the hands of two competing commercial channels? Or is it a fluid mix of the two? In other words: what is the emerging moral economy of locally produced interactive websites targeting children in New Zealand? The study draws on data gathered from website analysis, sampling of audience responses and interviews with members of two New Zealand publicly funded children’s production teams who broadcast on full-service commercial channels. It is posited that the term ‘television audience’ no longer adequately describes children’s responses as engaged participants and fans in interactive spaces. Neither does the term ‘television programme’ adequately describe the textual relationships

between producers, their web teams and child audiences. It argues that children's television producers and their web teams are positioned as critical cultural intermediaries between child audiences, public funding and corporate interests.

Keywords: children, audience, viewer, prosumer, television production, websites, social networking, interactivity, rights, public space, consumer culture

Introduction

The paper explores how local children are responding to interactive websites attached to popular New Zealand produced children's television shows. It asks what changes and what stays the same for children's media spaces as emails, twitter, message boards, photo uploads, videos and other social networking tools become everyday creative tools for users and programme makers. It also asks: how do New Zealand children respond to modest indigenous websites when they have access to well marketed and funded corporate media websites like Nickelodeon that address 'savvy global kids' (Hendershot).

In turn the paper explores how producers imagine the users of these local web spaces. Do they address them in formats and appeals that emulate successful global corporate websites, or are they attempting to carve out spaces with appeals designed around 'local difference'? How do producers, as key cultural intermediaries, interpret the responses of their child audiences now that they are constructed as web 'viewers' ¹? For example, do websites attached to local children's programmes foster authentic participation in terms of shaping civic spaces for children in New Zealand because much of their budget comes from public broadcasting funds? Or do the rules for interactive participation simply represent new forms of recruitment of children to commercial media because the choice to commission programmes remains in the hands of two competing commercial channels? Or is it a fluid mix of the two? In other words: what is the 'moral economy' between users and producers within locally produced interactive websites targeting children in New Zealand? The study draws on data gathered from website analysis, sampling of audience responses and interviews with members of two New Zealand publicly funded children's production teams who broadcast on full-service commercial channels.

The paper begins with a consideration of theoretical debates within audience studies in order to relate these to concerns in consumer studies, sociology of media production and constructivist childhood studies. Recent research into children's media use in a range of countries is surveyed before a brief description of the global audio-visual context for children is described, where the old business of children's television has now exploded into a hugely lucrative trans-media entertainment business, often in association with merchandising and wider corporate marketing opportunities. This provides the frame for the case studies.

Reimagining audiences within the converging media environment

Toffler, as early as 1980, discussed audiences in interactive terms when he coined the term 'prosumers', but it is fair to say that it was early in this millennium that the debate around the inadequacies of the term 'audience' accelerated in response to interactive media. For example, in 2004 Frank began to refer to audiences as 'media actives' and pointed to a generational shift which saw young people demanding to be able to interact and reshape media content. By 2006 Rosen had articulated this theoretical anxiety in his now famous dictum concerning the 'people formerly known as the audience' (as cited in Green and Jenkins 215-6). In the same year Jenkins was referring to devoted audience fans as 'loyals' and pointing out 'the value of consumer commitment in the era of channel zapping' (215). In the 1980s and 1990s new audience studies demonstrated how active audiences undermine the inscribed meaning of industrial media texts and scholars celebrated the unpredictable, idiosyncratic responses of users and fans to old broadcasting content (Fiske), but even during these decades of work on the radical reversioning of 'the audience', new questions were being posed.

Green et al argue that the historically separate spheres of audience studies and industry research need to be bridged in order to make sense of the emerging 'moral economy' that frames the emerging relationship between users and producers within the converging media landscape. Green et al describe the contradictions, conflicts and schisms emerging within the web 2.0 paradigm 'around the imperfectly aligned interests of media producers and consumers' (213). They describe 'a rift between the "gift economy" of fan culture and the commodity logic of "user-generated" content' (214) in order to challenge scholars to consider the emerging 'moral economy' as it relates to the social expectations, emotional investments, and cultural transactions between media companies and their consumers.

Industry research – at least within academic circles- has taken a top-down approach, emphasising the power of media companies and the impact of the decisions they make upon culture; audience research has historically taken a bottom up approach, emphasising audience interpretation and cultural production read in cultural rather than economic terms (214).

This they argue has seen two conflicting claims made about the current state of our media culture 'one emphasising media concentration and the narrowing of options; the other emphasising the expansion of grassroots participation'. They want to provoke a conversation between the two sets of literature and ask for nothing less than a new bridge to be built between the historically separate spheres of audience studies and industry research as a response to questions arising from interactive social media.

Some, however, might argue that the inadequacies of this binary have been already begun to be addressed in other fields. During the same period in which cultural studies scholars

celebrated the sovereignty of audiences, and communication theory and political economic theory explored the reach of conglomerate media power, other scholars have been conducting empirical research within media production sites (and other sites of popular cultural production). Fieldwork in media sociology, critical political economy and even industrial media research provides evidence that the simple binary drawn between corporate strategic planning and the audience agency and creativity is inadequate to describe the rich and complex relationships between audiences and producers of culture. Early case studies of television production illustrated the elaborate dance that has always existed between a corporate desire for market efficiency and the need to court 'fickle' audiences (Buckingham). Other empirical studies of production processes (Dornfeld) have positioned the producer as a key industrial 'intermediary' critically positioned between media consumers and corporate interests. Producers were discovered to be highly responsive agents, engaged in reading active audience responses, often against the grain of corporate intent. They were very particular kinds of cultural agents who worked on behalf of both the audiences they court and the corporate bosses they serve. They produced 'media texts within contexts constrained by culture, ideology and economy but operated within particular social locations and frameworks' (Dornfeld 13). Scholars in consumer studies also investigated the micro-sites of authorship, audience behaviour and consumption and their relationship to macro frames of corporate capitalism and regulation.

Recently industry audience researchers have become increasingly self-reflexive and aware of the limitations of ratings audience measurement. The old broadcasting media's focus on eyeballs and Nielsen ratings has long been supplemented by qualitative research that respects the viewpoints of loyal fans and rejecters alike (Zanker and Lealand). Fans have been accorded increasing degrees of participation within formative media production processes for some decades and audience interactivity is now an increasingly valued measure as the media conglomerates' desire to exploit synergies between different platforms, and consumers demand content where and when they want it.

New questions are being asked by public and commercial media producers alike: how can audiences be attracted and kept 'on task' using media content? What does the audience want from productions designed for a 360 degree media environment of multi-channel, multi-platform consumer opportunity? And, for corporate media, how is it possible to generate commercial value from new interactive patterns of audience behaviour?

Children as audiences and media users

Scholars engaged in the cross disciplinary field of children's culture are brokering innovative ways of exploring audience behaviour. They draw on cultural studies, new audience studies, anthropology and social constructivism to help them explore reception and use of media in children's imaginative and social worlds. Innovative ethnographic, sociological and

industrial field work, alongside reflexive theoretical reframing, have enabled a nuanced and complex understanding of children's media use.

It is becoming clear that, given access, children are using media in rich and diverse ways within their social worlds. At the same time other studies have been mapping flows of transnational children's programming, as well as the complex rights and merchandising opportunities that have emerged over the last fifteen years. Recent studies range from micro studies of reception to macro studies of corporate media commissioning, media flows, state policy and cultural diaspora (Lealand and Zanker, Rydin and Sjoberg; Drotner and Livingstone; Carlsson; Messenger Davies; Buckingham and Tingstad; Steemers). Buckingham and Sefton-Green explore, with other scholars, the Pokemon phenomenon, which illustrates the complex inter-relationship between structure and audience agency in popular culture and its mediated forms. There is also an increasing interest in mapping the chaotic, multi-directional digital re-versioning and mashing by users of those same entertainment products, often in total disregard for current intellectual property rights (Montgomery and Chester).

Götz et al. traces global and local media in children's make believe worlds and conclude that children do not necessarily distinguish between local and global content. They appropriate what attracts them seamlessly into play and fantasy but contextualise it within their own cultures. De Block and Buckingham, reporting on a large scale European study of immigrant children, note that children adeptly draw on a range of different local and global media sources in order to create a repertoire of ways of being and acting socially. This growing body of work has provoked cross disciplinary conversations that begin to build a bridge between the literature of audience studies and industry studies along the lines called for by Green and Jenkins.

The expansion of media choice, associated merchandising and social networking opportunities, it can be argued, empowers young people by creating new interactive community and offer new ways to express themselves within corporate play spaces. There are utopians, like Kleeman, who celebrate the implications of the range of textual choices now available to children

... when children in many parts of the world have the ability to pick and choose from a borderless digital smorgasbord, what do they themselves consider their "community"? Many young people in the digital age are redefining themselves via a multi-dimensional mash-up, where race, ethnicity and nationality are not necessarily the defining elements (para 6).

There are empirically based views by scholars like Lemish et al who suggest another way of considering the emerging media ecology by arguing that while children might consume the

same media content and use the same communication technologies, such commonalities do not necessarily result in cultural homogenization: 'Conversely, the world is becoming ever more culturally diverse despite what seems like a common culture of consumption and style' (554).

De Block and Buckingham, however, serve a warning that while Nickelodeon, Disney and other dedicated children's global television channels and social networking sites, like Facebook and Bebo, can be said to have invigorated a sense of a 'transnational public sphere' for children, they primarily address children as global consumers. In earlier work Buckingham argues that, given the influence of the masters of a handful of media conglomerations around the world 'We might all be consuming Disney in complex and ambivalent ways, but in the end we are all still consuming the same thing'. In his view, the space for alternative childhoods, for alternative stories to be told, may be steadily reducing (294).

There is an increasingly nuanced debate amongst scholars of children's media culture. It rejects the old binary of top down global power and takes issue with some cultural studies scholars' over celebratory focus on hybrid textual readings and cultural resistance. Kraidy alerts us to the danger of subsuming cultural diversity and choice under that of market freedom of consumer choice and agrees with Buckingham that cultural studies scholars have found themselves in an increasingly uncomfortable alignment with the free market celebration of individual audience agency. He argues the case for a new form of critical transculturalism that can reclaim the notion of hybridity from doctrinaire free marketers: 'People's identities may be refracted through individual consumption, cultural and otherwise, but consumption is not tantamount to being' (151).

To reclaim power as a major and legitimate focus of research, it is important to view cultures as synthetic entities whose hybrid components are shaped by structural and discursive forces (153).

Rather than think of local audience agency and corporate media agency as opposites, Kraidy argues that it is more helpful to think of them as mutually constitutive. Tracing constitutive power relations is at the centre of this research into children's responses to website resources.

What is emerging is a theoretical stance that claims the preference for global or local culture is not a zero sum game. Children's heightened interest in shared popular global culture does not preclude interest in the local and particular and pleasure in sharing these stories. Children experiment with an emerging sense of agency and explore a range of identities within media spaces, in part because they experience family lives that have to balance integration into mainstream culture with a desire for cultural maintenance (de Block et al).

The problem of 'good local media' for children

The previous section posits that television producers are important cultural intermediaries, who enable or delimit the imaginative horizons made available to children. As Dornfeld puts it, they are 'trafficking in narratives of self and other and the way they are enlisted in constructions of identity, community and nation' (Dornfeld 18).

New Zealand children's television producers have funded websites 'on the side' for some years but only recently have they been funded 'above the line' within budgets. The websites explored here are partially funded by NZ On Air, but as part of larger television programme proposals put forward by the commercially competitive programme commissioners from TVNZ and Mediaworks. NZ On Air is the local content public funding agency and is all that remains of the much attenuated public service broadcasting environment. The programmes and their website spin offs have competing objectives: firstly the national funding requirement to ensure that programmes are developed with the interest, perspectives and views of local children as citizens, and secondly the requirement to be successful competitive brands for commercial channels embedded in global consumer culture. How can children's participation be understood in these circumstances and how do producers interpret this? Is participation encouraged as part of a commercial branding strategy, and a source of formative production and marketing intelligence, or is it a democratising force that promotes children's rights and participation in active citizenship within New Zealand?

The ideal of old media cultural citizenship is that citizens (including children) can recognize themselves in available representations offered in the media (Murdock). Flew (as cited in Rutherford) argues that cultural citizenship also requires the right to participate in the 'shaping of these representations' and it is this participative right that has increasing resonance as children's producers provide interactive websites. The Australian producer Shier highlights Article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child document which assures to children who are capable of forming their own views, the right to express these views freely. He goes on to note that 'the increased mobility of children across digital streams would seem to perform an important function in relation to this statement, and multi-platform texts are no exception to this'. He outlines a five point model which requires children to be :1) listened to, 2) supported in expressing their views, 3) have their views taken into account, 4) involved in decision making processes and 5) allowed to share power and responsibility for this decision making (Shier as cited in Rutherford). Rutherford explores these questions through the ABC's dedicated public service web provision for children in Australia, but they are equally useful as guidelines in New Zealand, where producers are precariously positioned between commissioners who want commercial recruitment and funding stakeholders who require authentic participation. How do the case study websites reflect these dual objectives?

During the 1990s Seiter observed that children often actively choose the very consumerist media pleasures often proscribed by middle class parents and thus, it could be conjectured, adult public service funding agencies. She draws on Bourdieu to explore a dilemma facing all adults who attempt to interpret child audience desires (whether parents, producers or audience researchers). Adults are, by self-definition, 'double access intellectuals'. They are free to consume and celebrate consumer culture but they also have the ability to draw on democratic resources necessary for participation in authentic decision making. This returns us to questions of how children consume what is made available to them and use it in the work of identity building.

Children's media use

If popular media reports are to be believed, children are deserting old broadcasting media for the pleasures of interactive social media (The Daily Mail; Palmer). This binary of 'either or' is challenged by the actual behaviour of children. In New Zealand (Lealand and Zanker), as elsewhere (Livingstone and Drotner; Buckingham and Tingstad, 2010), television remains the top media choice for local children and the primary window through which they learn about both globally circulated popular culture and the particularities of their own cultures. Marketers also continue to value television as the prime place for promotional campaigns for films, games, toys, music and fashion (Kidscreen, 2010). At the same time, recent research demonstrates that children consume media across platforms, often at the same time (Lealand & Zanker; Kaiser; OFCOM).

One large American study in 2010 found high levels of media multitasking where children report consuming over seven hours of media a day, much of it parallel media use. Young people record that they are using another medium 'most' of the time that they are listening to music, watching television or using the computer. Media use increases substantially when American children hit the 11-14 year-old age group (Kaiser). British research in the same year (OFCOM) found that children consume 7.5 hours of media a day, much concurrently, but that television remains for them a key platform. Its access is universal and most children watch it daily. It remains the activity children would miss the most across all ages. That said, television is now forced to compete for the attention of children because of the growing presence and simultaneous use of other technologies, particularly the internet. Conversely, increased internet use appears to play a critical role in driving up interaction with other media, including television. The report states:

Interaction with television overall has declined, but interaction with programme websites has increased, no doubt influenced by simultaneous use of television and the internet.

The key devices used by children are the TV and the computer, followed by the mobile phone. Seventy-five per cent of the time that 12-15 year olds spend with media is with a TV

or computer (OFCOM). The case studies (below) explore this relationship between television viewing and their associated websites.

It is also important to locate the New Zealand case studies within the global children's media ecology, firstly in order to understand exemplars of cross promotional and online developments at companies like Nickelodeon, Disney and Cartoon Network and, secondly, because this is the highly competitive and well financed media landscape within which the New Zealand programmes are required to design their appeals for local children.

The earliest positioned and largest transnational media corporations are still considered to be the 'masters of the children's television universe'. These brands have preserved their dominant position and generated impressive profit margins even though competition has increased during recent years (Steemers). Each entertainment conglomerate employs a range of sophisticated interactivity via website nodes in order to connect their cross platform brand extensions.

Nickelodeon: a model of a multi-platform entertainment brand

As O'Reilly puts it 'The central principle behind the success of the giants born in the Web 1.0 era who have survived to lead the Web 2.0 era appears to be this, that they have embraced the power of the web to harness collective intelligence' (O'Reilly cited in Green and Jenkins). Nickelodeon, owned by Viacom's Music Television (MTV), has demonstrated this by being particularly well-positioned to expand on a global scale: the accumulation of enormous capital, marketing experience and the control of the global market have given them a tremendous competitive edge. Nickelodeon provides a useful exemplar of the emerging universe of entertainment choices which utilize 360 degree marketing to ensure user-centric experiences across all their platforms and brands. They have set the benchmark for all other children's entertainment brands.

Nickelodeon markets directly to children by harnessing parental trust in the brand. It is marketed as the world's only multi-media entertainment brand dedicated exclusively to 'kids' (Hendershot). Viacom's interactive global map illustrates that Nickelodeon has a 'global reach', with a few exceptions such as Greenland (Viacom). What the map is not designed to show is the amount of localized programming offered in various regions. The majority of Nickelodeon channels operating around the world have a strong US flavour with 75 percent of the programming comprised of Nickelodeon US originals (Sandler 65). Nickelodeon has championed 'kids rights' since its earliest days but that 'kid' has reflected the tastes and desires of children tested in the United States, or large regional markets. It currently targets children and young people 6-17 years of age with a range of entertainment choices which are designed to appeal to a universal, actively consuming 'kid with attitude' (Hendershot). Geographic and cultural dimensions are largely lost in the 'quality global branding strategy' for Nickelodeon, except when it comes to promotions and marketing. New Zealand takes a South East Asian version of Nickelodeon, which differs in some content

from the US version, but the only local content inserted into the New Zealand's feed relates to local marketing events (Lustyik & Pecora).

Nickelodeon television shows are hits around the globe. Shows like *Rugrats* and *Sponge Bob Square Pants* are given 'first window' runs on Nickelodeon channels and replays on www.nick.com. Rights are sold on consequently to terrestrial channels in New Zealand and via DVDs.

The front page of Nick.com illustrates how Viacom uses its website to cross promote its wide range of entertainment products. These now extend far beyond the 'window' of television. The brand embraces multimedia, theme parks and merchandise. Nickelodeon spinoffs include: Nickelodeon, a children's magazine based on the Nickelodeon cable channel, Nickelodeon Universe, a Nickelodeon-themed amusement park inside the Mall of America, Nickelodeon Movies, the motion picture production arm of children's cable channel Nickelodeon, originally launched in 1995, Nickelodeon studios, an operating television taping studio as well as an original attraction at Universal Studios Florida, Nickelodeon compounds (moulding substances sold as toys), and Nickelodeon animation studios, the channel's animation arm (Wikipedia accessed February 20, 2011).

Nickelodeon Kids and Family Virtual Worlds Group develops and manages all virtual world initiatives for kids, preteens, teens and families for the Nickelodeon Kids & Family Group. For example Neopets (www.neopets.com) targets 8-17 year through a game environment where the goal is to take care of virtual pets. Players earn virtual currency (neopoints) to pay for their pet's upkeep through playing games and entering contests. Members adopt and care for a virtual companion who accompanies them through an array of games, communities and fantastical lands. It claims to be the stickiest² website in existence for children. Pet Pet Park (www.petpetpark.com) is another spin off site where members adopt animals.

Disney and other children's entertainment brands develop films, programming and entertainment webs in similar cross promotional ways. They promote their entertainment through free to air reruns, on dedicated pay channels on the Sky platform as well as through richly interactive 'free' websites. Websites cross promote content and deliver audiences between the corporate stable of entertainment products. In that way each corporation can be said to create a self-referential galaxy of intertextual content. This is the gold standard for website design for children's properties in the minds of New Zealand producers and their web teams.

'Stealth marketing' to children through interactive entertainment

The proliferation of niche children's and youth television networks has enabled child audiences to be targeted directly in ways that were not possible before.

Because children and youth are heavy media users and early adopters of newer technologies, media marketing and advertising campaigns using both television and newer media are efficient pathways into children's homes and lives (Calvert 207).

Some free sites (like Nick.com) market Nickelodeon trademarked characters and franchises without advertising because they can deliver quick growth, help keep movie franchises alive and instil brand loyalty in a generation of new customers. But Nickelodeon websites are also highly desirable to those marketing a range of other products to children and function as large scale 'advergaming' promoting transmedia intertextuality and third party advertising interests (Grimes). In particular they offer prime marketing opportunities to food and drink companies because they fall outside current broadcasting regulations around marketing to children. The traditional broadcasting line between advertising and editorial is erased in many entertainment websites targeting children. Advertising and marketing to children on the web differs profoundly from familiar television spot ads, on set product placement and sponsorship deals.

The internet has also opened new avenues for obtaining information about consumers. The strategies employed in gathering and using information about children are considered by many commentators in the USA to be deceptive and highly problematic.

The 'leakiness' and interconnectedness of websites enables two things. First there is the opportunity to integrate advertising into the entertainment strands themselves. This is most apparent in the ways that food and drink companies leverage brand recognition through association with entertainment brands. Second the ease of 'click-through' entices child 'audiences' into entirely separate branded websites which masquerade as entertainment. Those marketing to children 'are employing a panoply of digital marketing practices across a variety of platforms—social networks, videogames, mobile services, online videos, instant-messaging, and even virtual worlds' (Montgomery and Chester S19).

Major brands, including Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Burger King and KFC, target children by creating 'relationship synergies' with entertainment brands. These often involve integration within storylines or games. So, for example, Neopets.com (Nickelodeon) is a 'free' site supported by advertising which is often integrated into other content. Food companies like McDonald's Nestle and Frito-Lay sponsor various activities on Neopets. Children are encouraged to buy Oreo cookies to feed their virtual pets. Seiter, in 2004, found that children were not aware of what was advertising and what was not on the Neopets site. Advergaming works particularly well for snack, beverage, and other 'impulse' food products. As critics put it, 'everytime children spend time on the page' (containing food or soft drink logos or product placement for example) ' they are spending time with that brand, thus increasing brand awareness' (Montgomery and Chester).

This extends further into the viral marketing enabled by social networking:

‘My Media Generation’ are more receptive to advertising that is tailored to their specific needs and inserted into these personalized media experiences. Digital marketers have developed a variety of techniques to encourage young users to communicate with their friends about a brand or a service, creating subtle forms of product endorsement that are spread (like a digital-age chain letter) to a vast population of recipients (Montgomery and Chester S21).

So, for example, iCarly is an American Sitcom shot at Nickelodeon in Los Angeles. It has its own ‘webshow’ www.icarly.com ‘designed by iCarly with her two best friends Sam and Freddie’. On the front page a bubble above a screen invites you to ‘send this video to a friend’. It is a fast paced skateboarding item where skateboarders and other ultra-sports kids disappear in puffs of coloured smoke before one of them ‘breaks through’ into a tropical jungle and opens a ‘well-earned’ Fruit Shoot drink. At this point you are invited to visit www.fruitshoot.com, a branded site constructed by a drink company. This website is typical of many advergaming sites that offer games of skill, both animated and video of children demonstrating as to friends. Such advergaming techniques are designed to ‘create or enhance branded environments that foster user loyalty’ (Calvert 208).

Montgomery and Chester have identified six key defining features of the digital media environment and interactive marketing: ubiquitous connectivity, personalization, peer-to-peer networking, engagement, immersion, and content creation. It doesn’t matter if it is the home entertainment brand that utilises these tools, or a food brand choosing to associate itself with that entertainment brand.

Commercial messages in the digital online environment can be said to ‘no longer interrupt programming; rather, marketing strategies are routinely woven into entertainment, gaming and everyday social relationships, and are often purposefully disguised’ (Montgomery and Chester S23).

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, there are advertising rules for broadcasters. The children’s television advertising codes have strict requirements around spot advertising, sponsorship and product placement as well as the use of heroes of the young for endorsement. There are further constraints around food advertising to children. However New Zealand websites targeting children have no such constraints under advertising codes. How do producers negotiate this uncertain territory?

Consuming communities

Wasko argues that content on some corporate websites targeting children can be interpreted as a 'training ground for capitalist consumer culture'. Many sites offer 'avatars' that children can tailor before playing within a gaming or collecting environments. One example of such a site is ourWorld, <http://w01.ourworld.com/>. Its tag line is 'Play games, meet people, look good'. You are then directed to 'select your look' from a range of girl and boy avatars which you can customise once you have entered ourWorld. OurWorld greets newcomers with

Welcome to ourWorld! Choose from over 100 puzzle, strategy or action games, watch YouTube with your friends, or hang out in a nightclub. Dress up your avatar in one of our 3,000 clothing items or decorate your virtual apartment with a selection of our wild furniture.

The website case studies

The global websites discussed above present both simultaneously inspiration and challenges to those designing websites for New Zealand children, both in terms of budgets and in terms of their degree of embeddedness in consumer culture. How do New Zealand television producers and their website teams create websites for local child 'viewers' when those same children have easy access to deep-pocketed corporate websites, chockerblock with attractions designed to engage children's attention, as well as signifiers of cool global public spaces for children?

Websites associated with the popular children's television programmes *What Now?* and *Sticky TV* were sampled late in 2010 and then again in the week of February 2011 as the new television programming year launched. Interviews were conducted with television producers and web teams in February 2011. A third case study of a programme website targeting an older 'tween' audience (*The Erin Simpson Show*) was dropped as a result of the February 22nd earthquake in Christchurch where the production facilities are based.

What Now? is the flagship TVNZ programme for children and marked its 30 year anniversary in 2011. The television show has huge ratings, not just within its target audience of 6-12 year olds but young people and even nostalgic parents. The producer joked that, just like *The Teletubbies* once did, it has a strong Sunday morning following amongst jaded Saturday night clubbers. In other words it is a New Zealand tradition. It shows on Sunday morning between 8.00am and 10.00am. *What Now?* was shifted from Saturday to this Sunday slot as the result of a stoush between commissioner and funder over its commercial worth. Sunday mornings are commercial free, which obliges the funder to fund it at a higher rate than would be necessary if it were played during a commercial Saturday morning.

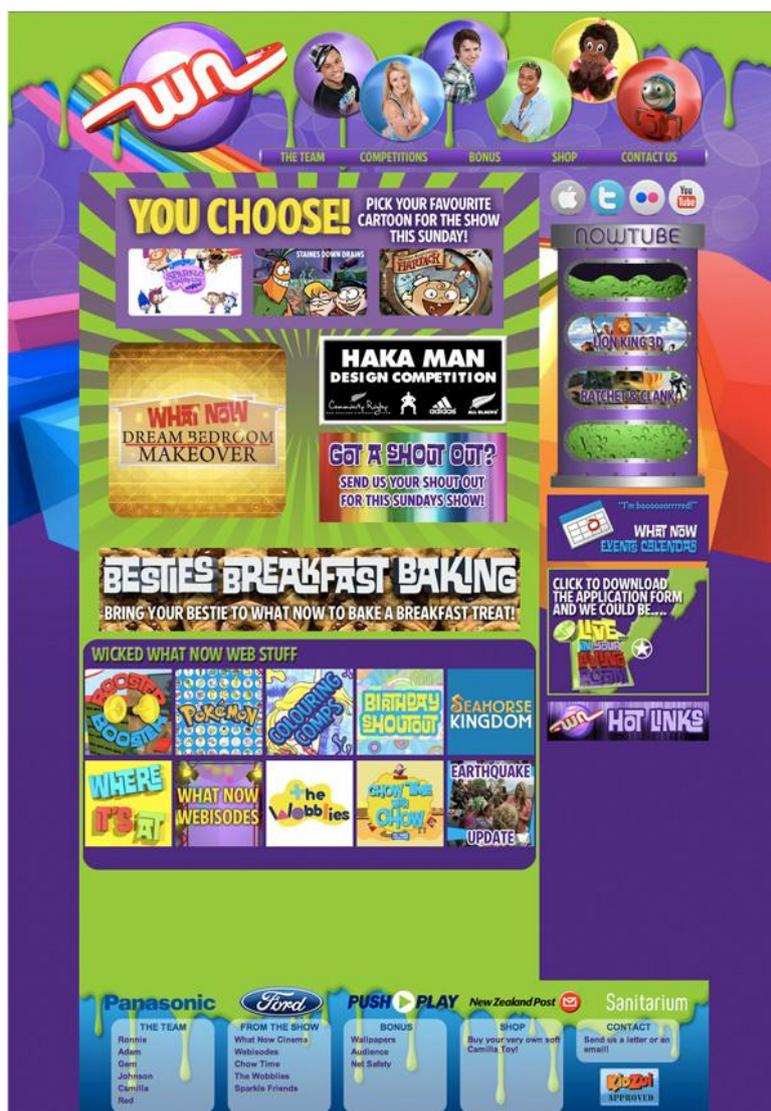


Figure 1: Screenshot of the front page of www.whatnow.tv (accessed October 2011)

It is commissioned by TVNZ for TV1 but the programme rights are owned by Whitebait TV, a production house. As a consequence the Executive Producer owns the website and its URL. The website has a modest funding stream from the television funder NZ On Air which, according to the producer, now means that it can be coded as a programme element instead of being subsumed under other elements of the show, as it once was. The site, in common with other children's sites, offers generic content like wallpapers, blogs, photos, access to studio content, applications to be in the studio audience, competition details and entry forms and field elements starring competition winners and fans.

The web administrator Kerry du Pont is responsible for attending production meetings, scanning scripts and designing the web links to mirror on-air material as closely as he can. He is keenly aware that if there is not tight coordination things go off the rails for both live studio show and websites. He says that the audience notice immediately if there is 'a

disconnect' because many fans are online as they watch. He tracks responses to the shows on the web as they are broadcast which provides instant feedback to the producers as to what is working and what is not for the audience.

The web statistics indicate that it is an impressively sticky website with 6 minutes 29 seconds being the average time spent on the website during which at least 6 pages are perused. Podcasts via i-tunes are increasing. Kieran notes the growth of Twitter.

What Now? sees Twitter users as low as 8 years old... The majority of them would be around 13-14 years old. The main reason Twitter has taken off is because the telco's have made it easy to integrate it into texting. So, kids/tweens/teens can easily update their Twitter from their cellphone... then archive all their Tweets so there's a running storyline of their life.

'Whatnownz', the YouTube channel, is growing with over 1,000 subscribers. YouTube views are popular and clips from shows as far back as the 1980s, many digitized by past viewers from VHS tapes, are uploaded by fans. The proportion of boys and girls using YouTube are reversed from its website, with 71% of YouTube viewers male and 29% female. This needs to be kept in perspective however as apparently 25% of these are males aged 45-54!

On Saturday mornings the web traffic is watched closely. Kieran the web administrator for *What Now?* says 'You should watch the traffic. It is incredible. You can see what kids like and what they don't like and if something is not there you hear all about it'. The producer Reuben Davison puts the amount of traffic in perspective. 'If you had 60,000 phone ins you would need 600 people on phones to answer viewers'.

Competitions on the website are carefully plotted as 'weekly', 'monthly' and 'seasonally'. Once again, web traffic demonstrates whether the team have designed an appealing concept. One member of the on-air presenting team is responsible for responding to emails, twitter and other tracks contacts from viewers in order to keep a relationship between the studio team and the website team. The team notes, however, that dedicated programme to website flows need to be kept in perspective with direct traffic from frequent users accounting for 23% of hits. Search engines direct the largest proportion at 65% while 10% come from referred sites.



Figure 2: Screenshot of the front page of www.four.co.nz/stickytv (accessed October 2011)

The producer and the web team are aware that the non-commercial positioning of the television show on Sunday mornings brings with it constraints on commercial sponsorship and linkages on the site. Sponsors are kept squeaky clean, with products targeting adults such as Panasonic, Ford, Push-Play (a fitness initiative of Sport and Recreation New Zealand), NZ Post and Sanitarium (breakfast cereals). For example, Sanitarium sponsor the annual Weet-bix Tryathlon, a nationwide sports event which is featured in both the show and on the website.

Sticky TV is a weekday afterschool programme. It is commissioned by TV3, part of the Australian owned radio and television company Mediaworks. It targets a slightly younger audience than *What Now?* In 2010 the producer signalled a ‘cosy’ and safe brand by basing the ‘club’ in an old suburban villa with a garden, though the set has changed in 2011 to something less ‘cosy’ along with a corporate makeover of the Mediaworks website. This, as shall be described, creates a ‘disconnect’ between the gentle culture of the show and the adult focus of the Mediaworks’ website. Mary Phillips, executive producer of *Sticky TV*, is early childhood trained. The target audience for *Sticky TV* is 5-12 years, but it has a strong following through to late teens, and many families watch it together. The programme content breaks into two audience groups: an ‘Earlybird’ section at 3pm targeting 8 and under with no advertising, and ‘regular’ commercial viewing from 3.30pm. On average last year 300,000 New Zealanders aged 5 to 14 watched *Sticky TV* per month and 1,200,000 aged 5+ viewed per month.

The producer uses television to ‘scaffold school learning in a relaxed afterschool club environment’. Her message to kids is ‘it doesn’t matter that you come from the sticks with no parental support (or money), you can rise above it’. The emphasis is on the rhythms of family life. ‘We love it when they upload photos of the whole Samoan family in their kitchen eating fish curry from a recipe demonstrated in the “\$20.00 cooking challenge”’. She argues that entertainment *are* the same thing and that there is a hunger for cultural role models, family

time and safe cosiness, rather than 'glittering marketing stuff'. 'Like the good old days, clubs and making things. Why wouldn't kids want that now? They tell us they do!'

Thirty thousand access the programme via website on-demand episodes, and 20,000-30,000 fans visit the website per month. Visitors remain on the site from three to five minutes, which is considered a satisfactory sticky length of time. The most viewed pages relate to the television show: competitions, 'Fun Stuff', 'Stuff to do' and episode views.

Assistant producer Chloe Gray describes how website content is closely tied to the weekly show. The website was once a low key home grown affair paid for 'on the side'. It used an odd assortment of fonts, page templates and colours but it worked for children according to web statistics. In 2011 the website was relaunched as part of Mediaworks' reprogramming of TV3 and TV4. A much more groomed corporate looking website now sits within the Media Works site and shares the banner promotions for Mediaworks radio stations and prime time imports like *The Simpsons*, as well as adult television programming. Programme replays for the show are also now integrated into the TV4 channel site. This means that anyone wanting to access past shows must now sit through a Channel 4 promotion. On Friday 11th of March 2011 this consisted of a branding statement for the channel which declared 'We do revenge, we do sexy, we do fitness...we don't do tree huggers'; clearly the branding message was not intended for children.

Fans of the show can enter the familiar roster of web competitions with prizes, apply to be on the show, write on the blog, watch episodes or go to the 'Stuff to do' and make something that the presenters have demonstrated on the show. When a presenter cooks something the recipe appears on the web. Activities are collected and archived for use. There is a dedicated section called 'ways to keep in touch'. The 'Sticky VIP club' has a monthly electronic newsletter with 'lots of behind the scenes 'goss' about the local stars of the show (a Pacifica mix) and exclusive competitions'. This again plays on the importance of insider status and belonging for this age group. The programme has built a big following on Facebook (only permitted on parent pages) and on Twitter by offering these interactive platforms for the viewers. The activity increased surprisingly rapidly when *Sticky TV* fans were given a chance to contribute their opinions on who should become a new presenter. Teddy's (The Sticky TV dog) Facebook page was started in late 2009. He had just over 1,000 fans by the beginning of 2010 and now has almost 45,000. This page grows at around 100 people a day. Teddy's Facebook page has uploaded photos and videos of him in different locations. Fans leave messages, get into discussions with others and love to feel that they are communicating directly with the presenters and Teddy. Chloe Gray says that the team are still astonished that when they give Teddy a status update 'straight away kids "like" the status and leave a whole lot of comments'. The explosion of this aspect of the website has surprised the entire team. Children and families upload their own photos and at the

beginning of 2011 there were around 800 photos of pets that fans had uploaded because they 'love them as much as Teddy'.

The *Sticky TV* Twitter page has grown steadily. It was started up in late 2009 and had about 60 followers by the beginning of 2010. At the beginning of 2011 it had almost 3,700 followers. Presenters twitter extensively. They write their own messages, sometimes during the show, and the team 'get heaps of direct messages and mentions back'. Chloe believes that the page is popular because 'we tie in the tweets with what's going on- on the show, with the presenters and around the country'. Twitter is a powerful means of creating intimacy. The team also send out teasers, jokes from the presenters, and photos. It is a critical part of the 'liveness' and accessibility of the show. She goes on to say:

Twitter is pretty wonderful- you would be surprised how many kids are on there. Kids are all over Twitter- following their favourite celebs and sending them messages and connecting with friends too. I have also noticed that the more followers you draw, the more cool factor you have- and people take the numbers very seriously... there are even programmes that can track this for you and tell you how many and who has recently 'unfollowed' you.

Both Facebook and Twitter remain active over summer while the programme is off air. Producers use it as a means of keeping in touch with their audience. It also enables the team to tease the content being evolved for the next season of the programme. 'Now we are using them for counting down till we are back on-air, what it will be like and who the new presenter will be'.

Commercial content on the old *Sticky TV* website was minimal and many of the products marketed on the 2010 show fell into the category of sponsorship deals that stretched the budget, like gardening and cooking equipment. The feel has changed in 2011 now the *Sticky TV* website sits within the marketing website for Mediaworks television and shares that site's adult cross media promotional load.

Case study conclusions

The two websites associated with local children's programmes in New Zealand draw on the Nickelodeon model of appealing to children as citizens (though critically as *local* citizens, not *global* citizens) and consumers. Each offers generic content like wallpapers, blogs, photos, access to studio content, applications to be in the studio audience, competition details and entry forms and field elements starring competition winners and fans. Children can be viewed as communities of interest within these websites; they are both drawn on as a source of formative production intelligence in building a commercial branding strategy as well as being addressed as future citizens.

Children's television programmes have always had enthusiastic clubs, and pre web received bags of fan mail, but now social media enable direct and instant interactivity. Children and families now participate in the show on a range of levels. At a pragmatic level webs are where viewers enrol and participate in competitions, the team responds to audience requests, replays of missed items on television shows can be viewed and where photos and stories can be uploaded. Website traffic demonstrates children's hunger for ongoing contact with each show's stars and guests. This feeds into a sense of 'club ownership' about what goes on, both on screen and behind the screen. The websites keep brands alive between seasons and social networking tools are valued by producers as formative research tools for the television show.

Each website fosters playfulness between child viewers and the production team. Children contribute content and reversion other content via social media, often with an intensity not expected by the production team. Producers solicit ideas from viewers, test new ideas, ask for content and market upcoming content on websites. They use social networking tools to talk to presenters, gossip about content on the television programme, make suggestions for better content and share new information gleaned from other websites and networks. Children are also enthusiastic prosumers who create their own media content which they upload to websites.

Website visitors provide formative feedback for producers on the effectiveness of television content. They respond to content in real time and suggest new content through a range of social networking tools including emails, chat, Facebook and Twitter. Communities build rapidly around the favourite shared elements. In such ways it can be argued that the New Zealand children who have access to broadband are being heard and seen more on screen via pictures shared and a wider selection of personal stories told than would ever be possible via television. It is less clear that the websites can be said to foster authentic participation in terms of shaping content for children. Participative power is carefully channelled as, for example, via the competition to choose a new presenter on *Sticky TV*. Participation is valued largely as a means of recruitment of new users, but it can be equally argued that it gave children a sense of agency and involvement in the look of 'their' show.

The rapid uptake of Twitter, Facebook and chat indicates that computers and mobile technologies are becoming taken for granted nodes of communication, at least for children with access to internet. Unconnected children remain outside this online club. The term 'audience' to describe children's behaviour within the children's entertainment brands of *What Now?* and *Sticky TV* is problematic. When the 'mothership' of the television show is central to website structure and traffic the producers continue to talk about website visitors as 'audiences'. This is particularly the case when hits in real time occur during studio live productions and web statistics appear to offer production teams a visual running commentary on audience engagement. Web administrators, by contrast, describe visitors

purely as 'hits', a far more slippery term. Web designers are interested in how traffic arrives to a website. Is it direct traffic? Hits may come from random searches completely unconnected with the 'motherhip' programme. What comes from Search engines? What come from referring sites? Traffic sources help map the wider ecology of the web. Both production teams think strategically about links from their websites to external sites.

They limit sponsorship associations to items that target adults like fast moving grocery items or cars. The *Sticky TV* website chooses not to refer 'viewers' outwards to online consumer products and popular culture within its own site, but it is embedded within the marketing flows of a commercial corporate website Media Works, which creates confusion. The *What Now?* producer, whilst careful to juggle sponsorship in order to be trusted by parents, does direct 'viewers' to commercial content and cross promotion to other 'cool' websites. But it is fair to say that neither team exploit the web's click through marketing powers, unlike the intense cross platform and product marketing evident in cited global examples. That line appears to blur for websites associated with shows targeting older child audiences. For example the sister show to *What Now?*, the 'tween' targeted *Erin Simpson Show* (targeting 10-14 year olds), draws heavily on the cultural capital of popular culture. For example, in February 2011 it included a fashion section where branded click through led visitors to raunchy photos on the clothing website for Diesel.

Conclusion

So what is the emerging 'moral economy' of locally produced websites for children in New Zealand? Do the websites foster authentic participation in terms of shaping content for children, or encourage commercial recruitment of users? The role of the producer as a cultural intermediary between child audiences, corporate and funders proves to be an ambiguous task in New Zealand.

Programme websites targeting children in New Zealand cannot aspire to be the expensive walled gardens of non-commercial public space for children in the sense that the ABC in Australia has attempted. Rather, they offer a fluid local space which offers a mix of public service content and popular culture which New Zealand children can draw on, and contribute to, in their work of identity building.

Producers, as cultural intermediaries, adopt basic templates from corporate global models but graft on local signifiers and information related to the show: gossip about the production, locations to be visited, local events, cooking competitions and other craft events that connect online fans through the daily television show.

It is clear from the evidence that New Zealand children respond enthusiastically to these modest indigenous online opportunities, even when they have access to well marketed and funded global corporate media websites like Nickelodeon, with their sophisticated

advergaming and other intertextual pleasures. The sense of 'liveness' is critical for local sites, whether through engagement with stars and content on the television show, or through the ability to upload and share indigenous content (family pictures, local stories, school boasts and dares) with fellow 'viewers'.

On one hand the relationship between audiences and producers appears to be commercial: designed to foster audience loyalty by enabling relationships with their stars and extending opportunities to interact with the content, thus increasing audience reach. But it is a curbed commercialism that is wary of 'click through' connections to marketing sites, unlike the integrated marketing strategies of Nickelodeon and other global corporate players. On the other hand producers talk of their websites in public service terms as local public places where diverse New Zealand children are given speaking rights and agency to share through photos, tweets and stories what it means to be a 'kiwi kid'.

This fragile balance between local civic pride and popular culture will be challenged as the relentless pressure on small free-to-air commercial channels intensifies. Sponsorship deals, product placement and forms of stealth marketing will become increasingly attractive. Future field work will explore the third intended case study, a website targeting tweens audiences. *The Erin Simpson Show* targets the 9-14 year old age group who, according to market research, are attracted to global brands and popular consumer culture. Does the success of such a show depend on commercial partnerships because, in the words of the executive producer Janine Morrell, 'you need to serve young people where they are found in popular culture'? Where does this leave the public task of 'developing content with the interest, perspectives and views of local children as citizens'? There is fear that tweens are a whole new challenge because '...they don't tell you what they do want, but they do tell you what they don't like and turn off' (Zanker, 2011).

Another area worthy of further examination is the emerging political economy of national publicly funded children's websites like these, and how they relate to the wider media ecology. Who decides how self-contained such public sites will be, or leaky in terms of playful linkages to external marketing sites? How do issues around ownership and creative rights shape the environment through which websites are accessed? In this study one producer owned rights to the show and website (*What Now?*). This has enabled her to draw boundaries with clarity between internal content and links to the wider webscape. By contrast the producer of *Sticky TV*, despite her committed public service vision, finds her website embedded in the corporate Mediaworks website. Entry into her past programmes in February 2011 was only gained through the bustle of the adult market place.

Biographical note:

Ruth Zanker designs and teaches courses for future media professionals at the New Zealand Broadcasting School in Christchurch. She draws on critical political economic frames in order

to explore the emerging media ecology in New Zealand for children and young people and, in turn, researches how young people respond to that media content. Contact: ruth.zanker@cpit.ac.nz.

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Interviews conducted with:

Mary Phillips, Executive producer Pickled Possum Productions

Chloe Gray, Assistant Producer *Sticky TV* (Pickled Possum Productions)

Reuben Davidson, Producer *What Now?*

Kerry du Pont, Director for *What Now?* and *The Erin Simpson Show*. Former web administrator.

Kieran Grainger, web administrator for *What Now?* and *The Erin Simpson Show*.

Notes

¹ 'Viewers' is a popular contraction of the terms 'viewers' and 'users' that has gained circulation in relation to interactive media. <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/viewers>

² A 'sticky' website is one that holds attention. It is an important quality for web designers.