



TV/Radio Talk

Coalition appealing for better children's TV

By Barbara Kessler
DALLAS MORNING NEWS

On public television, Big Bird's been around so long he'd be losing his feathers about now in real life.

In the rest of TV land, though, the history of educational programming has not been so lively or so consistent.

Two years ago, a watchdog group caught some stations trying to pass off reruns of *The Jetsons* and *Leave It to Beaver* as meeting their obligations under the federal Children's Television Act of 1990.

Today, the picture has improved with the success of shows such as the relatively new live-action science program *Beakman's World* (CBS) and the Fox network's *The Fox Cubhouse*, aimed at preschoolers.

But a coalition of groups led by the Center for Media Education in Washington says that commercial television still has hours to go and time slots to conquer in its efforts to provide more edifying fare for the 2-to-16-year-old set.

The coalition, which includes the national PTA, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Association of School Administrators and others, is issuing a new appeal to the Federal Communications Commission for stricter guidelines to enforce the Children's Television Act.

The Campaign for Kids' TV, as it has dubbed itself, wants commercial

television to offer more and better programming for children, who are powerfully affected by the medium, said **Jeff Chester**, executive director of the Center for Media Education.

"This electronic nanny is a bit out of control. It's feeding them all kinds of horrible stuff and the diet is not healthy," Chester said. "It's now time we tighten the rules of employment and say, '... You need to be more responsible.'"

The National Association of Broadcasters intends to fight more regulation. The organization, which represents the nation's 1,100 broadcast TV outlets, says its members have made reasonable strides in providing educational shows for children and will continue to make improvements.

Since the act was passed in 1990, the amount of educational television aimed at youngsters has increased by 81 percent — from an average of about two hours a week to 3½ hours a week, said NAB spokesman **Doug Wills**.

"Most broadcasters are taking this to heart," he said. "So for groups to complain that broadcasters are not making an effort, those groups are engaging in hyperbole to further their own cause."

Further regulation, he said, could jeopardize the stations' First Amendment freedoms and their

free-market right to make profits.

The Center for Media Education, however, considers the new shows to be the products of public pressure for change and therefore believes that only public pressure — reinforced by tighter FCC rules — will assure that broadcasters don't backslide.

"It's when pressure like this is brought to bear that broadcasters do respond in a responsible way. Absent the pressure, they'll just ... do what's easiest," said **Ellen Wartella**, dean of the College of Communication at the University of Texas in Austin and an advisory-board member of the center.

The center wants the FCC to endorse an industry standard of seven hours a week, or one hour a day, of children's educational programming, instead of settling for the three-plus hours a week.

The coalition also wants the FCC to enunciate what it considers "educational and informative," closing the loopholes that allowed some stations to count episodes of *The Flintstones* as meeting children's educational needs.

The group believes the Children's Television Act is too vague in asking only that stations provide more children's programming, without clearly defining what that means.

Finally, the coalition wants to limit stations to counting programs

aired after 8 a.m. and before 11 p.m. Eastern time, when children are likely to be watching.

A 1992 center study found that some stations had fudged on content and time slots when it came to fulfilling their legal obligations. In addition, some stations had simply reworked descriptions of existing entertainment programs when it came time to show the FCC that they were meeting the requirement.

The question of children's programming has been before the FCC for the last 18 months, since the commission began a public inquiry. After hearings in June, the FCC has continued to take public comment on the issue.

The Campaign for Kids' TV push is timed to influence the FCC before it meets next month. Then, the five-member commission is expected to consider proposed new rules that could strengthen the way the act is enforced.

Members of the campaign are hoping that a nod from U.S. Rep. **Jack Fields** (R., Texas), who is expected to become the new chairman of the House telecommunications subcommittee, will push their agenda forward.

So far, Fields, 42, has said very little on the topic, and he won't say much until after his committee leadership is officially decided, said **Bryan Wirwicz**, an aide.



Paul Zaloom stars as Beakman on "Beakman's World," the successful live-action science discovery program on CBS.

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