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Do we let television determine the future of Thai children?



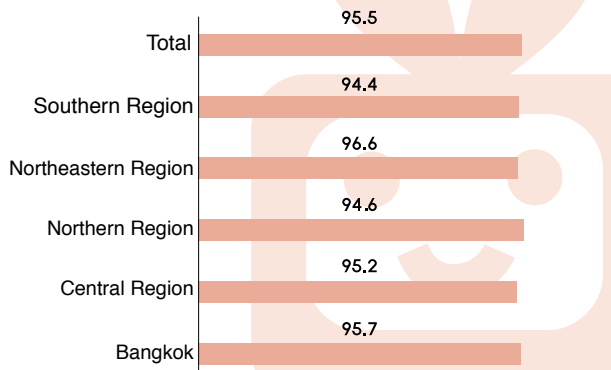
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Television is an amazing communication device. The user inserts a plug, presses the “on” button, and images appear on the screen from every corner of the earth. However, the benefits television brings depend on the content created by the program producers, especially in the case of children, who cannot judge the value of the material they are watching.

Television has an enormous influence on the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors of people of all ages. Because television is so ubiquitous, the quality of the message is vital. Television should ideally develop people’s minds. Low-quality television is like a toxin that misleads people and weakens society. This is especially true now that 95.5% of Thai households own a television (see chart).

Television plays an increasingly important role in the education of children and young people. If adults continue to ignore the risks associated with television, there will inevitably be consequences for the nation’s future adults.

Percent of Thai households with a television, by region, 2003



Source: Research on TV Media 2003, Report, National Statistics Office, 2003

Using television to educate children

In 2003, Assumption University, the Family Network Foundation, the Children's Development Foundation, and the Office for Health Promotion undertook a joint research project on the "Impact of Television on Children and Young Persons." They found that most children spend the majority of their leisure time watching TV. Watching TV is the most popular family activity, carried out by 98% of households. From Monday to Friday, the average child spends 3.5 hours per day watching television. This increases to 5.5 hours per day on Saturday and Sunday. The most popular time for watching television is from 4 pm to 8 pm, and the second most popular is from 8 pm to 10 pm.

The study analyzed the content of TV programs on the five free TV channels in August 2005, at the peak viewing time, 4 pm–10 pm. Incidents involving sex, violence, and discrimination were found to be extremely common. Channels 3 and 7 broadcast the most soap operas with 1,470 and 1,480 minutes per week, respectively. Soap operas generally emphasized relationships and revenge. Those broadcast between 4 pm and 8 pm were more violent than those broadcast between 8 pm and 10 pm.

Between 1993 and 2003, the number of TV programs aiming to provide education to children, young people, and families decreased by 4.75%.

In July and August 2003, TV programs for children accounted for only 45 hours 22 minutes, or 4.94%, of the almost 1,000 hours of broadcasting.

If children are allowed to watch TV alone, they are often strongly affected. They can begin to regard violence as normal. In addition, a violent incident on television can frighten a child for several weeks.

Temporary improvement

Concern about the influence of media on children led to a Cabinet Resolution on November 4, 2003 stipulating guidelines on children's programs on state television and radio stations. The resolution requires that "10-15% of radio and TV broadcast time be for children, young persons, and families. There must be at least half an hour between 4 pm and 6:30 pm and at least one hour from 4 pm to 10 pm."

Television production companies, foreign program importers, TV stations, sponsors and agencies modified their television schedules to comply with the Cabinet Resolution.

Channel 3 broadcast the Thung Saeng Tawan and Nong Mai Rai Borisut documentary programs about children's and young people's lives, and Dao Achariya, a game show for children. Channel 5 launched the Su Puea Mae (Fight for Mum) series, Darun Dharma (Morals for Young People) and World Discovery. Channel 7 launched the Ja Ting Ja cartoon, Krob Krua Onlaweng, variety show Por Krua Tua Noi and Kling Wai Kon Por Sorn Wai. Channel 9 had the Super Jew, and Tosakan Dek game shows, and the Bandit Noi and Poed Lok Wai Son documentary programs. ITV had Wai Son Khon Mahasachan and Hed Hunsu. All of these, according to Dr. Wilasinee Phiphitkul, a lecturer in the Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University and a scholar member of the Project on Media Research and Monitoring for a Good Society, met the guidelines for quantity, though not for quality.

However, after a short time, television schedules were revised, and many children's programs were dropped. The period after 4 pm, which was supposed to include children's programming, was once again dominated by soap operas and game shows.

TV4Kids – A More Positive Result from the Cabinet Resolution

A more positive outcome from the Cabinet Resolution of November 4, 2003 was TV4Kids, an organization that produces and collects research on television programs for children, young people, and families. The objective of TV4Kids is to address the problems that television poses for Thai society.

TV4Kids seeks participation from all sectors of society. It uses networks of people, including television professionals, to monitor and develop television programs. It also produces policy recommendations. Its website www.tv4kids.org disseminates research findings and information, news, articles, and interviews relating to television. It provides groups with an interest in children's television with a forum for presenting their views.

Mr. Ittipol Pritprasong, the researcher of TV4Kids, cites some major obstacles to the development of children's programs. For example, he claims that people rely too much on government regulations and policies, that academics and producers of children's programs misunderstand the business sector, and that people trying to develop suitable programs for children, young persons, and families work independently, without proper coordination. Instead, the various stakeholders need to work together in order to succeed.

Ratings and Profits: The Reason Children's Television Programs have Disappeared

Television companies regard the production of children's television programs as commercially dubious. Children's television is difficult to produce and difficult to sell. Television programs must compete to find commercial sponsors, and sponsors are generally not interested in programs for children.

Because of the low incomes that children's programs generate, it is difficult to find money to pay for equipment, studies, and fees. High-quality children's programs are expensive to make. The income rarely justifies the expense.

Samosorn Pueng Noi, a program that was very popular among Thais aged 10-20, is a good example of a program that was unable to survive. The program was unable to find a commercial sponsor, but still paid the same tax as other programs. Producers of television programs hope only to survive not to make large profits.

Mr. Wira Suwannachot, director of the Thai Youth News Center, and former producer of children's programs Nu Di Mi Rueang Lao and Jiu Jaew Jo Lok says that children's programs cannot survive commercially. Although his programs had reasonable ratings, no companies were interesting in sponsoring them, and broadcast fees were very high. Another one of his programs has recently been cancelled after four years of production.

Many people have argued that the production of television programs for children and young people should receive assistance from the government. The government needs to provide financial support, to introduce regulations on timing of programs, and to give tax concessions. If television is totally determined by market forces, then television programs for kids will never eventuate.

Proposed Changes to the Rating Process

In Thailand, television programs and movies are subject to the Act on Prevention and Suppression of Obscene Material Distribution and Trade. The criteria for approval are social and state security. For business, the main criterion for broadcasting a program is ratings. Measurement of ratings is done by a reputable international company. High ratings are like oxygen they are crucial to survival.

Doubts can be raised about the ratings process, as the surveys may not cover all population groups. In particular, the procedure of asking adults about the popularity of children's programs is highly dubious.

Thai society needs to find a new way of rating television programs. The new method should rate programs in terms of their quality, which would surely lead to higher-quality television.

The New Hope: ETV

One bright spot for struggling television producers and parents concerned with children's programs is a new mega project being run by the Ministry of Education. In collaboration with the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (THPF) and the Media for Children Network, the Ministry of Education is launching the ETV free television station, concentrating on educational programs.

The Ministry of Education and THPF selects organizations that are eligible for support. It also lobbies for other long-term measures that may lead to the establishment of a sponsorship fund and tax concessions.

The program schedule is broken into four parts, based on age groups. Programs screened between 6:30 am and 8:00 am are aimed at 3-5 year old children; programs screened between 3:00 pm and 4:30 pm are aimed at small children; those screened between 5:00 pm and 6:00 pm are aimed at 6-12 year olds; and those screened between 6:00 pm and 10:00 pm are aimed at young people and families. Between 10:00 am to 1:00 pm, some material will be re-broadcast.

Since ETV is managed by the Ministry of Education, the aim is for children to watch programs outside school hours, though children may also watch programs at school when, for instance, they are waiting for their parents. ETV is broadcast on Channel 96 of UBC, through local cable stations, through satellites, or via broadband at www.etvthai.tv. The variety of formats increases access to ETV. However, it is important to promote the channel among parents.

Mr. Soontorn Promrattanapong, director of the Education Technology Center, which runs ETV, states that ETV programs are provided by THPF, imported from abroad, and produced by the station. The contents include English language, Thai language, science, and history, with the aim of broadening children's knowledge and experience.

Many children dream of having access to good-quality television programs. To achieve this, coordination between adults, with participation for children, is necessary. Programs with appropriate messages will help children develop properly, so that in the future they can create a strong society. ETV is an important step towards this goal, and it deserves close attention.

