

UCSD communication specialist sheds light on kids' tv and the fascination with superheroes

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Media Contact: Dolores Davies, (619) 534-5994 or ddavies@ucsd.edu

Why is talk about TV superheroes forbidden at a Montessori school? Why would a mother feel guilty about watching Star Trek in front of her four-year old child? Why do girls often lose out to their big brothers in the fight for time on the family computer?

According to Ellen Seiter, a professor of communication at the University of California, San Diego, and an authority on the cultural impacts of TV programming for children, cultural biases held by educators and parents about certain types of programming hinder our ability to understand important relationships between children and popular TV shows and their characters.

Seiter is the author of the recently released book "Television and New Media Audiences," (Oxford Television, 1999), and has also recently produced a CD-ROM, "HeroTV," (1999, South Moon Press) aimed at increasing awareness of the significance of superhero stories for children among parents and educators. Seiter is also the author of the acclaimed 1993 book, "Sold Separately: Parents & Children in Consumer Culture."

"HeroTV lets kids and adults make their own classic superhero adventures, costumes, toys, and production budgets," said Seiter. "During play they see the common elements that make up children's television today. They can test their knowledge of kids' TV through the ages, try out classroom and home activities, and learn to talk about violence, consumption, and the media."

The HeroTV CD has been called an unusual response to TV superheroes, which are often critiqued by educators as being too violent for young children. Viewing or even discussion of many superhero shows, such as Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and X-Men, is banned by some teachers and parents, in spite of the fact that children, especially boys, continue to be drawn to them.

Action adventure stories featuring superhero characters and the various weapons deployed in their fight to save the world from villains form a big part of children's media worlds. Popular characters -- and their weapons -- are introduced in the classroom through play, through show and tell, and through the use of videotape in classrooms and day care centers, a practice that has become more widespread over the last two decades, according to Seiter.

"I don't think superheroes should be banned," said Seiter. "Children find superhero stories very compelling and powerful. You can't explain it simply as TV brainwashing kids. Genuine imagination and exploration go on in kids' superhero play and storytelling."

Her new book, which explores patterns of media consumption among different TV audiences, including girls and boys, examines the different reactions to many internationally known television programs, including The Flintstones, The Jetsons, Star Trek, Street Fighter, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, and The Cosby Show. Through a series of case studies, Seiter explains what audience research tells us about the cultural aspects of

different forms of television programming and new media technologies at home, in the workplace, and in the classroom.

"Television is considered by many to be the least legitimate of media forms," says Seiter. "Reading any form of material is usually granted higher status. When people talk about television, the discussion is often inflected by this illegitimate status, prompting frequent apologies or an underestimation of TV viewing. Many studies of middle-class adults have documented this defensiveness, especially among women."

Certain television genres such as public affairs programming and historical dramas are associated with an educated middle-class audience who resist being characterized as heavy or even regular TV viewers. Other genres, such as soap operas and situation comedies are associated with working-class viewers who may enjoy discussing such popular programs at work and may openly resent the concept of watching television for education and self improvement.

According to Seiter, children offer an interesting test case because they are oblivious to many adult notions of cultural prestige, yet have begun to appreciate some of the distinctions between adult and child attitudes towards TV. As early as the age of four, she says, children can appreciate that *The Flintstones* is not normally part of their school's curriculum not the sort of video (like *Sesame Street*) that would be approved for classroom viewing.

"In many classrooms, children are taught that they are not supposed to talk about TV at school, where books are valued, where tapes are rarely shown, and where show-and-tell subjects are censored," said Seiter. "TV takes its place in the repertoire of forbidden references, like those to smelly feet or body parts or diapers. In fact, TV songs or jingles are often sung moments before or after crude language or jokes are voiced. No wonder many teachers hate popular children's TV, when it is associated with bedlam, rule-breaking, and forbidden activities."

While Seiter certainly is no apologist for all children's TV, she believes that teachers need to think of ways to capitalize on children's love of superheroes by drawing them into writing activities, instead of pretending they don't exist. Since TV is completely embedded in everyday life, she argues, it's much more realistic to discuss and learn about TV than to avoid it.

"Children have been hitting, shoving, pushing and fighting on playgrounds long before *Power Rangers*," explained Seiter. "Children can have angry, violent fantasies and rebellious feelings towards their adult caretakers, with or without TV. Let's be sure we don't portray TV as the root of all evil."

For more information or to obtain the *HeroTV* CD, which is free and operates on both Macintosh and Windows, visit the South Moon Press web site at: www.southmoon.com

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