

Policy Matters: Exploring Opportunities for Media Policy Scholars in Public Debates

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Matters of media policy remain under considered in TV studies despite certain topics gaining pop culture appeal. While we've dutifully analyzed connections between industry and policy historically, particularly the FCC's relationship to the nascent broadcasting industry or cable's expansion during the deregulatory 80s, numerous communication policy issues go unexamined today. When, in fact, various global communication policies not only remain inextricably linked to television industry strategies, actions, and content decisions, their relationship seems to be intensifying amid widespread concern that we are in the middle of an "obesity epidemic."

Part of the connection between the television industry and the "obesity epidemic" stems from long-standing discourses framing television watching as a harmful inactivity. For example, *The Independent* recently reported: "Sitting in front the television for multiple hours a day... is likely to make you fat." Similarly, an article in *The Vancouver Sun* stated: "Your television has an off switch and chances are if you don't use it, your children will grow up to be overweight or obese... Simply turning the TV off makes children and adults more active" *The Boston Globe* even explicitly connects TV watching and our current health "epidemic":

"The two prime culprits for this expanding obesity epidemic are inactivity and overeating,

and TV watching is linked to both of them. This is an important take-home lesson, now that school's ending and children can finally relax. Too often they relax- just like adults- by spending lazy hours in front of the TV, which can be hazardous to both age groups' health and well-being."

These associations being drawn between television watching and fatness in light of the current "obesity epidemic" thus impact the television industry in two key ways. Firstly, many citizens, public health officials, and government regulators are renewing their focus on the way television and advertising content is regulated (or more accurately, not regulated), especially in regard to children's programming. In 2007, FCC Commissioner Deborah Taylor Tate lead a debate over whether the food advertising industry and television channels were doing enough self-regulation to ward off further government intervention or oversight. Additionally, a 2010 U.S. Senate committee hearing, entitled "Childhood Obesity: Beginning the Dialogue on Reversing The Epidemic," spent an inordinate amount of time talking about TV as a contributor to this health "problem."

Secondly, and likely as a result of these policy debates, the television industry is employing several strategies to position itself both as acting within the public interest and as a solution to the "obesity epidemic" instead of a cause. Actions include exhibiting more programming about weight-loss (*I Used to Be Fat, Heavy*), creating health campaigns and partnerships to "combat obesity" (BET's "A Healthy BET" initiative), and engaging in forms of self-regulation to prevent further government attention. The last strategy is especially the case with children's TV, with TV executives generally framing

their actions as less about protecting their profits (and advertisers), and more in terms of benevolently protecting children. A Nickelodeon spokesperson, Dan Martinsen stated in 2004, "This is something we have to do, not from fear of government crackdowns, but because kids programmers are obligated to safeguard their impressionable and vulnerable audience." Additionally, Cartoon Network executive, Stuart Snyder, stated in 2012, "Childhood obesity is an epidemic to our country, and that's why for the past three years we've done the Move It Movement Tour, which is all about getting kids to eat healthier and to exercise more and to live a healthier lifestyle."

Reflecting this concern over correlations between fatness and television, a lot of children's television content now encourages physical activity, which directly counters discourses of TV watching as inactive while also demonstrating industry responsiveness to widespread social concern over TV's link to childhood obesity. The Disney program *JoJo's Circus* (2003-), PBS's *Poobah* (2003-), and Nickelodeon's *Dora the Explorer* (2000-), among others, encourage kids to get off the couch and move or dance as they are watching. Other media industry actions include Disney proactively choosing in 2012 to no longer air "junk food" commercials during its programming. Going one step further, in 2007, Nickelodeon New Zealand began partially stopping transmission of its usual cartoon line-up on Sundays, instead airing two hours of automated, rotating segments featuring games and physical activities.

There are numerous other examples of the way television actively engages with discourses of the "obesity epidemic," renewing longstanding debates over whether TV is a destructive social force, a tool for cultural (or health) uplift, or some combination of the two. Ultimately, while public health officials, regulators, and news reports position TV as a culprit in global weight gain (potentially necessitating increased government regulation), industry continually actions work to reframe television as a potential "solution" to health concerns. These issues raised within the context of the "obesity epidemic" thus demonstrate the continued importance of examining communication policy's impact on not only industry structure or issues of licensing and access, but also on content and the way channel's frame themselves and their actions.