

Nickelodeon-Branded Parenting: Use Your Noggin

Dr. Darcey Morris, Goucher College

American preschoolers spend an average of 25 hours per week using mobile devices with apps such as Nickelodeon's "Noggin." Noggin, described as a "preschool subscription service," features popular Nick characters in play-along videos that encourage (and sometimes require) viewer interaction. While children's television has long broken the fourth wall, this new type of engagement is marketed as a way to increase children's retention of educational material. Such content eases parents' fears about new technology by assuring them it is beneficial though, of course, the primary goal is for children to spend more time in the app. Since Noggin is targeted at children ages 4 and under, the network's long-term strategy is that as kids age, they continue their relationship with the Nickelodeon brand.

The cabler's use of mobile platforms is necessary in today's saturated media environment as streaming content becomes key to securing old media's future. In today's crowded mediascape, linear networks must embrace digital technology to meet audiences where they are and face off with competitors in a struggle to maintain dominance. Such endeavors are no longer new and have been the subject of intense scrutiny over the past several years. However, the impact such changes have on the audience who are also navigating a rapidly changing world garners far less attention by media industries scholars. Cultural shifts due to new media are not unusual, but what is the impact of marketer-created mobile content for kids?

In the past few decades, Americans have seen an increase in economic inequality, and along with it, the widespread embrace of "helicopter parenting" as parents care more about their children's future success. Fears about crime also lead parents to want kids to play inside and under supervision, which makes using a trusted app feel like a safe, smart choice. Interestingly, a recent study found a rise in the use of apps like Noggin and a decrease in this hyper-vigilant approach to child-rearing. In other words, parents may have fewer anxieties and thus spend less time hovering and monitoring as their kids engage with apps like Noggin. In a way, the constant technological surveillance that occurs on such mobile applications could be regarded as a new version of helicopter parenting. If children's use of mobile apps can affect parenting styles, do we as scholars need to alter our conceptualization of the audience to better understand the broad cultural and social impact platforms like Noggin have?

Consumer exploitation for marketing purposes is common regardless of the age of the audience, who in the case of mobile apps become "producers" due to the unique activities and behaviors taking place. Children are active participants by playing games, generating content, and creating their own flow as they select specific videos to watch and shows to interact with. Parents are also part of the target audience for Nickelodeon and its apps, and this gets called out in direct messages to "grownups" such as an on-screen bumper promising that the cartoon Blaze and the Monster Machines teaches kids "problem solving, science, technology, engineering, and math." This is an example of Nickelodeon addressing parents as an audience group, touting supposed benefits of the content and assuaging any concerns over the effects of screentime. If the network understands the relationship between children's media consumption and parenting behaviors, it's certainly an arena media industries scholars should address.

Nickelodeon's recent expansion into new technologies led to a reconfiguration of its marketing and content teams, and as industrial structures and spaces evolve, academia must keep up the pace and update our own approaches to production studies. If children and parents are producers in the digital media space, do we need to include the family environment in our examination of production culture? How can scholars better respond to the constantly fluid production process and media's shifting relationships to audiences as the blurring lines between producer and audience have major cultural impact?