

Sonia Livingstone**Book review: television, childhood and the home: a history of the making of the child television audience in Britain by David Oswell****Original citation:**

Livingstone, Sonia (2003) *Book review: television, childhood and the home: a history of the making of the child television audience in Britain by David Oswell*. [British journal of sociology](#) , 54 (2). pp. 309-310. ISSN 0007-1315

DOI: [10.1080/0007131032000080258](https://doi.org/10.1080/0007131032000080258)

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Review for *British Journal of Sociology*

David Oswell

Television, Childhood and the Home: A History of the Making of the Child Television Audience in Britain

Clarendon Press, Oxford

16 May 2002

179 pages

Price £25.00

In the early days of television, how was children's television constituted as a distinctive cultural form? How did it address the child audience at home? Can historical analysis reveal how the relation between television institution and child audience was constructed and governed? Resisting the naturalistic notion of the child audience as the aggregate of actual children watching television, Oswell shows how the television audience was constituted materially and discursively during the diffusion of television in the UK during the post-war period. The 'invention' of the child audience depended on the intersecting activities (shaping, making visible, regulating, commodifying) of diverse actors including broadcasters, journalists, researchers, writers, government, parents and children themselves.

Television, Childhood and the Home charts the unfolding discussions and debates regarding the child audience as documented by broadcasting and government archives. Along the way, we learn that involving children as participants in programme making is nothing new, we gain an inside account of the BBC's short-run fascination with puppets for addressing pre-school children (with intriguing parallels between the reception of Andy Pandy and today's Teletubbies), we hear of anxious debates over how to devolve responsibility for the child audience from broadcaster to parent, there is some wonderful marketing advice on co-ordinating the television set with ones living room décor without disrupting the established gendered division of labour, and, delightfully, we find the origin of 'Children's Hour' in a Longfellow poem.

While historians have linked earlier media with long-standing moral panics over children's supposed passivity, trashy tastes and delinquent tendencies, along with nostalgia for the days of outdoor play, family conversation and 'proper' values, Oswell sees television as distinctive. Where radio took children for granted within 'the family audience', its mode of address asserting a unifying voice to bring the family together around the hearth, television, he argues, arrived when the trend towards individualisation – a dispersal of the family around the home, positioned within diversified lifestyles - was further advanced, partly because of the coincidental arrival of central heating (though few public discourses attack central heating for dispersing family members around the home!). Television thus set out to address this heterogeneous audience, including the distinctive age cohorts within 'the child audience'.

Theoretically, Oswell's purpose is to undermine the sterile opposition of broadcasting institution and audience by drawing on actor-network theory to trace complex relations among diverse actors, also contrasting multiple imagined, constructed or scientifically measured conceptions of 'the audience' with the diversity of children actually watching television. Yet at times, the empirical material instead reaffirms this opposition, for despite revealing the network's growing complexity, the actors are generally shown to speak with one voice, constructing 'the child audience' as a problematic object of moral anxiety - in need of supervision, inattentive, lacking in discrimination, even addicted. The acquiescent role of social scientists, especially psychologists, in this process particularly attracts Oswell's critical attention, though one suspects there is a more

complex story to be told regarding the misappropriation of academic research by broadcaster and policy discourses, undermining the apparent consensus among elite actors.

Children themselves play a pivotal role in this history, although their voices remain marginalised in the discourses which surround them (including, it must be said, in this book), for it is the private and elusive character of audiences which makes for such hotly contested, morally fraught attempts at governance. Rather than resulting in a manic pursuit of ‘the audience’, as Ang argued in *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, Oswell sees the early children’s broadcasters’ use of industry audience research as an act of modesty, a recognition that they must not presume to ‘know’ their audience – and indeed, viewers consistently acted in unexpected ways – children watched adult programmes (and vice versa), mothers absented themselves from viewing ‘Watch with Mother’, teens emerged during this period as a critical group resentful of the worthy, patronising tone of much children’s broadcasting, and so forth. Yet in many ways, Oswell tells a sad tale in which a dedicated, creative and idealistic band of children’s broadcasters in the 1950s became overtaken by the larger attempt to govern the supposedly problematic activities of young people. He concludes by bringing the story up to date, noting recent changes in children’s television production, in the differentiation of child audiences and in the dispersion of expertise, though his outlook for the future children’s audience remains bleak.

Number of words: 715
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24 October 2002