

THE WAY THEY SEE IT:
Gender Readings of Filipino Children's Programs on
Mainstream Television

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Abstract

This article explores what gender messages exist in children's television programs in the Philippines. It seeks to discover stereotyped portrayals and roles of the programs' presenters and lead characters through the identification of these personalities' activities and their reactions to situations presented in the programs, as well as the way these personalities are presented.

Television has been a big part of Filipino life since its first commercial broadcast in 1953. Every household has at least one television set, and serves as a typical middle class family's primary source of news, entertainment, and to some extent, instruction.

From late-breaking reports on the streets of the metropolis to the most-swooned after tv drama, Philippine mainstream television has helped shape our present day musings on society and the world. From an early age, television viewers are persuaded by the sounds and images on the screen as well as the subliminal messages embedded, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the program producers and scriptwriters. Messages of class, gender, ethnicity, normative heterosexual ideologies, culture, urban topics and taboos, and a host of other subconscious cues find their way into our individual and group processes for making sense of our environment through entertaining genres and repetitive themes. If these messages are so easily impressed on adults, it may be said that among children, this absorption and

impression is even more effortless.

The point of concern in this paper is the kind of content that children's television programs contain. In particular, this paper would like to explore what gender messages exist in children's television programs in the Philippines. This paper seeks to discover stereotyped portrayals and roles of the programs' presenters and lead characters through the identification of these personalities' activities, their reactions to situations presented in the programs, as well as the way these personalities are presented -- the sets they appear in, their demeanor, even the way they are addressed.

According to Pecora, Murray and Wartella (2007), "TV is an audiovisual medium with content that cause, overtly and imperceptibly, learning to take place." Therefore what children see in supposedly "educational" and instructive programs are bound to make an impression on them over time. The gender cues present in these programs, whether they are obvious or subliminal, contribute to shaping how children see the world, theirs and others' role in society, and ultimately perpetuate whatever dominant ideology is present in their immediate environment

Why children's programs, and why now?

There are limited writings that explore the genre of children's television programs in the Philippines, much less writings that actually explore the topic of gender. To be fair, the production of children's programs locally is a relatively new endeavor, if we compare it to canned educational children's programs from the United States that began airing on Philippine television in the 1960s. American shows like *The Romper Room* (late 1960s), and *Sesame Street* (1971), were the first children's programs aired on local free television (Flor 2006). However it was *Sesame Street*, as a syndicated American program, that became a hit in the Philippines.

Many studies claim that research on *Sesame Street* "is without equal in the entire field of educational television" (Sammur 1990). Research spanning effects paradigms to post-modern and constructivist points of view have been written and published about the program (Fisch & Truglio 2001), and scholars have lauded its efforts to educate children across social strata, and in cultures from over 140 countries over the last four decades. *Sesame Street* has been syndicated all over the world since the early 1970s, beginning in Germany, the Caribbean and Mexico. Characters have been adapted to

address the unique situations in the countries where they air. South Africa has the character Kami, an HIV Positive 5-year old muppet, who talks directly to children about tolerance and taboo issues on AIDS. In Bangladesh, “children don’t really have a childhood” says Shaila Rahman, a researcher for Nayantara Productions, which produces the Bangladeshi version of *Sesame Street*, Sisimpur. “By the time [they’re] five, [they] end up working and supporting [their] family.” Sisimpur introduced muppets who play and were shown getting the same opportunities regardless of gender.

Studies abound lauding *Sesame Street*’s production style and content, well-developed curriculum, and how these, coupled with its entertainment value, contributed to improving speaking, reading and writing skills among pre-school children in the United States and beyond (Pellegrini & Bjorklund 1998; Sammur 1990; Fisch & Truglio 2001; Gikow 2009). The upbeat, animated segments and instructional songs, not to mention the real-life characters in the neighborhood and their Muppet friends, served as the conduit to an educational curriculum that was not as accessible to the poorer (ghetto) kids in America (Loory 2009) and became the overarching objective of the program as it reached out to children in similar environments and situations worldwide. It was this style that the Philippine Children’s Television Foundation sought to emulate when it produced the first bilingual version of *Sesame Street* – titled *Sesame!* – in 1983 (Gikow 2009).

As *Sesame Street* evolved, it began to develop content that promoted pro-social behavior among its audiences, dealing specifically with topics on tolerance, equal opportunity, gender equality and empowerment (Gikow, 2009; Fisch, 2005). However, as with all successful, experimental endeavors, there were criticisms about *Sesame Street*. There were studies that claimed the show impeded on a child’s proper development by contributing to shorter attention spans and children’s inability to appreciate structured learning in the classroom (Pellegrini & Bjorklund 1998). There were also findings that an imbalance in the representation of gender roles on the program existed. Ditsworth (2001) compiled a literature review of studies that show gender misrepresentations and sexism in the program. Ditsworth’s (2001) claim is that the show promotes stereotyping and gender inequality. This is echoed in the study by Jones, Abelli and Abelli (1994) which showed that male characters were featured twice as often as females, and more often in primary roles. Stereotypical attributes were also evident in the characters they studied, which they claim were “ten times greater than characters portrayed in non-stereotypical roles” (Jones et. al. 1994). Cathey-Calvert’s study (undated)

in particular enumerated how women were portrayed in subjugated roles. In a randomly-sampled, sequence-by-sequence analysis of an episode of *Sesame Street*, Calvert found that women's activities "were centered around marriage and the home. While...*Sesame Street* makes a serious attempt at eliminating ethnic and racial stereotypes, these efforts remain confined to male portrayals" (Cathey-Calvert, as cited in Ceulmans & Fauconier 1979). Specifically, Cathey-Calvert's study revealed that

"males are shown to be interested in and capable of intelligent, intellectual thinking, problem-solving, logical reasoning, and decision-making. Women are portrayed as lacking information, concerned simply with the mechanics of mundane activities (in the kitchen) and not with abstractions. Inspection of dialogue illuminates instances of male competency/dominance and female insufficiency/subordination. Most objectionably, in one scene the female is portrayed as physically more weak than the male to whom she must desperately cling. The male is portrayed as calm, strong and unconcerned with the difficulty of the female while something more important occupies his mind (Cathey-Calvert, undated).

For *Sesame Street* to face such allegations of misrepresentation and stereotyping, in light of its status as a benchmark in children's programs, presents serious implications for subsequent educational television productions. According to the studies cited above, in its 40 years of existence, the show has not perfected the formula for gender equality in its episodes, despite its attempts to promote tolerance and other pro-social behaviors. However, the program seems to have responded to these studies in their work to establish multi-cultural versions of *Sesame Street* in different parts of the world. It has created female lead roles in traditionally patriarchal societies such as Egypt, Kuwait and even India (Gikow 2009). It encourages girls to take on non-traditional roles and engage in traditionally male activities.

In the Philippines, efforts to emulate *Sesame Street's* principles have not always proven successful. Because of the commercial nature of the broadcast industry, it is important for networks to maintain certain formulae to keep audiences coming back. As audiences, children are typically considered passive and part of a potential mass market. Hence, the challenge of producing educational, "*Sesame Street*-like" programs was taken on by independent television production companies such as the Philippine Children's Television Foundation, Inc. (PCTVF), which produced *Batibot*,

and Probe Productions, Inc. (PPI) which produced *5 and Up. Batibot* first aired in 1984 on RPN Channel 9, and *5 and Up* in 1992, on Channel 5. These are the only two children's programs in the Philippines that have won awards from the prestigious Prix Jeunesse International, which awards excellent and high-quality children's programs worldwide. (Prix Jeunesse International is an award giving body dedicated to promoting quality in children's television since 1964. Established in Munich, Germany, "it wants to bring forward television that enables children to see hear and express themselves and their culture, and that enhances an awareness and appreciation of other cultures." From <http://www.prixjeunesse.de/>)

Both programs achieved a measure of success, surviving with little commercial endorsement or through big business affiliations. Despite winning countless accolades locally and internationally, both programs were not considered top raters by their home networks. This, coupled with funding difficulties and their home networks' move to produce programs "in house" forced their cancellation in 2002. Since then, not much has been heard about critical inquiry into the content of currently airing children's shows. What exist are reviews and Wikipedia entries about the hosts or producers of these programs, but nothing about reviews on content or treatments about the subject matter that are presented in the shows.

This paper aims to contribute to filling this void. It aims to find out what gendered images or messages are present in children's programs. This paper will attempt to identify the media images children consume when they are tuned in to supposedly "safe programs." Though strategies for delivering messages are indeed kid-friendly, it is the treatment of subject matter, particularly the attention given to gender, that requires review. To keep the audiences tuned in, producers of children's television programs need to present characters and situations that are easy to develop within a limited time. More often than not they have to resort to stereotyped characters, situations and story lines that will make characters easily identifiable and relatable to the audience. While there is nothing wrong with presenting familiar characters, the problem of assigning roles and categories of activities based on gender may necessarily limit the way people, in this case, children, see themselves and what they can achieve.

Children's Programming Content and Gender

As with other program formats and content, subject matter tackled

in children's programs are drawn from how people experience life. Pecora, Murray and Wartella (2007) say that "the images and portrayals of social roles that compose the content of television today like its early electronic, print and theatrical relatives, utilized historical and present-day perceptions of them drawn from the way a creative person views, feels, and thinks about his or her role in society." (p. 93) The "stored memories" of individuals on how they socialized with other people, and the relationships of those socialization activities with the information they absorb in school, the home, among their peers and even places of worship, help the individual make sense of his/her place in the community, as well as those of the people around him/her. These ideas and experiences are amplified on television.

Studies on gender representations in children's television programs in Europe and the United States have yielded some interesting findings in terms of stereotyped characters. Some of these studies show that males are still the main protagonists of stories, and are usually the main character presenters; they are often portrayed as heroic. Females on the other hand, are concerned with reproductive tasks and femininity is a characteristic often given to characters who show "non-male" attributes such as caring, silliness, moodiness, fright, touchiness or importunity (Gotz, 2007).

Singer (2002), gathered studies about children's television programming over a 50-year timeline and found that in programs targeted for children from the 1970s through to the 1990s, women were always portrayed as youthful, while the males were older and more dignified. In portrayals of occupations, women were less likely to hold top positions in big firms and were instead given jobs in gender-neutral positions. Traditional positions of power were still given to male characters. Most women were also still seen as stay-at-home mothers or uncategorized workers, while single or formerly married characters were depicted as part of the workforce.

Although Singer notes that as the late 1990s to the early 21st century programs progressed, there were parallel changes in portrayals of women on television as there were changes in female roles in society itself. Some portrayals showed women mixing their careers with being mothers. Gotz (2007) says there have been programs that show mixed-gender groups that have female characters as the main protagonists. They are portrayed as "individuals acting independently," although it is important to note, says Gotz, that they are a minority in relation to the size of the groups. Despite the minority though, says Gotz, it is good to note that these are "new figures" in

children's programming, showing the female characters as both achievement-oriented, independent but still caring.

Luther and Legg (2007) discovered that male characters in Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon and Toon Disney programs for children were more likely to exhibit physically-aggressive behavior while female characters exhibited more social aggression than the males. Steinke, Long, Johnson and Ghosh (2009), in their content analysis on scientist characters on television found more males depicted in these roles than females. Male scientists were "more likely to be shown with the masculine attributes or traits of independence, athleticism, and dominance. Female scientist characters were not more likely than male scientist characters to be shown with the traditional feminine attributes of dependency, caring, and romantic." Both males and females however were portrayed as having high-status scientific professions.

Among non-human characters in children's programs, male-ness is assumed (Gotz, 2007). Characters that are female have to be specified, and they are "sexualized" with the use of color for their garments, ribbons in their hair or their tones of voice. In the Philippines, it has been found that the concept of beauty is the most central issue with regards to gender. In a survey of Prix Jeunese producers from around the world, Professor Dafna Lemish (2008) found that the Western "beauty myth" is prevalent among female representations. Depictions of women as fair-skinned, sporting aquiline noses and big round eyes were the stereotypes found in most television shows, and not just on children's programs. Females are still generally seen as "normal" if they adhere to traditional roles and stereotypes, and not as free-thinking lesbians. Male characters on the other hand may take on any role except that of a homosexual -- these were according to the MTRCB Chairperson, Marissa LaGuardia, who, in a letter to producers of television programs, said "To show such kind of abnormality/aberration on prime-time TV programs gives the impression that the network is encouraging lesbian and homosexual relationships." (Human Rights Watch 2004)

As with most television programs in other countries, there is a dearth of representations of characters with complex personalities (Lemish, 2008). This issue has a lot to do with television itself as a medium, the limited time given to develop three-dimensional characters, and the necessary concerns of broadcasting being a business (Pecora et al, 2007). However media scholars and educational institutions have been active in promoting gender equality in the content in children's programming through media literacy activities and

workshops for television producers and even consumers. The Children's Media Center has in fact come up with guidelines that define good and effective media content (Wainwright, 2006). The Center for Media Literacy has also developed a Five-step strategy for identifying media messages in children's programming (Center for Media Literacy 2005). The Center for Media Literacy was established in California to develop in media consumers "the ability to communicate competently in all media forms as well as to access, understand, analyze, evaluate and participate with powerful images, words and sounds." Its mission is to "help children and adults prepare for living and learning in a global media culture" by educating them with practical media information, and empowering them with tools to analyze media products they encounter daily (http://www.medialit.org/about_cml.html). These efforts are proving instrumental in re-orienting the media practitioner, and awakening an awareness among audiences of not only gender issues, but other messages as well, that are embedded in children's television shows.

Child Friendly = Gender Sensitivity?

All free-TV channels are required by the Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster sa Pilipinas (KBP) to allot 15% of its programming schedule for children's viewing. On the two biggest television networks, namely GMA 7 and ABS-CBN 2, the children's programming block is composed of a mix of animation and live action tele-magazine programs. Most of the live-action programs that aired at the time of writing were produced by the two big commercial networks. GMA-7 had the following: *Lovely Day*, *Kids on Q*, *Batang Bibbo* and *Art Angel*. ABS-CBN 2 had *Super Inggo* and *Going Bulilit*. As of this publication, the programs *Art Angel* and *Going Bulilit* are still on air.

This purposive sampling of live-action locally-produced programs approximates Philippine society's values, culture, knowledge and practices, whether consciously or unconsciously, through the programs' segments and stories. Socialization and cultivation theories of media tell us that humans, especially children, are socialized through different agents in their environment throughout their lives (Signorielli 2002). The media plays a special role in socialization because of the images and messages they present: mostly simplistic, one-dimensional portrayals of "characters that lack originality" (Signorielli 2002). Nancy Signorielli, in the *Handbook on Children and The Media* (Singer 2002) says,

“They appeal to people’s emotions, rather than their intellect. Television with limited time to devote to character development often resort to stereotypes. The concern is that viewers, especially children, who are continually exposed to television’s stereotyped roles, may develop conceptions and preconceptions about people that reflect the stereotypical images they see in the media.” (Signorielli 2002)

Social construction of reality theory by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann meanwhile states that “human beings create a social order and reinforce it in their young, generation after generation by imparting their understanding of human culture as it currently is” (Rousseau 2002). As human beings make sense of the world, and try to understand phenomena on their own terms, they create meanings that give order to the universe. The tools that help achieve this -- school, parents, community, church, society and the media -- contain messages and symbols that are passed on from the moment human beings are born. The power of media as a socialization agent, and of television in particular, has the ability to reinforce these values, knowledge and understanding of a society and influence how children see their world. Many of these symbols have been simplified to the point of stereotypes in order to make its transfer easier.

What stereotypes are therefore conveyed through these programs are the items under study. By deconstructing the characters in these programs, their activities, roles, and personalities, as well as the segments and the treatments of their subject matter (applicable to the tele-magazine format), the researcher will extract the constructs that are unwittingly presented. While this paper aims to present stereotypical portrayals that may have unconsciously made its way into the final media products, it does not mean to delineate between what is right or wrong. This paper wishes to raise an awareness of the constructs media practitioners may take for granted in the production of their programs, and in so doing encourage program producers to re-evaluate their programs’ story conceptualization processes and the content that gets aired on mainstream television.

The data was gathered from three weeks of monitoring children’s programs: one program was from ABS-CBN 2, one program was from QTV 11 and three programs were from GMA 7. The GMA 7 programs had telemagazine formats, while the program from ABS-CBN 2 was a drama. These programs were: *Super Inggo* (ABS-CBN 2), *Kids on Q* (QTV 11), *Lovely Day*, *Art Angel* and *Batang Bibbo* (GMA 7). These programs were chosen

because of their consistent ratings. *Kids on Q* was chosen as a case study because it was a locally-produced program and was aired on free tv (QTV 11). Although QTV 11 is a sister company of GMA, it was considered a contender for audience share, especially among the female segment of the viewing population. As a free-to-air station it was required to air children's programs. *Kids on Q* was considered its flagship program for children.

Table 1 presents a simplified listing of the approximate average numerical ratings for the period of November 2008 when these shows were still on the air, as compiled and analyzed by AGB Nielsen (2008). Percentages are based on the total number of target audiences -- children, aged 2-12 years old. The total universe of study was approximately 800,000 viewers in what is called Mega Manila (Metro Manila and nearby provinces). *Super Inggo* first aired in 2006 and ended in 2007. The show was so successful that the network aired reruns of the program during its daytime programming in 2008. For purposes of illustrating popularity and reach, *Super Inggo's* November 2008 ratings are shown in the table.

Table 1. Average ratings percentages for the month of November 2008

Program	Channel	Ratings %
<i>Super Inggo</i>	ABS-CBN 2	19.23
<i>Kids on Q</i>	QTV 11	2.2
<i>Lovely Day</i>	GMA 7	5.8
<i>Art Angel</i>	GMA 7	7.00
<i>Batang Bibbo</i>	GMA 7	10.2

It may thus be inferred that these numbers reflected a “comfortable” relationship between the audience and the program content; that is to say, viewers more or less knew what to expect from the program on a regular basis. The audiences who tuned in may be considered to be in a comfortable frame of mind regarding the images, storylines and character portrayals – expecting nothing more, and nothing less than what they were used to seeing on local free television. This in turn informed the actions and decisions of the producers, writers and other members of the production team on the topics, treatment and storylines of the characters, and plotlines of the shows’ episodes. It may have served as a barometer of audience preferences for the production team, the network and the marketing and advertising groups involved in the program.

A textual analysis of the programs aimed to extract the gender representations of the following concepts: the look of the presenters and characters on the programs, their “personalities,” their roles in the program, the activities they engaged in based on their characters, the stories or topics that were assigned to the characters and/or presenters, and how the characters resolved issues in the programs.

Reflecting Gotz’s (2006) study of stereotyping on children’s TV, the numbers of male and female presenters on the program were not always equal. Male characters and presenters in these shows were assigned lead roles and “masculine” stories. Young females were the leads while older or middle-aged females took on villain roles. There was a certain category of stories and segments assigned to more females than males. Males were portrayed as dominating and forceful while females were presented as caring, and in some programs as sacrificing. In programs where female characters were the lead, these females were portrayed as the pacifiers of arguments, encouraging harmonious relationships.

However, there were some obvious efforts to break away from stereotypes. There were female characters who took on traditional male heroic roles, some of them taking the lead decision-making roles in certain stories. Stories on explicitly breaking stereotypes were tackled. Females were also shown taking control of events in their life and exhibiting wisdom. Details of these summative statements are tackled in each of the programs below.

General Physical Observations

In majority of the programs, the female presenters were young women who projected youth and vibrancy (Gotz, 2006). Hosts of the program *Kids on Q* all sported long hair, and so did the characters of the show *Batang Bibbo* and *Lovely Day*. Budong’s mother in the show *Super Inggo* also had long hair. Only Ate Pia, host of *Art Angel*, sported short, cropped hair. However their guest hosts on the show all sported long hair. On the show *Super Inggo*, the grandmother sported cropped hair and she was portrayed as malicious. On the other hand, the only male who sported long hair on *Super Inggo* was the evil Prince of Darkness. All the male super heroes had short cropped hair.

Majority of the female presenters on these programs were fair-skinned, and only two reporters on *Kids on Q* had *morena* (brown) complexion. Yet

not all the presenters were sporting glowing white skin. Not all of the female presenters and characters had “aquiline noses” the way Lemish described in her paper (Lemish, 2008). However, the main female characters in programs like *Super Inngo*, *Batang Bibbo* and *Art Angel* may be described as *mestiza* (fair-skinned) and possessing slim-built bodies.

Kids on Q (Saturdays, 10.00 am, QTV 11)

Kuya Tonipet Gaba is the anchor for the show *Kids On Q*, and sets the “direction” of the day’s episode, delivering the show’s opening, closing and continuity spiels. The show features child presenters in each segment of a different topic. During the period of monitoring it was found that stories about food, animals, and sci-fi fantasy were assigned to a male reporter, while stories on arts and crafts and good behavior were assigned to female reporters.

In two separate stories, a male and female reporter each tackled a story about animals: a male reporter talked about love birds and their behavior of sticking to one mate for life, while the female presented a story on exotic animals and how to care for them. The male reporter was shown looking at the animals followed by various montages of the love birds, but never interacting with them. The female reporter meanwhile was shown handling the animals, petting them, and playing with them.

Craft stories such as creating beaded slippers in Payatas, an economically depressed area, and digital scrapbooking were assigned to female reporters. Although digital scrapbooking is a hobby done using the computer, the output is still considered a “feminine” pursuit. When they were not reporting on crafts, the female reporters presented stories about the history of Valentine’s Day and a story about rewarding good behavior, where female reporters were shown behaving “commendably” by sweeping the floor, making the bed and putting books away. Though short segments on science experiments were presented by a female reporter, she was dressed in a white lab coat and big, black eye glasses, reminiscent of a stereotyped mad scientist, who was usually male.

Art Angel (Saturdays, 9.00 am GMA 7)

Tonipet Gaba and Pia Arcangel host the show, *Art Angel*, while a female child, Krystal, hosts her own craft segment within the show. Pia presents the craft segments where she and a guest host interact while creating

art projects. They always pause to remind the viewers to be careful with sharp instruments like scissors. Tonipet meanwhile interacts with a hand called Pintado; its name connotes male gender. His demeanor when interacting with Pintado is forceful, almost dominating, the way perhaps an older brother would play-bully a younger sibling. He is also in charge of telling the featured story of the day, which usually deals with a gendered male character that either finished a task, helped/rescued other characters in the story, or was enlightened by some new knowledge.

In the story, “Ang Mabait na Kalabaw,” the lead character was a water buffalo that helped friends solve problems. This character was assumed to be male. A fellow water buffalo character was represented as female through longer eyelashes and a pink polka-dotted ribbon tied around one of its horns. During the period of monitoring, Tonipet was not seen handling any art projects.

Batang Bibbo (Saturdays, 8.30 am, GMA 7)

On the program *Batang Bibbo*, the lead character was Ate Anne. She interacted with neighbors Bi (female) and Bo (male), puppets portrayed as siblings. Their activities with their playmates, Nicole and Arshad, serve as the running story throughout the episode. Ate Anne was portrayed as a caring individual, always in a positive mood, and ready to cheer anybody up. It was not clear though what she did when she was not chaperoning the playmates. Like most female leads, she was young and vibrant, most likely in her mid-20s.

The children approached her when they had problems with schoolwork or were embroiled in disputes among themselves. In the episode titled “Ano Sa Palagay Mo,” (the theme was about expressing one’s feelings and emotions), she helped solve an argument among the playmates when she counseled them on speaking up about assigned tasks for their school project. In this program, the preferred way of resolving conflict was through dialogue and understanding one another’s feelings. Ate Anne facilitates these discussions and leads the children to the solution.

Arshad and Bo were not typical “masculine” characters; while they played traditional male games like basketball, they were not portrayed as domineering or as always taking the lead. In fact, the female characters Bi and Nicole were more assertive and outspoken. In the episode titled “Pambabae

o Panlalaki” (the theme was about gender equality), the female characters demanded they join a basketball game, while the male characters in turn proved that they could prepare a home-cooked meal.

Unlike other programs, *Batang Bibbo* successfully shuffled the leads in weekly stories. The male and female characters took on non-traditional roles and attitudes (i.e., Nicole as the group’s bossy leader, the male classmates as followers in the episode “Ano Sa Palagay Mo”). However this may also be construed as Nicole being a nag. The two group members, who happened to be male, refused to continue being her group mates in the school project unless they were given the chance to make suggestions and give opinions about their project.

Lovely Day (Saturdays, 9.30 am GMA 7)

The program *Lovely Day* was a telemagazine program that had a continuing story line throughout the episode that tied it together. Every week Ate Love led a secret foursome endowed with supernatural powers to battle menacing forces in the urban setting. These evil forces were characterized by dark puffs of smoke that solidified into human form. They were out to hurt people, in particular the children who were on Ate Love’s team. The team was composed of two males and one female. This program featured Love Añover as the female lead character or anchor of the show.

During the period of monitoring, the episodes portrayed the “evil forces” as females in their mid-30s or 40s, their fierce make up and attire all done in black. They always seemed to attack the young female member of the team first before the male members. This usually gave the males time to call on Ate Love to unite the team, transform them simultaneously into their superhero personas, and vanquish the monsters. Though the females were not portrayed as completely helpless, they were also portrayed as unwitting victims in the story lines. In an episode where the continuity spiels’ storyline was about vampires, Bea, the female member of the team, was attacked and overcome despite the fact that she was in her superheroine persona.

The story segments were allocated traditionally, with the female presenter doing a story on synchronized swimming, described as a sport suited to the female body while the males did stories on animals like crocodiles, which were presented as “fierce” creatures, and traveling adventures and out-of-town trips. The females were portrayed as caring and concerned for others’

welfare. In continuity spiels about an after-school meet up in the playground, Bea would remind the boys to eat healthily and do their homework. The males meanwhile were portrayed as take-charge types, usually dominating one another in jokes, games or friendly conversation.

As with *Batang Bibbo's* Ate Anne, it was not clear what Ate Love did outside of her being a superhero. But unlike Ate Anne, Ate Love discussed less how to solve problems and instead led her team in resorting to “masculine” force (i.e., laser beams, fist fights, kicks) to ward off the “evil” attackers.

Super Inggo (Daily, 10.30 am, ABS-CBN 2)

The program *Super Inggo* featured ordinary people with powers, who transformed into super heroes as well. The lead character was a young boy, Budong, who, along with a group of superheroes in the Power Academy, battled the Prince of Darkness.

The Prince of Darkness was out to capture Budong, in fulfillment of an evil prophecy. Budong was the offspring of a Superhero, Super Islaw. His mother was Bugan, a villain, one of the Power Academy's arch nemeses (later on, they are to find out Bugan was also the mother of Budong's best friend, making Budong and his friend actually half-brothers). He was raised by a soft-spoken, self-sacrificing woman, Pacita (his adoptive mother; Budong was not aware of his biological mother's real identity). They both lived in the house of his grandmother, Lola Juaning, who was portrayed as deceitful and opportunistic and who blamed the death of her son (Budong's father) on them.

Already, the premise of this serialized drama applied many of the stereotypes that were present in traditional portrayals of characters. The female characters were portrayed as either martyrs or malicious. Lola Juaning was shown conniving with the Prince of Darkness so she may get a reward. Pacita, the adoptive mother, was portrayed as abused, emotionally and mentally, and though she was shown as the breadwinner, her job as a restaurant clerk did not earn her enough to give herself and her son a comfortable life. This forced her to live at the mercy of her mother-in-law's mood swings and verbal abuse. Bugan, Budong's biological mother, was not only evil but promiscuous as well. Budong, being a “good son,” promised to help his mother alleviate them from their suffering as soon as he became a full-fledged superhero. His persona as the savior, both of his mother and (unwittingly) of the world,

reinforced the stereotype of the male as superhero. Unbeknownst to him, he was the one who could vanquish the evil trinity The Prince of Darkness is trying to assemble.

During the period of monitoring, the episodes revealed stereotypical portrayals of male and female characters. There were more male characters, in both lead and supporting roles. The lead female characters were mothers and grandmothers; supporting female leads were young women with super powers, but seemed to receive less exposure than the male supporting cast. The leader of the Power Academy was male, who set the agenda for the rest of the group. The mentors at the Academy were predominantly male as well. The rare times when female superheroes solved problems or resolved sticky situations were moments of comic relief: in one episode, a blind member of the Academy was guided in battle by the seeing female superheroine Super Inday. Its treatment included humorous staccato music, off-target shots by the blind super hero, and instances of being clumsy. It seemed to convey the idea that the female superheroes were left to deal with the issues associated with human ailments and issues regarded as “domestic.” (Super Inday herself was said to be suffering from amnesia). Because this was not as “serious” as saving the world, it could be passed off as a humorous occurrence. When the members did not assume their Power Academy personas, the males were more likely seen as thinking, strategizing or talking among themselves, while the females keep house and assisted handicapped colleagues.

As with all stereotypical ways of dealing with conflict, the leader of the Power Academy’s resolution was by way of physical combat, and the use of their superhuman strength and supernatural powers. After each battle though, not much changed in the lives of the lead characters. It seemed like the world was waiting on Budong to come of age and become a man so that he may completely vanquish the Prince of Darkness and restore good in the world.

Seeing Things Differently

Mainstream television in the Philippines is a commercial enterprise, and the bottom line calls for products that sell. For media products to sell they need to cater to mass audiences, and this means coming up with palatable content -- markers, characters, themes, situations, etc. -- that run the risk of being too simple that they are easily stereotyped. Though this may work for the networks’ bottom line, its effects on the audiences whom they

claim to serve may not be as rewarding. Television's socialization function can leave lasting though subtle effects on a child's view of people and society as s/he grows older. Stereotypical portrayals of characters which children may relate to and even idolize have the potential to influence their world view of cardboard-cutout characteristics. Their triteness has the potential to settle in the minds of audiences as givens in society – and this can be a dangerous idea. Though characterizations of women as part of the workforce (such as Pacita, Budong's adoptive mother) are welcome, it is the type of job she held down as a menial in a restaurant and not in a leadership role that becomes an issue here. The portrayal of women taking control of situations as well puts them in either comic situations, abusive positions or as resorting to solutions that still require violence. Women are still seen less as producers of knowledge and more as nurturers of the human race, thus emphasizing even to children the traditional roles they are to take on in society as they come of age. It gives the idea that, to put women in positions of leadership will not yield the results that are considered desirable in society. Such simplistic portrayals may not assist the child in learning that more complex personalities and situations exist...although right now, it seems most of them do, thanks to television.

Though not directly related to gender issues, but still critical in terms of portrayals, is the lack of portrayals of children as contributors to their community – or in much simpler terms, as human beings capable of resolving situations on their own, and achieving solutions that need not be dictated by, or conform to, what society may deem “right” or “proper.” There seems to be a reluctance to portray children as problem solvers, and a disbelief that they can actually come up with creative ways to achieve their goals, no matter how small. The simple act of processing an argument among friends and finding a compromise that will get things done is an important instance of showing children that they are empowered individuals. Inadvertently or not, such real life issues in the immediate universe of the child are not considered important. No such space exists on Philippine television for such discussions. Sadly, the industry seems to subscribe to the idea that, for their contributions to be considered of value, children first have to mature into adults for their ideas and opinions to be heard. Either that or they may exist as worthy contributors in a fantasy world. This indirectly reflects how Philippine society views its children: insignificant, yet lovely creatures that have yet to grow into certain categories or stereotypes in order to have a shot at making a contribution in their community.

The key to addressing these issues is for those in power to see things differently. Doing so provides unlimited possibilities for sponsors,

organizations, and ultimately audiences. This instantly creates an environment where diversity in thought, and ultimately content, can exist. Programs that have promise, like *Batang Bibbo*, are few and very far between. One of the main problems is funding for production. Children's shows are recognized as non-raters, and hence, do not attract advertisers and profit. The advertising industry generally regards these programs as full of limitations. The "limitation" of a proper children's show (according to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the International Clearinghouse on Child Rights and the Media) is that it should not have any blatant commercial endorsements. Unfortunately *Batang Bibbo* exists through sponsorship of a hotdog brand. For the sponsor and the network this could well mean a risk since the topics and personalities are slightly out of the ordinary. Yet it opens doors for similar efforts and ideas to flourish.

Getting a sponsor to support non-traditional subject matter is rare, and underscores the need for production companies and networks to explore ways to present more complex themes and characters despite the limitations of airtime, funding and the rule of the ratings. An idea that can be explored is the channeling of corporate social responsibility funds and efforts into producing children's programs. This frees writers and producers from the constant rehashing of "safe" and "viable" storylines and characters for commercial sponsors' brand palatability, and liberates them from the tyranny of ratings. This will allow producers to explore various themes, present new material, and finally come up with truly child-friendly content.

The lament that children are watching programs that are not age-appropriate and are turning to deplorable content through other channels is simply a symptom of the disease: the fact that there is NO content that clearly reflects the issues and concerns of children, because these topics are simply not "sexy" enough to sell. In a sense children come across "non-traditional" content on television through new media. The mobile phone and the internet have given them access to stories and information that they in fact discuss among themselves - whether online or face to face. Talking down to them with jaded storylines and topics will not get networks the audiences they need. This new generation of digital natives is less trustful of the traditional media, especially when they know they can get information on their own, according to their preferences and experience.

Networks and production companies should acknowledge that putting a children's program together requires just as much preparation (research

and careful implementation of messages and images) as a documentary film or program. The topics may be simple but treatment should be developed with a delicate hand. *Sesame Street* and *Batibot* achieved this goal and several generations of viewers attest to the lasting images, messages and songs that came to them through the shows.

More efforts need to be channeled to developing three-dimensional characters. Just because stereotypical superheroes sell does not mean they convey positive values all the time. Children need to see characters dealing with everyday life problems, and not necessarily other-worldly creatures and situations. Programs need to show children that the real world is not always fantastic. Television can do them a favor by giving them a glimpse of real life and make them realize there are other children like them going through a range of life situations. There are also different ways of dealing with certain events and they do not always have to be “dramatic.” Television, after all, also has the power to educate, and if children see that though life is not a string of happy endings, there is always hope that a situation can change if they make up their mind to change it.

This researcher believes this should be the outlook of children’s programs: change need not be a scary thing. Whatever gender or creature one is, there is always the opportunity to make things better. The first step is simply to see things differently.

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