The Great Space Coaster and the Commodification of Children's Television: The Ideology and Legislation that Defined 1980s Children's Programming

"Let me leave you with this message: always remember - no gnews is good gnews with Gary Gnu...fade to black guys." So laments Gary Gnu, the green puppet who dominated the early '80s with his dedication to never report anything from the news, during his last broadcast of *The Gary Gnu Show* in 1986. Despite being canceled for over three decades, Gary Gnu remains a vocal figure in the campaign to preserve the episodes of *The Great Space Coaster* (1981-1986), the children's series that housed his news segment from the beginning ("Gary Gnu Retrospective"). The program recounted the adventures of three young singers who are taken to an asteroid by a clown named Baxter and are introduced to all of the interesting characters who inhabit the asteroid. Through the exploration of various themes and ideas, *The Great Space Coaster* looked at problems children dealt with while giving them constructive role-models to mimic behavior.

In 1983, *The Great Space Coaster* won a Peabody Award for its excellence in children's educational broadcasting for their episode, "If Wishes Were Horses," a story promoting the importance of physical activity for children with disabilities. Co-created by Kermit Love and Jim Martin, the program ran in first-run syndication for five years, amassing a number of fans and achieving a cult-like status in modern memory (Matheson *USA Today*). This program for its public service-oriented content, but it was actually privately funded by Hasbro and distributed on its network. *The Great Space Coaster* is surrounded by the critical moments in the legislation of children's programming and poses the central debate question perfectly: can privately funded network shows ever serve the needs of children, or if is it only through strict regulation that we can ever hope to have reliable, beneficial content for children on television?

The concern regarding children's relationship with television dominated the ideals behind practices such as the Television Code, however, commercialization specifically remained for the most part unstudied up until the shift to Saturday morning cartoons in the 1960s (Kunkel and Roberts 60). The big three networks at the time (ABC, NBC, and CBS) had concentrated their children's programming in one major time block, allowing for advertisers to craft a target demographic and create advertisements specifically geared towards children. By the late sixties, cartoons had increased their advertising time to around twelve minutes per hour (Barcus 1974, as quoted in Kunkel and Roberts). Parent watchdog groups, such as the Action for Children's Television (A.C.T.), pushed for research into the potential ramifications of so much commercialization of children's programming.

These requests were met with resistance not only from the FCC but from academics in the area as well. The trouble was twofold: the area of television in academia was not as prolific as it is currently, and advertising in children's programming was not considered a lucrative issue to explore. At the time, Congress was more interested in scrutinizing the content of children's programming, focusing specifically on violence. Senator Estes Kefauver chaired the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Delinquency (1953) and assembled a team of experts to compile data to prove that television was indeed "bad for children" (Hilmes 203).

The so-called Kefauver hearings were actually not promoting government regulation. On the contrary, Kefauver believed that the key was actually self-regulation, or at least favored it, considering how inconclusive the findings regarding the psychological effects of television were (203). Eager to prove their ability to regulate themselves, the National Association of Broadcasters (N.A.B.) adopted the aforementioned Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters, also known as the Television Code.

It was not just advertising itself that was the issue, rather the introduction of "host-selling." Host-selling, or the process in which a program itself is designed to sell a product, was in its mere infancy when the FCC was forced to confront the issue (Kunkel "Children and Host-Selling Commercials"). In 1969, Mattel released the television program *Hot Wheels*, a children's program designed to sell the eponymous toy cars. Mattel also purchased advertising time ABC's Saturday morning slot, but not during the time slot for the show itself. This still led to the complaint to the FCC, which claimed the program to be a "30-minute commercial" (Roston *Hot Wheels*). The FCC decided this content to contain promotional material and required ABC to count certain aspects of the show as part of their advertising time. These regulations proved too much for *Hot Wheels*, which was canceled in 1971.

This case started a landslide of legislation regarding advertising in children's television. The Television Code expanded in 1974, under the pressures of the A.C.T., to include the precursor to "Kid Vid" laws, which limited commercial time to twelve minutes per hour during children's programming, and prohibited hosts of children's shows from appearing in commercials aimed at children. This expansion coincided with the actual FCC legislation in 1974, which limited commercial time and enforced a clear separation between advertisement and content (Kunkel "Children and Television Advertising").

Ultimately, by 1977, the National Science Foundation summed up three clear conclusions based on the research conducted over children and television. Firstly, young children experience difficulty discerning between a program's content and the advertising during the program's air time. Secondly, children below the age of eight have little to no comprehension of persuasive tactics in advertising, and therefore, thirdly, tend to "express greater belief in commercials" and are more likely to base their purchases or desire purchases on the commercials they see (Kunkel and Roberts). These three scientific “truths,” for lack of a better term, informed all decisions made regarding children’s television legislation on the part of the FCC throughout the late seventies.

However, legislation is always under the discretion of the political party in power. In 1981, Mark Fowler took over as chairman of the FCC under Ronald Reagan, and almost immediately went to work on dismantling regulation he felt to be too strict. Fowler firmly believed in the right of the public interest to determine its own interest, believing that a commercial market in itself is self-regulating (Hilmes 292). He did concede, however, that there were certain markets that needed more protection from capitalism than others, noting the needs for children specifically, but refused to implement any kind of legislation to protect them or to replace the then abandoned Television Code (Roston 61). By 1984, children’s programming was completely deregulated, dominated by host-selling shows and extended advertisements.

This begs the question: is private industry self-regulating at all? If one were to look at *The Great Space Coaster*, one might argue yes, as it is a show dedicated to the needs of children while being completely privately funded. However, research included in Dale Kunkel’s unpublished paper, “Children and Television Advertising,” found that children are not more likely to find less commercial content, as adults would if the market were to become oversaturated with commercials. Children are not able to cognitively grasp the difference between commercials and content, and therefore would not truly be able to tell the difference (18). Due to this, the audience for children’s programming would not decline should networks inundate them with more commercialization, meaning that networks had no reason to actually limit commercials at all (12). Considering this, the problem would only get worse rather than improve, as the only reason not to be making more money through advertising is simply ethical concerns, which do not really find a place in the discussion over private industry.

Fowler famously pointed to public broadcast as the solution for the lack of educational content for young children (Hilmes 292). His meaning behind this was that as public broadcasting was federally funded, commercial networks should just fund those programs in an effort to balance commercial broadcast with public service content. The logic is partially sound: *Sesame Street* had been running successfully since 1969, and along with others similar to it, were shown to have a positive benefit on young children (Kunkel "Policy Battles"). Should it just be the job of public broadcasting, whose funding is steadier than a fickle public opinion, to provide for children's wellbeing? What is interesting about this whole issue is that, actually, Children's Television Workshop, one of the key founders and funders of *Sesame Street*, was stripped of its funding in 1981, forcing *Sesame Street* to invest in its licensing and merchandising, the exact idea to which A.C.T. was opposed (Kunkel).

The Great Space Coaster came out in 1981 in syndication, right as Mark Fowler was taking power over the FCC. Hasbro's conception of *Coaster* was post-concept of host-selling, but also under the stricter regulations imposed by the NAB (whose Code only ended in 1983) and the FCC. Upon further examination of the Peabody Awards entry packet for *The Great Space Coaster* from 1983, the context in which it was created is clear.

Kellogg's Hasbro Industries, Inc. submitted two article reviews and the write-up from when *Coaster* won a Gold Award for the best children's program from 1982 at the 25th International Film & Television Festival of New York. Whereas in 1983, these were supplemental documents to speak on behalf of the quality of the series, looking at these documents in the attempts of contextualizing it in the debate over children's television emphasizes certain aspects of these documents. Namely, the same year that *Coaster* won a Peabody Award, the program was also awarded with an Achievement Award from the A.C.T., the same organization that rallied against the show's host-selling counterparts (Peabody Awards). Sunbow Productions, Inc., the production leg of Kellogg's Hasbro, started their toy-series empire that same year with *G.I. Joe* (1983-1986), a show against which the A.C.T. specifically protested.

The question then remains: where did *The Great Space Coaster* come from? Hasbro's future shows, such as *My Little Pony* (1986-1987) and *The Transformers* (1984-1987) have clear commercial motives that took advantage of the deregulations under Fowler's "toaster" regime (Hilmes 294). However, for all intents and purposes, *Coaster* appears to only care about bringing beneficial content to young children.

"We wanted to use marketing and create TV programming specifically for kids," said Thomas Griffin, as quoted in *The New York Times* (1983). Thomas Griffin was one of the two key players in the conception of *The Great Space Coaster*, along with his partner, Jules Bacal. Their advertising agency, Griffin Bacal, represented all of Hasbro at the point the show was created, and are credited with coming up with the idea of such advertising. *Coaster* itself might have been about helping children, but with two commercial minutes per thirty-minute episode going to Hasbro and Kellogg, and Griffin Bacal producing a total of twenty-six minutes of advertising spots for its client a year, the actual airing of the show was littered with the same concern that ACT had held throughout the '80s: children being consistently exposed to commercialization in their daily lives (*New York Times*).

By the time this interview was written, *The Great Space Coaster* was the most-watched children's show, as it ran five days a week in 85 different markets (*NYT*). The concern then comes from what so many children are actually watching. There is no reliable way to watch full episodes of *Coaster* anymore with the original advertising, and the information regarding the commercials themselves is slim to none. However, the fact that it was not just sponsored by Hasbro, but created and distributed by Hasbro as well, means that this show was most likely not without its commercial presence. It was merely the best way to make money in a regulated landscape.

The Great Space Coaster is remembered for its wholesome content and dedication to quality in children's programming (*The Great Space Coaster .TV*). Clearly modeled after the same concepts as *Sesame Street* (considering again who the creators are), *Coaster* came about right as private industry needed to prove that they were able to produce such content for the public benefit. However, once Fowler deregulated children's programming during his time as FCC chairman, Hasbro was able to allocate more funds in their far more profitable host-selling programs. In this case, it was not the public interest being decided by the "public interest," as Fowler would have claimed (Hilmes 292). *The Great Space Coaster* started out from the best intentions one could have in a privatized industry: using funds and opportunities granted in the marketing process to make quality content for children (and hopefully make more money through advertising). However, good intentions do not propel privatized industry forward, and once the opportunity to make more money presented itself, *Coaster* faded away into the saturated history of forgotten television shows.

After the cancellation of *The Great Space Coaster* in 1986, the movement for government involvement gained momentum, leading up to the ultimate Children's Television Act of 1990, which technically still regulates society today. The Children's Television Act ostensibly severely tightened the reins on children's television in the wake of the commercial Wild West that was children's programming in the 1980s. The act cut the commercial time back down to twelve minutes on weekdays, and ten-and-a-half minutes on weekends. Its main goal was to look after the educational welfare of children, stipulating that networks had to prove an effort of providing for the educational needs of children at the onset of every license renewal, lest their license would be in question (Kunkel "Crafting Media Policy"). However, many critics were quick to point out their outright refusal of banning host-selling television shows, instead only explicitly upholding the legislation banning direct advertisements for the host during the run of the program during its airtime (Andrews 1991). This meant that *G.I. Joe* could continue to live peacefully without much interruption, but any advertisements during an episode could not be a G.I. Joe action figure. This distinction was considered the easiest way to "avoid a regulatory nightmare," as the then vice president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies said (*New York Times* 1991). Advertisers supported the legislation after being guaranteed the survival of host-selling and the N.A.B. after working with legislators to insert compromise language into the act, allowing networks to continue with little to no consequence. The claim was actually to protect shows like *Sesame Street*, which had as previously mentioned invested much of their energy into building a toy brand in order to make the difference in their funding cut and to protect other shows from potential censorship.

In this same *New York Times* article, the founder of A.C.T., Peggy Charren, is quoted: "By redefining the problem, the FCC has given a green light which encourages them to sell toys instead of telling children something." Throughout the nineties, networks got away with extremes such as releasing reruns of the *Flintstones* as educational programming, and even tighter regulations in 1996 have not fully worked to combat the issue regarding educational children's programming (Kunkel "Policy Battles").

In context, *The Great Space Coaster* almost seems to be a turning point in children's television, before the deregulation hit. It was the idealized goal of all groups dedicated to children's television reform yet could not survive the market shift towards commercialized content. Whereas shows such as *G.I. Joe* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* were able to use the viewership of children (which already made them money through ratings and syndication) to make more money through toy-sales, *The Great Space Coaster* was fairly limited in its money-making ability. Yes, it made money through syndication, but it had a minimal presence in the toy industry and made very little off of licensing (Bainbridge, 830).

The Great Space Coaster is what most legislation of children's television ended up being: the best compromise an audience could hope for. An award-winning, quality children's television show with important lessons about life and hardship is an amazing and important thing, and this context is not meant to belittle its significance. However, much as the Children's Television Act itself, it was not fully able to commit completely to the well-being of children with no regard to private industry. The articles in the packet in the Peabody Archives explain it best: "It is, in short, like a thoughtful parent" and it should be remembered as such (Barbou 1981). It came about at the perfect moment in television history (between the initial regulation and deregulation, and before the FCC's controversial Children's Television Act) for a private corporation to create an entertaining show with a focus on children's wellbeing. Its legacy lasts today, as we open up the discussion again over children's programming under new FCC leadership.

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