

Stay Tuned: A Political History of Saturday Morning Cartoons

The political urgency of #WeNeedDiverseBooks has energized both public service and scholarly work by members of our field, but it also underscores the limitations of our established approaches to studying children's culture. While several scholars have argued for the need to engage and critique the culture industry, their uncritical use of "the industry" belies our hesitation, even lack of preparation, to interrogate the complex structure, logics, and influence of the range of independent, corporate, even conglomerated entities that comprise contemporary publishing. Indeed, we need to think cross-industrially and transmedially, as narrative unfold across literature, media, and ancillary markets, to understand the material roots of the vexing ideologies that continue to dominate children's culture.

This paper takes Saturday morning cartoons as a case study for arguing for the need to both expand on the important, though somewhat limited, study of children's media while also understanding it within a larger industrial and political context. Television, in fact, stands as the most influential narrative medium for children today, yet it remains one of the most underexplored areas of our field. Studying it reminds us of the need to examine not only representation and ideology, but also the policies that construct and govern how network television in the United States operate. A focus on broadcasting policy reveals the tense ongoing negotiations between special interest groups (such as the now-defunct Action for Children's Television), advertisers, and politicians (in this case, the Federal Communications Commission) over what constitutes children's television—and, by extension, children.

Tracing the development of Saturday morning cartoons from its nascence in the 1950s through its veritable demise in the 2000s, I show the value—even necessity—to engage in industrial studies of children's culture, including studies of the policies that both define and circumscribe children. To do this, we can engage in an interdisciplinary praxis that draws from both political economy studies as well as cultural studies frameworks, despite misguided notions that such approaches are fundamentally opposed. While this work may seem beyond the traditional wheelhouse of literary and cultural studies, it becomes increasingly clear in doing so how broadcasting policy inflects the narrative content that so often vexes those of invested in the politics of children's culture.