

4-H TV Series Make Impact

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Recommended Citation

Tedrick, William E. (1973) "4-H TV Series Make Impact," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 56: Iss. 4. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.2010>

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Abstract

A recent edition of the Great Plains National Television Library catalog came to my desk.

4-H TV Series Make Impact

William E. Tedrick

A RECENT EDITION of the Great Plains National Television Library catalog came to my desk. Six pages in that issue were of special interest. They described different 4-H TV Series: Living in a Nuclear Age, 4-H Photo Fun and Mulligan Stew.

To many of us, that moment symbolized a milestone of progress. It proved again that a useful idea properly conceived and nurtured can grow and find a certain measure of success even in these fast changing times.

Like most innovations introduced into educational systems, this one was some 10 to 12 years from the idea stage to general adoption. However, if future production funds cannot be generated, problems are in sight.

The general concept of conducting youth development by television was born in Michigan about 1956 and 1957. At that time the state 4-H program staff joined hands with the extension TV specialists and the Michigan State University ETV station to produce the first series.

That series featured electricity and was designed to simulate a traditional 4-H Club with an adult leader and 4-H members. This basic format was to dominate production that followed.

Michigan kept the ball rolling when it produced a second series on science in the early 60's. Still later TV Science II appeared in the mid-60's followed by the 4-H TV Action Club in 1967.

The early series were used by a few Eastern states but not extensively. The first series to gain national exposure was the TV Action Club produced on a U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Civil Defense grant to help sell emergency preparedness. This series

was destined to be used in nearly every state and is believed to have attracted several million viewers.

Several states had produced similar series on a variety of topics, including automotive safety, dog care, bicycle safety, clothing and others, none of these was apparently designed for or received broad distribution and use.

The 4-H Photo Fun Club produced in 1970, was the first series produced with a national distribution plan in mind from the beginning and also the first to be produced entirely on private funds.

By this time, two more series were funded and in production. Kansas was working on the series entitled *Living in a Nuclear Age*, and in Washington, D.C., the USDA Film Division was shooting *Mulligan Stew*. Both series were completed during 1972 and are currently being aired across the country.

Living in a Nuclear Age and *Mulligan Stew* departed significantly from earlier productions. Both were produced entirely on film and did not attempt to simulate the traditional 4-H club in their format.

Early series were produced to fit the 13-week TV programming calendar, but due to production costs, the numbers of programs in the series were gradually reduced, and six seems to be the magic number now.

The 9-12 age group has been the target audience so far, with *Living in a Nuclear Age* pitched more toward the 12-14 age range.

The basic question of any educational effort is this: Does it make a difference?

Available research and survey data can help us make some judgments about that. After reviewing a wide array of data, the author believes several significant results can be cited and supported with some degree of certainty.

No attempt is made to assign relative importance to different results cited here. The reader is left to his own judgment and value system in that regard.

Have significant numbers of youth watched 4-H TV series?

Data reviewed says yes they have. Data obtained by coincidental telephone interviews suggest that from 11 to 58 percent of

the enrolled members watched the entire series. In general, equal or greater numbers of youth and adults not formally enrolled were viewing. The data here would suggest that total audiences in addition to those formally enrolled have numbered into the millions.

Have viewers learned from the 4-H TV series?

Unfortunately, adequate data obtained under strictly controlled experimental conditions are lacking. Studies that dealt with this problem show varying impacts, but they suggest that these tentative conclusions may be justified:

- Knowledge learning about 4-H in general and specific subject matter content is greater among viewers than it is among non-viewers when tested under identical conditions.
- Effective learning or attitude change is greater in regard to the 4-H concept than it is toward the subject matter content among viewers.
- Skill development, as reflected by viewers being able to complete certain skill tasks or activities suggested in the TV program and supplemental materials, was observed in a low percentage of viewers.
- The frequency of TV viewing and amount and quality of learning of all types is related to how much reinforcement the youth receives from teachers, parents, leaders and friends before, during and following actual viewing of the series.

What are viewers like?

It's fairly certain that 80 percent or more of the viewers have experienced their first contact with 4-H via the TV set. Little overlap between 4-H members in on-going clubs are enrolled as TV viewers.

This is an important result as far as extension and 4-H programs are concerned. It means that new and different audiences are being contacted that were apparently being missed by previous programming methods. These audiences are apparently mostly urban youth in areas where extension resources are generally least available.

Historically, the viewers have been somewhat weighted in favor

of girls, apparently partly due to subject content of programs and the TV viewing pattern differences between boys and girls. Some evidence suggests that girls tend to be less active in outside activities, thus they are more likely to watch TV at the time the TV series are aired, usually on Saturdays in most markets.

Any “spin-off” values observed?

Perhaps the one most often mentioned was the fact that extension agents felt their professional status as a youth worker was enhanced. They report that teachers and school administrators expressed new interest in agents and their work. They also reported that mass media professionals responded more favorably to them following the planning and implementation of a series.

Some cost accounting reports show that on a per-viewer basis, TV programming is extremely efficient when compared to traditional approaches requiring intensive agent commitment.

In summary, available evaluation data suggest that the adoption and continued use of TV as an educational method for youth development has and will continue to pay direct and indirect dividends to extension.

There is evidence that learning does take place from voluntary viewing among a significantly large segment of the target audience. When additional reinforcement techniques are used, levels of learning increase in proportion.

Extension workers at state and county levels have developed a new professional status with school officials and mass media personnel. The relative cost of programming on a cost/return ratio may be favorable as compared to more traditional methods.

The past is indicative of the future only if extension leaders at all levels come to realize the significance of the TV series as an innovation and give it their full support.

New ways of funding production for nationwide distribution must be found soon, or quality TV programming for youth development programs will diminish. There must be ways developed to bring private sources of funds into the picture to bolster support from public monies.

The ES-USDA, National 4-H Committee and National 4-H

Foundation are giving good leadership, but without the full support of ECOP and the state extension services they can be only partially successful in keeping TV alive and well.

Individual states cannot adequately fund a high quality series. It costs money—big money—but it's worth every penny if properly planned and executed.

Extension information staff professionals have a significant contribution to make in expanding and improving ETV in general and 4-H series specifically.