

Low Definition Kids in a High Definition World

Gone are the days when you would pull your new TV out the box, plug it in, connect the bunny ears and escape into the wonderful world of television? When our family first migrated from South Africa to Australia in the late seventies, we were mesmerized by the large colored TV that commanded central place on the green shag pile carpet in the living room of our rented Sydney home. In an attempt to maintain control of its apartheid system the South African government censored much of the social progress that was taking place in the rest of the world through conspicuously tight media control of newspapers, radio and the non-existent television of my childhood. The Dutch Reform Church proclaimed television as the "devil's own box for disseminating communism and immorality". However after the country listened to one of the most spectacular world events - man's first steps on the moon, on radio alone, the government was forced to cede defeat. In January 1976 South Africa joined the century airing limited selections of mundane programs divided into English and Afrikaans during viewing time which ran for a mere five hours per night. We were elated to arrive in a country where television was an accepted part of life and where four channels aired free from the early hours of the morning all through the night - in English. Perhaps the church was right but as far as we were concerned, the Fonz ruled! We would plonk ourselves down at the end of every school day to eat space food sticks and watch "Happy Days". After dinner we would return to the holy entertainment box filling our heads with new and useless information and over stimulate our senses with the barrage of advertising material, music, action and drama. Today I watch my children memorized in the same way as they watch Star Wars on our High Definition TV. The picture quality is infinitely better, clearer, sharper, the characters larger, the sound booming through their little psyches, altering their imaginative play forever. A stick in the bush, is transformed into a light saber, the fairy queen is now princess Armedala. The quality of this larger than life media, delivered into our humble home through a High definition Multi-media Interface - HDMI cable allows the technology of video games consoles, personal computers, digital audio devices, computer monitors and all things high tech, to connect producing state of the art sound, picture and imaging. The home theatre is no longer the simple screening of a rented movie on a Friday night projected onto a white wall in a playroom where cousins and grandparents gather to watch Paul Newman and Robert Redford swindle their way through the west. Today the experience is an all consuming sensory onslaught from which it is almost impossible to disengage. I remember my sister's indignation when she tried to participate in a visualization exercise that asked her to imagine she was walking through a forest. "Disney stole my imagination!" she cried out at the end of the exercise - for she was able only to imagine a young Mowgli wondering through the deep forests of The Jungle Boy. I imagine today's High Definition TV is stealing more than our children's imagination, it's certainly stealing their time. As I watch their little eyes grow in awe at this larger than life, overly defined backlit world, I wonder about the reality against which they will be able to define themselves.

About the Author

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