



Photo by Michael Wilhelm

## Cartoons and Commercials: When you can't tell the difference.

Toy ads have always been an integral part of Saturday morning programming, particularly in the weeks before Christmas. But for the past few years, some people have complained that they can't tell the ads from the programs.

The problem is some of the shows' animated characters are toys. Critics claim programs such as "He-Man and the Masters of the Universe," aren't programs at all, but thinly-disguised toy advertisements.

The examples are numerous. In Eugene children can see at least 11 toy-linked shows, from "Care Bears" to "Pound Puppies."

And like the age-old chicken-and-egg question, it's often impossible to tell which comes first — the show or the toy.

The idea of featuring a toy in a program isn't new. The Federal Communications Commission put a stop in 1969 to an ABC show, "Hot Wheels," which featured toy cars made by Mattel Toys.

But by 1983, 13 toy-linked programs were coming across the airwaves, prompting Action for Children's Television, a Boston-based lobbying group, to file a complaint with the FCC. The complaint charged the commission with violating its own guidelines regulating children's programming, adopted in 1974.

But rather than move in, the FCC backed off. In 1984 the FCC weakened the 1974 policy, opting to allow the television industry to virtually decide for itself what type of programming it would offer children.

Now, according to ACT President Peggy Charren, more than 60 children's shows are tie-ins for toys.

And toy-linked shows do "create a demand," says Mark Haag, regional manager of Toys "R" Us, a national toy store chain. "If they like the TV show... they're going to be wanting some of that product."

Children ask for particular toys and brand names, and television ads play a direct role in that, Haag adds.

"TV advertising has a tremendous impact on what the child asks for — they want what they see on TV."

According to Charren, selling Shirley Temple dolls inspired by the child's movie success wasn't the same because "the people writing the movies were not trying to sell dolls."

Toy makers also are fully aware of the implications of tie-ins, Charren says, citing a Hasbro Industry advertisement in a trade journal that predicted its sales would jump as soon as a show based on a Hasbro toy was aired.

"It's not like they don't know what they're doing — they know what they're doing," she says.

Toy-based shows limit diversity, a critical element of good programming, Charren adds. For one thing, all the shows must be animated because toys can't be made to talk otherwise.

"It's made it very hard for people who can't afford cable or home video to find anything else," she says.

And if it's hard to tell the commercials from the programs, in some cases it's hard to tell the program production companies from the toy manufacturers.

For example, the company that produces the G.I. Joe cartoon, Sunbow Productions, is a subsidiary of Griffin/Bacal, the agency that handles advertising

for Hasbro's G.I. Joe doll. And Hasbro owns Cluster Productions, the company that distributes the G.I. Joe cartoon.

It must be working. Haag says even though the product isn't new, "G.I. Joe and his accessories are still doing extremely well."

And according to Charren, Mattel Toys also has set up a television production company.

"So what's happened is we've given over children's programming to the toy companies," Charren says. "What they're (toy makers) doing now is coming out of the closet."

Kathy Thorpe, Mattel's manager of marketing and public relations, says she doesn't know if Mattel owns a production company.

But she does say cartoons and corresponding toys should be treated as separate entities.

"A bad product line cannot support a bad TV show and vice versa," she says. "There have been cases where the product has flourished and the TV show has failed."

Thorpe admits television shows do increase the toys' exposure. But she defends the quality and entertainment value of the programs.

For example, Mattel is picky about how its He-Man action figure is portrayed in the corresponding cartoon, she says. He-Man never kills anyone, and every show contains a moral lesson, she says.

And He-Man and the Masters of the Universe toys were solid sellers before the show began, she adds.

Mattel makes three toys that have their own shows, according to Thorpe, and a show for a product already on the market is planned for next

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secretary of the Oregon Consumer League. "A lot of it is not out and out dishonest. Just 'huckery' and gyrations and pushing you into paying higher prices."

Another problem during the holiday season, Smith says, is the influx of mail-order and catalog companies that charge exorbitant prices.

"An awful lot of these mail-order and catalog companies jack the price up and have a handling charge, and you darn well they don't need that much money," he says.

Although many people today find the Christmas season to be increasingly meaningless, very few understand why that is.

"They don't realize that the gift-giving has only been a modern phenomenon, and that adults didn't used to look for their happiness in that context," Robinson says.

"It depends on how old they are. People younger than 50 or 60 will only have known a commercial Christmas, and they kinda get defensive when you attack it because that's what Christmas is. And they don't know what would replace it," she says.

One of the main drawbacks of the commercialism of Christmas for individuals, besides the obvious financial burden, is poor mental health. Tom Boerman, a supervisor in the crisis department at Eugene's White Bird Clinic, believes the buy, buy, buy syndrome plays a big role.

"In some people's minds it seems to become a reflection of not necessarily their goodness or their worth, but if they don't have that ability to buy, buy, buy, it creates some inadequacies. You know, the guy who calls and is feeling very sickly bummed because he can't buy his daughter what seems to be a sufficient amount of Christmas presents," Boerman says.

Through their workshops and interviews, Robinson and Staeheli have found a dif-

ference in how men and women approach the commercialism of the holidays. Men act passive about the Christmas season and possess more of a childlike attitude yet are more concerned about the commercialism, Robinson says.

"We find that women gets so wrapped up in the production and all of the amazing wonderful things they can do and buy, that they really can't be apart from it as much as men and really aren't critical of it," Robinson says.

"There's a tremendous amount of pressure, particularly on women still, to be responsible for making sure all the right people receive gifts," says Mariam Johnson, acting director of the Center for the Study of Women in Society.

Another effect of the commercialism is the decline in the spirituality and religious appeal traditionally associated with the season. It's especially ironic when one takes into account the fact that gift-giving has Christian roots.

"For people who've always looked to Christmas as a spiritual kind of thing, the more commercialized Christmas has become over the years, the more the spiritual base for Christmas has been eroded," Boerman says.

"People put together real high hopes for what this time of year means to them, and it's kind of epitomized in that period of opening presents. And when that's over with, there still remains in a lot of people's minds a void. There still is a certain emptiness," he says.

"Getting something and giving something is part of the season, really. It's inspired by the reality of the season. But it can become an end in itself," says Rev. Carlos Rustia, a Roman Catholic priest at the Newman Center.

According to Rustia, there are some things people feel doing to combat the emptiness they may experience.

"I preached the first Sun-

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