

Social Mores and SpongeBob Squarepants

Emily Conrad

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Professor Jason McKahan

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Who lives in a Pineapple under the sea? SpongeBob Squarepants! Absorbent and yellow and porous is he...SpongeBob Squarepants! IF nautical nonsense be something you wish...SpongeBob Squarepants! Then drop on the deck and flop like a fish! SpongeBob Squarepants! SpongeBob Squarepaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaants!



Since television first took off, it has continued to transform based on what the audience wants. While Disney had already started making animated films, the first cartoon for television was introduced in the 1940's. Since then, like most shows on television, content and variety has changed to meet the approval of viewers. What seems to have changed radically is children's television. As social mores have changed, so have children's cartoons. The language, the content and the overall tone of the shows have changed. Children's television used to be about just that: children. Now it is flooded with adult undertones and often times are made with parents as the

audience in mind. A show that would most reflect these ideas is Nickelodeon's "SpongeBob Squarepants."

Saturday morning cartoons have always been in a fight for top ratings among children. In the late nineties, *Pokémon* was ruling the television. That is until 1999 when a "geeky, naïve perpetually optimistic sea sponge" (Hendershot, 2004) was introduced. After one month it was on its way to passing *Pokémon*, which it eventually did. Not only did it beat *Pokémon* and any Saturday morning ratings, it also broke Nickelodeon's own record with *Rugrats*, (Hendershot, 2004). Another show around that time, *Ren and Stimpy*, was an adult cartoon that children latched on to. The fact that the network believed "they were creating a kid's show indicates nothing less than willful blindness, or, to put it more kindly, wishful thinking on its part, (Hendershot, 2004). The fact that any show is animated regardless of whether or not it is aimed at children or not, will draw a child in. For instance, many children are more excited to watch a show such as *Family Guy* rather than a PBS original because of the loud, flashy animation that comes with it. SpongeBob itself is rated TV-Y, which states by the Federal Communications Commission that the "program's themes are "specifically designed for a very young audience, including children from ages 2-6," (Lewis and stuff). Though a lot of the jokes would be lost on a child that young, children much older who understand the content are watching the show and drawing from the double edged phrases.

What is interesting about children's television is that is made by *adults* for children. This would be the most obvious reason that adults are drawn to children's television. But in comparison to other children's television networks, Nickelodeon claims to be different. They think they give children what they really want instead of what we as adults *think* they want. Heather Hendershot makes the appropriate point that, "Grown-ups who work for Nickelodeon

can, apparently, magically violate the sacrosanct division between adult and child, a division about which there is much cultural anxiety, in order to think like kids and create shows just for kids.” Is the concept of children’s television even possible? There are shows that seem to hold nothing of interest for an adult (Like *Barney and Friends*) but all kids TV are ultimately the product of adult minds (Hendershot, 2004). It does seem impossible that adults making a show for children could not slip in some adult content, even if it seems non-provocative and non-offensive. For example, SpongeBob himself does not come right out and imitate adult ideas or characters, but instead alludes to them. He uses “verbal strategies” from the likes of James Bond or Bruce Willis: “SpongeBob engages in a pencil-sword fight with a menacing animated doodle, he breaks the doodle’s pencil and says, in a mock-serious voice, “Looks like it’s a draw.” The doodle sharpens its pencil, and SpongeBob says, “I see your point,” (Hendershot, 2004). SpongeBob is naïve and innocent but still leaves room for the parents to draw their own conclusions based on his random meanderings.

Adults are not ashamed to admit that they give into the children’s pull of SpongeBob. Even many celebrities vocally support the show based on their own entertainment, such as Ellen DeGeneres, Jackie Chan, Dr. Dre, Tony Bennett, Tom Waits, Bruce Willis, Sigourney Weaver, The Violent Femmes and the “inspiration for the character: Jerry Lewis,” (Hendershot, 2004). When it comes to certain shows like *Sesame Street* or *Dora the Explorer*, it is easy to market material for children. But when SpongeBob took off for more audiences than just children, a whole new world was opened up in terms of marketing. Adult t-shirts, license-plate frames, flip flops, air fresheners, boxers, dorm room memo board, navel rings, soap on a rope, bra and underwear sets and thongs (Hendershot, 2004), just to name a few products, are what have been put out there for the older audiences. While some of them are fairly generic, things like

SpongeBob Bikini Bottom things don't exactly come with a childlike connotation. This seems to be a current strategy "of popular culture to both exaggerate generational differences and to profit from transgenerational address with products that are distinct from rival product by virtue of being 'youthful,'" (Kinder, 1995). This basically translates into products that can be targeted at children and adults are extremely lucrative. The show has been such a hit with teens and adults that it was played not just on Nickelodeon but also on MTV and Spike TV. When SBSP first debuted, it was slated for ages six to eleven. By summer 2002 Nickelodeon realized the adult audience was growing significantly so they began to air the shows weekdays at 8:00 p.m. This is an obvious way that the network encouraged adult viewing and by June 2002 "viewers between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine took up almost one-third of the program's total prime-time audience," (Hendershot, 2004).

There has been a study done on the adult attraction to *SpongeBob Squarepants*. After the show hit an all time high "anecdotal evidence began to emerge that suggested that college students and adults were counting themselves among the *SpongeBob SquarePants* fans as well," (Williams). An analysis of the audience was necessary because there was a notable amount of adult viewers but percentages and more were needed in order to proceed. Using a custom re-contact telephone survey, criteria was established by which respondents could be identified as "SpongeBob Squarepants Adult Alphas" (e.g., watch the television show at least three times a month; rate the series an 8, 9, or 10 on a 10-point appeal scale)" The results showed that 6.6% of 18-54 year-olds in the United States, or 10 million adults, were SBSP enthusiasts. Nearly two thirds of the Alphas are women, three-quarters of them are parents, and African Americans are overrepresented in this consumer group," (Williams).

So what brings adults down to the childlike level of television? Hendershot argues that the “sophisticated dialogue, ironic humor and parody,” are often key. This goes back to SpongeBob and his allusion to adult characters. These are jokes that young children would not pick up even if they are not inappropriate. But there are many moments within the SpongeBob realm that the jokes are inappropriate. For example, in one episode there is a sculpted mermaid who does not have any cleavage. While this seems all well and fine, there are fish holding big balls that are to imitate her breasts. Many adults expect children to overlook this detail (Hendershot) but this is not always the case. Children are growing up faster these days, which in of itself in an entire argument on its own, but it has become apparent. Because of this, especially with shows such as *SpongeBob* perpetuating the themes, kids are catching on faster to the jokes. Though *SpongeBob* is not seen as edgy and harmful as shows like *Ren and Stimpy*, *Family Guy* and *South Park*, for children, it still has adult undertones that children learn to understand before adults realize this.

SpongeBob is nor man, nor child. He has a job like an adult man but he plays and mostly thinks childlike. He has childlike emotions but is caught in many adult situations. In one episode he is upset that everyone makes fun of him for letting his grandmother kiss him and make him cookies. He takes his friend Patrick’s advice to being an adult (1. Puff out his chest, 2. Say “tax exemption,” 3. Develop a taste for free-form jazz) and reveals his ultimate grown-up weapon: sideburns. When he does get to his grandmothers and expresses his need to be an adult and not be babied anymore, she obliges him and treats him as she would any other adult. He finds that he cannot accept this because it is too much. He rips off his sideburns and ends up in a crying heap at her feet. She tells him that adults can be kissed too, as she hands him back his sideburns *and* cookies, (Hendershot, 2004). The show is very conflicted in whether or not SpongeBob and his

friends should act like adults, or act like children. This can give children confusing ideas about their roles. While mostly it is all in fun and not to be taken so seriously, psychologically it can play a part in certain issues. Many things pertaining to children's behavior over the years have been conveniently blamed on television and movies and music, and this is often a fallback excuse. But it does not mean that it can never be accepted as viable. There have been many shows where the adult or adults act in a childlike manor, such as *Blue's Clues* (Steve and Joe), Buffalo Bob from *Howdy Doody*, or PeeWee Herman from *PeeWee's Playhouse*. SpongeBob is different because we are never given one notion or another on his adult/child character. This then brings about the question of performing age.

Hendershot contends that children's television can be understood to be much like gender, as articulated by queer theory: like gender, age is enacted. Both are requirements of society – you must be one of two genders, you must have a level of maturity that “matches” your physical age and so on and so forth, (Hendershot, 2004). These ideas can and have been revised, therefore the same can be done from childhood to adulthood. What children can and cannot do: smoke, drink, attend college etc, are things that have been ever changing. One idea cannot be backed up without its partner getting the same attention, so in turn adults are allowed to go through the shifts in their expected plans as well. As Hendershot states, “learning how to act your age was very different a hundred years ago from what it is now.” In almost every kids TV show, the characters *are* children, or aliens or animals that are young. The shows not animated, like *Blues Clue's* with Steve, visibly have a functioning adult. It changes the way the shows reach the children. SpongeBob has no physical characteristics of an adult but he *acts* young so the children connect easier with him. And in addition this makes anything subliminal or inappropriate he says slide in under the radar. Many parents are worried that their children are being exposed to unfit

content but unless they sat down to watch a full few episodes of the show they would not pick up on a lot of the subliminal innuendos. Phillip Scepaniski states:

For quite a while, cartoons were seen as children's programming and though recent trends in television comedy have called this association into question, the concept of combining a children's genre with adult themes still bears an underlying comedic current. Try mentioning cartoon porn to almost anyone and see if you don't get a laugh. But the inherent humor of this conflict also leads to controversy, as people worry about drawing children's eyes and ears to seemingly child-unfriendly content.

There is an episode of the show titled, "Sailor Mouth." While SpongeBob is out by the dumpsters behind his work he sees a word he does not recognize written on the trash receptacle. When he goes to speak it a dolphin's squeak is played, and done so for the rest of the episode. When Patrick comes about and SpongeBob asks about the word, he is told it must be a "word enhancer" to make something more fancy. For the rest of the show SpongeBob and Patrick run around using the word until they get into trouble. This plays on the aspect of children and their awe of curse words but in a way is still encouraging the use of words they do not know. Had SpongeBob just asked an "adult" on the show and had it explained there would not have been any uncertainty. Also, depending on the parent's seriousness, there are other less offensive words thrown around the shows many times. For example, the words and phrases, "stupid," "idiot," and "shut up!" are frequently used in each episode. Many parents find this offensive because they are worried that their children will start to repeat it and use it in other situations. Even if a parent tries to instill many things in their children, it is often hard with such a TV icon like SpongeBob to ignore what he makes look cool and listen to ones parents.

SpongeBob Squarepants, while low on foul language and violence, is not devoid of any sexual innuendos. Like other shows in the past, such as *Teletubbies*, *SpongeBob* has been much ridiculed for insinuated homosexual content. There are many episodes in which SpongeBob and Patrick are referred to as a couple, one of the most prominent being in the episode, “Rock-a-bye Bivalve.” The two underwater creatures adopt a baby mollusk and raise it together. SpongeBob stays home, slaving over a hot stove, cleaning, wearing curlers on his head (though he has no hair) and trying to raise the mollusk and please Patrick. Patrick “goes to the office” all day and comes home refusing to help with any household duties or helping with the baby. SpongeBob assumed the female role as Patrick took over the male role. There has also been public outcry to the fact that Squidward, SpongeBob’s boss on the show, may be exhibiting gay qualities as well. Hendershot states:

Squidward’s appeal to adults works, I think, on several levels. There is a childish delight in seeing a campy gay character on a children’s show because one knows that this is a little bit naughty. Children’s television is supposed to be sex-free, and network censors are particularly ware of gay content. As I’ve observed elsewhere, it seems that the producers of children’s television believe that children are both nonsexual and heterosexual.

Another good point, argued by Robert Keser:

Though fundamentally innocent, the show still delights in naughty flashes and refuses to punish them, as when Patrick materializes in fishnet stockings and dominatrix stiletto-heels in a capricious bit of musical-theatre dress-up. ..When Patrick asks, ‘Did you see my underwear?’ it's embarrassment. When he follows up with ‘Did you want to?’ it's sexual, all within a two-line dialogue exchange.

In 2005 there was a promotional video that showed SpongeBob with a few other children's characters singing a song to promote diversity and tolerance. An Evangelical group attacked SpongeBob because they felt he was becoming an advocate for sexuality. The creator of SpongeBob, Stephen Hillenburg, was quoted as saying that SpongeBob was not gay, but in fact asexual. He further confirmed this by saying that "sexual preference was never considered during the creation of the show, (Associated Press, 2005).

Children are simply assumed to be uninterested in the gayness of characters but again, with so much getting to children at an earlier age, they are more prone to receive these sorts of themes and run with them. The reason, it seems, that adults really do enjoy children's programming so much, is because they take interest in the jokes that seem like they will fly over children's heads. Just very recently Burger King has produced a very inappropriate advertisement using SpongeBob. Using the rap song by Sir Mix-a-Lot, "Baby Got Back" (or better known as "I Like Big Butts,") the BK moguls changed the words to, "I Like Square Butts," for the theme of the ad. The ad shows scantily dressed woman shaking their derrieres to the camera while their butts are being measured. This is much like the original video done with Sir Mix-a-Lot but hardly an appropriate way to get kids interested in begging their parents to go to Burger King. Besides the obvious, vulgar reasons this should not be targeted towards children, psychologically this fuels the idea that girls have to have a certain kind of body to be thought of as attractive. Little girls seeing this ad will imitate it thinking it is what they have to look like in order to gain any kind of wanted attention. It is an offensive commercial in its own rite but the fact that it is targeted at children and their kid's meals is stretching it a bit. If SpongeBob wasn't associated to some as perverse before, the ad certainly does a good job of kicking that idea into high gear. The ad can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ap21ghq27g>

In addition to the whole idea of children's shows being inappropriate, it seems that as of late kid's cartoons are coming out faster than we can handle. They are wildly commercialized and seem to be only created to sell products. The content or educational value hardly compare to the millions of dollars that are being made off of the lunch boxes, clothing lines, hygiene products, desserts, toys and more. Shows that really teach children moral and educational values are not as prominent in the commercialized world, in terms of products and just general promotion. The violent and crude television shows are everywhere you look and on their characters names on everyone's lips, they are in stores being sold and in children's rooms in all forms. But rarely do you see products from *Sesame Street* or *Caillou* littering department stores. This is always something that is in the hands of the parents. Because of SBSP's high ratings, one-third of that coming from adult viewership, increased the networks prime-time ratings by thirteen percent. In terms of advertising, Nickelodeon was never the type of network to have any commercials that were not their own. But with the creation and take off of SBSP, outside buyers were racing to get advertising time, even if there was no guarantee their ads would be played during an episode.

When it comes down to it, it is the final word of the parent what can be seen and what can't. If they find humor in the show, or nothing wrong with it, then that is their call. The jokes are often subtle and short but as previously stated throughout this argument, children are not as innocent as adults would like to think. Hendershot sums up the entire issue by saying, "eager to believe that their children remain untainted by the corrupt adult world, parents may imagine that their children don't get the double edged jokes; if that's what they think, the joke's on them." An indeed, the joke is on them, because children are being exposed to more than ever before and if parents are truly concerned with their children being exposed to certain content they find

questionable, than they need to take a closer look at what their children are watching and decide for themselves.

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