

BOOK REVIEW

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Sarah Banet-Weiser tells the story of how Nickelodeon, the first network dedicated exclusively to children's fare, moved from obscurity into global dominance and effectively mapped out a "nation" of what Banet-Weiser calls "consumer citizens." Her thesis is that tight boundaries between the commercial and the real no longer apply and that the children inhabiting the Nickelodeon universe are, in effect, political actors. How does she get there, and is she right?

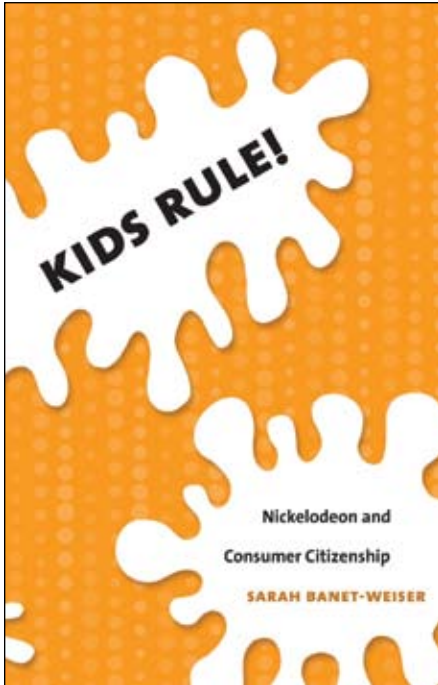
Banet-Weiser does an exceptional job of analyzing the development of the Nickelodeon brand. Using internal documents, private interviews, and hours of television programming, she notes Nickelodeon's movement from an edgy, experimental network to a global brand with seemingly unassailable market share. Banet-Weiser relays without judgment the contradictions between Nickelodeon's appeal to parents (non-violent, "let kids be kids") and its appeal to youngsters ("Us versus Them"). She tacks back and forth between comments of creative directors and programmers and those of Nickelodeon kids to illustrate the putative kinship between Nick's progenitors and loyal fans; she gives the reader a strong sense of what it means to be "in" the Nickelodeon brand.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of *Kids Rule!* is Banet-Weiser's analysis of Nickelodeon's relationship to girl power,

diversity, and the ironic approach to gender. She examines each as it appears over time in the programming and questions whether the network champions, or rather tames, these movements. While she frequently calls the network's practices with respect to feminism, multiculturalism, and gender-subversive irony "complex," she ultimately suggests that the network domesticates and impoverishes them. At the end of the day, it's all about market share and the consumption of ideological markers. Banet-Weiser leaves open the question of whether or not the steady flow of diverse characters on television sufficiently shapes children's cultural expectations. Probing this would make for an interesting follow-up project.

At the heart of *Kids Rule!*, however, is the presentation of Nickelodeon as a mini-universe in which children have real choices and real political identity. Banet-Weiser argues repeatedly, with scholar Naomi Klein, that branding constitutes a "key symbolic frame of reference for contemporary identity" (81) and that Nickelodeon provides the ultimate form of this through its discourse of citizenship. According to Banet-Weiser, Nickelodeon effectively "constitutes" children as consumers within "Nickelodeon Nation," a community with rights, pledges of allegiance, and political choices. To argue as she does that the children viewing Nickelodeon are engaged in "political acts" compels Banet-Weiser to argue that the boundaries between the commercial and the real need to be blurred, that certain marketing strategies are actually "political philosophy," and that commerce plays a larger role than formal education in forming identity.

I have to wonder if Banet-Weiser is taking the Nickelodeon phenomenon a



little too seriously. It should not really surprise us that network executives focus on market share, that they use (or misuse) themes and movements that resonate with the public, or, put more charitably, that their best intentions are swallowed up in profit. The real question is whether Nickelodeon's influence is *primarily* cultural or political, and how extensive it is in the first place. Does Banet-Weiser really think that the experience of watching *The Fairly OddParents* sounds louder in children's ears than doing chores and homework and interacting with peers on the way to school? If so, then in which children's cases? Surely some children are more amenable to being shaped by media than others.

I have to wonder further whether collapsing all experiences into the political is really helpful in understanding identity and behavior. Banet-Weiser asks what the costs are of Nickelodeon's limited view of

citizenship, but a further question would be the costs of construing activities such as watching a particular network as "political." Of course, all spheres are permeable; of course, the boundaries of governance are informed by latent cultural assumptions. If Nickelodeon urges children's sense of self in a certain direction, for better or worse, we need to know that. But our view of culture would be small indeed if we equated watching *Dora the Explorer* with pulling the lever for a candidate.

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