

Setting the scene: A room with a view

Fiona Cram

<https://doi.org/10.18296/cm.0203>

In this opening piece, Fiona Cram (Ngāti Pahauwera) reflects on her introduction to the new technology of her childhood—the television set. She intersperses her memories of how this device changed her whānau’s dynamics with advice for today’s young people as they clamour for new technology to think more deeply about the associated consequences.

My childhood memories of a new technology—television—are interspersed here with my speculations about how rangatahi¹ are engaging with a new technology of their time—mobile devices and ease of connectivity. I make no claims that my memories are in any way generalisable to my generation, just as I make no claims that I know anything much about what’s going on for rangatahi today, apart from what they choose to share with me and various media portrayals of their lives. In writing this piece, I’m seeking connection across generations to propose that there are some experiences we share of growing up in a “new” technological world, just as they in turn may also seek such a connection when they are parents and grandparents of young people who are inhabiting a world with another iteration of new technology. So, to begin ...

Some of my earliest childhood memories are of the arrival of television in our neighbourhood. I say “neighbourhood” because this magic entertainment box did not make its appearance in the corner of our living room until some time after it was welcomed into other people’s houses. As a small concession, we were able to occasionally visit our neighbours and watch their television. I can recall *Felix the Cat* cartoons, in glorious black and white, that made us marvel at this new technology and kept us riveted in place—quiet and attentive. The view in a room with a television was marvellous and exciting, and not accessed anywhere near often enough as my mother didn’t want us kids bothering neighbours.

When I think about the burning desire I’ve observed, of young people wanting a mobile device and the ability to be connected, I wonder what they’re expecting.

1 Te reo Māori is glossed at the end of this article.

With television, we wanted to have the social capital that would enable us to join in conversations with our friends. We didn't want to be left out or left behind. Adults are often challenged about when to get their tamariki or mokopuna their own device and, like my whānau, it may be something that's delayed because it's unaffordable. In the COVID-19 lockdown, lots of young people could not do remote learning because there was no device they could use, or they had to share the one device with siblings and adults in their household. A lack of connectivity that prevents learning shutters the view from a young person's room.

Finally, and sometime later, my father gave in, and our very own television took pride of place in our home. The living-room furniture was shifted to make space for this treasured possession, with the couch and armchairs reoriented so we could all watch from good vantage points. What followed were nights of us assembling in the living room after dinner and baths to watch television until bedtime. The view in our living room was of us cosying down in our pyjamas, watching the television intently, shushing those who talked, and occasionally being treated to two squares from a block of Cadbury dairy milk chocolate.

Rather than being about family members sitting and enjoying entertainment together, a mobile device provides young people with a curated, private form of connectivity. Parental controls and restrictions can moderate this but, still, we're opening a world up to young people that we're often naïve about and may not seek to inquire after. This world may also consume many hours of their time each day and disrupt other activities, including whānau occasions. The ways in which those with parental responsibilities seek to express their guidelines can be a catalyst for meaningful discussion and/or perceived by young people as curtailing their freedom of expression. When a young person is in a virtual room with friends who are both known and unknown to their parents or grandparents, how do these adult caretakers get some sense of the view being seen from that room?

What I don't remember much about are the television advertisements I saw when I was young. Mostly they played in short blocks every 15 minutes or so and this provided an ideal time for those watching to run to the toilet or for someone to put the kettle on and make a cup of tea. Looking back, however, I now realise that so much of what I take for granted or consider ordinary is actually a consequence of early efforts to sell us stuff via this new medium of

television. The jingles for sweets stick with me and continue to fuel my sugar cravings (for example, “Pinkies the bar for you ...”). I also continue to wash and condition my hair with various bottled concoctions. I attribute this to growing up in the 1960s when detergent technology was new and companies were touting new products that would make us, our stuff, and the surfaces we leaned on cleaner, sparklier, and more hygienic. The view from the television when the advertising was on was of a very sweet, very clean world.

The persuasiveness of television advertising has been replaced with information streams that can be just as entertaining, inviting, and compelling. A personal, curated experience of social-media platforms can be subject to the whims of algorithms that narrow what’s seen or recommended. We have a new vocabulary of people being “radicalised”, “going down rabbit holes”, and buying into “conspiracy theories”. While it can be difficult at times to tell what’s tika and what is teka, checking in with whānau and friends can help young people distinguish between the two. By continuing to hone their intuition about these things, young people can become very good critics—just ask any adult researcher who has asked them research questions. My hope is that the view from their room is clear, so they see things as they truly are, without any disguises or traps set to fool young players.

There are other things I remember about the role of TV in my early years that were to have repercussions in later life. The first is Sunday night’s screening of *Disneyland*. The mournful theme tune of “When you wish upon a star ...” still brings me down, but not as much as it did earlier in my adult life. Then it would induce a mood swing reminiscent of the Sunday night blues I experienced as a child, as *Disneyland* came to signal the end of the weekend. My second memory is of the few Māori who were on TV. There was entertainer Howard Morrison, Tina Carline bringing us the weather, and my father’s favourite, Ernie Leonard, commentating the local wrestling programme *On the Mat*. As had happened in many urban residential settings in the 1960s, the view from our room was of Māori pepper-potted or scattered across what was largely a Pākehā suburban television landscape. In the 1990s, Leonard returned to television on *Panui*, providing Māori-centric commentary on how the media covered Māori events and issues. Above all the other memories, and perhaps because I was a little older then, I remember his commentaries and especially his sarcasm when the media got it wrong. He not only provided a window

into the Māori world, but he also chastised those who tried to represent Māori in ways he found unhelpful—ways that were not mana enhancing. The view from the television room when he was on was, refreshingly, of a Māori world.

Gathering, viewing, and considering information can be an important part of identity formation, with joy potentially following on from making connections with others in the same “tribe”. That is, others who are like us, who are feeling the same way we do, and who are facing and trying to overcome the same life challenges. It’s not good to be pepper-potted and subjected to the gaze and possibly judgement of those who don’t quite get us. So, we should encourage young people to seek out connections with those they can relate to, and to sidestep those who demean and discourage them. I want rangatahi to have a view through their window on the world that is full of the same aroha for them that is present among the tīpuna who stand behind them. Rangatahi also have great potential to be those on the other side of the window—being the content creators and the creators of the tribes that those like them can find and join.

Another change introduced by TV was when my father found a very small television that he could put on the dresser by the dining table. This meant he could watch the news when we sat down to dinner. It wasn’t as if our dinner conversation prior to this had been sparkling or intellectual, but I’m sure we had had something to say to one another about our day, our worries, or our celebrations. The little television put paid to that, and we ate mostly in silence. The messages that were imparted by newsreaders went undiscussed and therefore unchallenged. This could have left me with an abiding faith in the media as arbiters of what was newsworthy except that the small television was really small, and my dining table seat did not have the same viewing advantage as my chair in the living room. Still, the view from our dining room was of quiet kai times, with our whānau held in check by a news-watching father.

My hope for whānau is that they keep gathering around their tables for kai and kōrero, unencumbered by technologies. At the same time, the conversation that flows can be about what everyone is discovering, laughing about, and sharing with a network of friends that will be familiar to those around the table because of the stories they have heard about them. In this way, whānau can stand beside young people to peek through their window.

The next big thing to come to our neighbourhood was colour TV. The family in the big house on the hill where I sometimes babysat got theirs as soon as they became available. It was weird finding out what colour things were on programmes where we had only ever imagined what a dress, a room, a landscape might look like in living technicolour. Unsurprisingly, my father was not convinced of our need for a replacement television and said he'd be getting a colour TV when the old black and white one died. So, even in the midst of colour bursting forth from more and more televisions in our neighbourhood, the view from our living room remained steadfastly black and white and shades of grey. As I was older, what may have been a pain point for me instead became a story I told with pride. "Yeah, our TV's still black and white 'cause my dad won't get a colour one until it explodes."

So, my message to young people is that, whatever the view from your room is, it can get a little easier to interpret as you get older. You can become more inclined to be self-deprecating and to chuckle to yourself when you pull up the blinds and see things that may have made the younger you feel ashamed, neglected, or isolated. Just as you may become more analytical and slightly wistful about the things you loved and the things you might have taken for granted. I will leave you with encouragement to remember how you and your whānau negotiated life with new technology, so that you can pass these stories on when your moko is asking for the latest technology.

Glossary

kai	meal
kōrero	talk
moko	grandchild
mokopuna	grandchildren
Pākehā	non-Māori
rangatahi	young people
tamariki	children
teka	false
tika	true
tīpuna	ancestors
whānau	family