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Eventful times for children's television

Public service television, indeed television generally, is facing many challenges. John Naughton paints a dismal picture, observing that "Broadcast TV is in serious – and apparently inexorable – decline. It's haemorrhaging viewers … And its audience is fragmenting" as we shift from a 'push' to a 'pull' media ecology (Naughton 2006, p.44). Crucially, he adds, "once audiences become fragmented, the commercial logic changes". While, for children's television, the drift of viewers towards alternative channels and newer media has signalled the coming crisis for some time, this was precipitated during 2006-7 by the hotly contested debate over advertising 'junk foods' to children.

Serious warnings over the state of the nation's health, combined with a moral panic over 'toxic childhood', led Ofcom in 2006 to recognise the 'modest' but significant influence on childhood obesity of advertising food high in fat, sugar and salt, especially during children's viewing, at an estimated loss in advertising revenue to commercial broadcasters of some £30 million per year (Ofcom 2006). This decision was quickly followed by ITV's announcement that it would no longer meet its quota of 8 hours per week of children's programming, a change about which, civil society groups argued, Ofcom's response could have been tougher. ITV then ceased commissioning any new content and moved its weekday children's programming from ITV1 to CITV, a channel which may not be sustainable given the absence of new commissions, while ITV1 broadcasts game shows and light entertainment when children return from school. To put matters crudely, market forces seemed to dictate a stark choice between fat kids with good telly or thin kids with nothing to watch!

Today, the only terrestrial channel to retain 'children's hour' is BBC1, though this is moving earlier in the afternoon when Neighbours moves to Channel 5. BBC now faces serious cuts of 1 in 5 jobs in the Children's Department and is rumoured to be shifting children's programmes to BBC2 (Gibson 2007). Meanwhile, Channel 4 announced the axing of its schools programmes in 2007, instead concentrating on new content online, while Channel 5 makes only pre-school programmes. Clearly, this is a moment to ask about the future for children's television. Do these changes matter and, if so, why?

Young audiences – changing provision, changing consumption

Ofcom's response was to commission and publish in 2007 a major body of evidence encompassing the economics of programming, children's media consumption patterns, parents' views and concerns, industry stakeholder consultations and international comparisons, accompanied by a public discussion paper (though not a formal consultation) setting out five options for funding children's television (Ofcom 2007). Without attempting to summarise the detailed findings, I note some key points below.

First, countering any notion of a crisis, one may read the situation as a good news story. Children's television in the UK has seen an explosion from less than 1000 hours of output in

the 1950s-60s to some 20,000 hours in 1998, recently rising sharply to over 110,000 hours in 2006. This 100-fold expansion in the past half century was made possible by dramatic growth in non-terrestrial dedicated children's channels – now numbering 25 (Ofcom 2007, pp.23-6). One can hardly complain that there is nothing for children to watch, though the 7% of terrestrial-only households (with children) remain excluded from this largesse (ibid, p.83). Any crisis, therefore, stems from the quality rather than quantity of provision.

The changed commercial logic has several linked causes, including: the dispersal of viewers over a much expanded number of channels, with audiences for top programmes dropping from some 10 million to a high of 2 million children; the loss of advertising revenue both as channel share falls and as restrictions begin to bite; the shift of children and young people away from television altogether – the average time spent online by UK 5-15 year olds is now 6.2 hours per week (ibid, p. 85); and the opportunity costs to broadcasters of targeting child rather than family/adult audiences in the late afternoon. The result is that children's television broadcasting in 2006 comprised just 3% of total industry turnover but absorbed 4% of spend, this totalling £170 million in 2006 (ibid, p.47).

This situation is inappropriately brushed aside by claiming that children no longer want to watch television. To be sure, they prefer to go out and see friends, describing television as 'boring' (Livingstone 2002). Yet every child wants a set in their bedroom (and most have one, Ofcom 2007, p.84), they couldn't imagine life without television, switching on is the first thing they do when they come home from school, latest celebrity reality show or teen soap opera is what they talk about with their friends at school, and their favourite websites are often TV-related. Significantly, they continue to spend far more time with television than with any other medium, and 'twas ever thus: when television was first introduced into Britain half a century ago, children's viewing figures almost immediately reached just under two hours per day (Himmelweit et al, 1958) - a similar level to today, not least because new media mostly supplement rather than displace old media (Ofcom 2007, p.72).

In short, one should not overdramatise any reduction in children's interest in television. Moreover, children continue to want children's television - indeed, a slight rise is predicted from 30.5% of all viewing in 2007 to 31.5% in 2012 (Ofcom 2007, p.182). But there is a chicken-and-egg problem here, for if the offer is reduced, commensurately falling consumption figures may seem to justify further reductions. Programmes for teenagers are a case in point: having long posed a difficulty for broadcasters, few – even including the BBC - now attempt to address or meet the specific and legitimate needs of this audience, a fact easily forgotten when justifying continued neglect of their needs by claiming that teenagers don't care about television. We are just one discursive step from a similar 'justification' for under-serving children.

Does quality television mean UK-originated television?

While the quantity of both programming and viewing is readily measured, assertions regarding their quality will always be contested. At the heart of the crisis in children's television is the future of UK-originated programmes. Investment in original UK children's programmes fell by 17% since 2001, even though at the same time total investment in UK programmes rose by 4% (Ofcom 2007, p.47). There is a question of fairness here: only 4% of total spend goes on programming for 19% of the British population (HMSO 2007), and expenditure on UK programming in particular is plummeting for children while it rises for everyone else.

In consequence, for child audiences, the offer largely comprises imports and repeats: across all the material broadcast to children in 2006, strikingly only 1% was UK-originated first run material. It could hardly get any less (Ofcom 2007, p.30).[1] Of course, there are many high quality imports, and it is well known that children enjoy watching favourite programmes over and again. But the explosion of channels is not resulting in a similarly expanded choice.
Nor is the present offer matching children's own priorities. Children's viewing is disproportionately greater for UK-originated programming and disproportionately less for imports (ibid, p. 97). Moreover, much that is imported for children is animation, so that cartoons account of 61% of programmes for children; yet they account for only 41% of their

viewing. Children prefer to watch drama and factual programming, exactly the two genres most under threat. Ofcom (ibid, p.73), reports that drama accounts of 12% of output but 19% of viewing, while factual is 5% of output but 7% of viewing. Further, 19 of the top 20 (i.e. most viewed) children's programmes in 2006 were BBC1 (p.102).

So, children vote with their feet for diversity in genres, especially those whose funding is most threatened (drama and factual) and they want UK programming, as indeed do their parents (ibid, p.115). But the market does not deliver according to their preferences: for although targeted by marketers and advertisers more than any child generation in history, children are insufficiently profitable by comparison with adults.

Why does this matter? As Jocelyn Hay, Chair of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer, put it, 'children need programmes which reflect their own rich heritage of language, literature, values and environment' (Voice of the Listener and Viewer 2007). This should not be misunderstood as an either/or claim: of course children also benefit greatly from representations of other cultures, particularly if these are diverse rather than uniform. Nor is it a simple claim, for children's heritage is itself diverse and multidimensional, a fact which speaks to the need for a substantial rather than minimal body of programming reflecting children's "own stories, their own voices and their own perspective on the world in which they live."[2]

All this is to recognise the politics of representation, an argument well made for ethnicity and gender (we regard it as discriminatory to expect children to view solely white or male faces on television); but unlike in other countries, where language provides a politically correct means of affirming the importance of representing the society children live in, in the UK we find this a tricky case to make, risking being interpreted as nationalistic or parochial. Yet the political will to make the case is growing. In December 2007, Janet Anderson, MP proposed an Early Day Motion in the House of Commons that recognises the crisis by stating that:

> "this House … believes that public service television for children plays a hugely important role in contributing to the educational and cultural development of children; and therefore calls on the Government to ensure that UK children of all ages, races and faiths have a genuine choice of high quality, UK-made children's programmes that reflect the diversity of UK culture and children's lives …on a choice of channels".[3]

Can television benefit children?

Academic research focuses less on measuring consumption and more on seeking to understand both consumption and its consequences, beneficial or otherwise. Research is clear that television provides children with many pleasures, as well as a talking point among peers, a way of discussing tricky issues with parents, a safe opportunity to test boundaries or explore emotions, a child-centred understanding of world events, and an opportunity to exercise imagination, become absorbed in narrative, appreciate new aesthetic forms and stimulate creativity and play.

Although most academic research has examined the potential harms of television viewing (Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone, 2006), there is a valuable body of independent research on its potential benefits, as Maire Messenger Davies and Thornham (2007) reviewed for Ofcom. Noting that "television is more important than other media primarily because of its universal accessibility to all classes, ages and types of children" (p.6), they categorize the benefits in terms of (a) learning, focused on educational programmes rather than informal learning[4], (b) socialization and citizenship, and (c) personal fulfilment and identity.

Much of what children get from television – in terms of it affirming their identities, and stimulating their imagination, their interaction with friends and their thoughts about the realities of daily life – may be aided by viewing high quality UK-originated drama where, it seems, their responses are more subtle and complex, more taken to heart when the young people portrayed and the dilemmas they face closely resemble themselves. As David Buckingham has shown in relation to children's emotional experience and their knowledge of sexuality, television content that starts where they are and takes them a few steps beyond their comfort zone is both desired by and of value to children – which is partly why they seek

content that is, supposedly, a bit too old for them, and also why addressing the whole age range from pre-school up to and including teenagers is important (Buckingham 1996; 2004). Factual and news programmes are also vital. Cindy Carter observes that children too live in situations affected by the news, including poverty and conflict, rendering protection from the news hardly appropriate – after all, we want them to be engaged not apathetic citizens. But she shows that the tendency to use images of children in mainstream news to signify suffering can be upsetting, as are negative representations of children as hooligans; hence the specific value of news created for children.[5]

In short, children do not just want or need 'entertainment'. Rather, "variety in terms of genre is beneficial, and preferred, by children, parents and teachers, both as citizens and consumers" (Messenger Davies and Thornham 2007, p.14). Indeed, when she asked children to act as schedulers, she found that, regardless of circumstances or background, children always chose a public service, diverse, balanced schedule (Messenger Davies 2001).

Jackie Marsh and colleagues recently surveyed nearly 2000 parents and carers, finding that children under six engage actively with television, while their families use this to scaffold social and cognitive learning within the home in ways that link with school-based learning (Marsh et al, 2005). Several recent literature reviews confirm that moderate amounts of viewing benefit young children's reading, that media and critical literacies may be increased by well-designed programming, and that the learning stimulated by television is broader than that occurring within schools. Thus, children can develop a range of skills through watching television, including wider vocabularies, more expressive language, knowledge of storytelling and imagination (Kondo n.d.; National Literacy Trust 2004).

In their collective response to Ofcom's Discussion Paper, academic specialists in the field of children and television argued that:

> "Children's television, as developed in the UK, publicly funded through the BBC license fee and partly mandated via the PSB requirements laid on commercial channels, is a model that has delivered valuable cultural experiences to several generations of children and had been widely admired internationally."[6]

Noting the potential loss of both a unique and internationally-valued skills base of specialist children's producers and a highly valuable UK export, as well as the cost to children, a series of policy suggestions were made. These included an argument in favour of tax breaks to children's producers at least until 2012, requiring children's broadcasters to meet their obligations to children across the board by imposing a fixed quota of public service broadcasting, and amending the Communications Act 2003 so as to provide stronger protection and support for children's programmes. As Ofcom's review of the regulatory provision in other countries shows, genre diversity even in PSB programming (including, notably, news) does not happen in the absence of a clear regulatory requirement.

The academic response also resists the casual assumption that none of this matters because the internet will, in future, meet children's needs. To be sure, children are embracing the internet with enthusiasm, and it provides an astonishing, indeed unprecedented resource that will transform many dimensions of their leisure, learning and participation. But it remains socially divided in terms of accessibility and use. Much that is of value online is hard to find, even for the so-called 'internet generation' (Livingstone 2008). It is highly commercialised and so risks socialising children more as consumers than as citizens (National Consumer Council and Childnet International 2007). And, crucially, it introduces as many problems as it may promise to solve: 2007 was also the year in which Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced the 'Byron Review on Children and New Technology',[7] followed by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's Select Committee Inquiry on 'Harmful content on the internet and in video games".[8]

Citizens and consumers

Much of the debate over the future of children's television seeks a productive match between the economics of broadcasting to children and their changing consumption patterns. But this is to position children solely as consumers. Since the spirit of the Communications Act 2003 is

not to quibble about the legal status of the 'citizen' whose interests the Act is fundamentally designed to further (Livingstone et al. 2007), let us recognise that children are citizens too. Defining a 'child' as anyone under 18 (not the broadcasters' 15 or, increasingly common, 12 years old), The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts children's rights to freedom of expression through any medium of the child's choice (Art. 13) and to mass media that disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child, with particular regard to the linguistic needs of minority/indigenous groups, and to protection from material injurious to the child's well-being (Art. 17).[9] Ivor Frønes and Trond Waage emphasise that the Convention is concerned with "not only rights to protection, speech and welfare, but also a right to unfold and develop capacities" (2006, p.2). Crucially, they add, while "socialization is anticipatory; the visions of the future exist as values in the present" (p.3); we must ask, therefore, what values our media offer? As Jean Seaton argues, "how we talk to children forms how they think of themselves, and how we think of them" (2006, p. 128). It was precisely to address this agenda that Anna Home initiated the internationally endorsed Children's Television Charter which seeks to ensure children's rights to receive quality programmes, the right to see and express themselves, their culture, their language and their life experiences through television programmes which affirm their sense of self, community and place.[10]

As with other citizen rights, however, ensuring children's rights are met within our current and future media ecology requires vigilance, imagination and political will. Karol Jakubowicz (2007) argues that political support for public service broadcasting in Europe should be revitalised by extending the PSB remit to encompass all 'public service media', in recognition of their growing significance to political citizenship and democracy, culture, education and social cohesion in a heavily mediated world. Others argue, rightly, for the importance of plurality in provision – meaning, in both production and in commissioning (e.g. Born, 2004), and these arguments matter for children no less than for adult audiences. How high quality programmes, encompassing multiple genres, produced in the UK as well as imported, and addressing teenagers as well as children, can be funded on channels other than the BBC is a major challenge in both the short and longer term. But the opportunities for requiring and/or incentivising public service broadcasters to deliver on these objectives are barely yet explored. Finding a way to generate and sustain lively competition for the BBC without undermining the strengths of its existing and future provision for children is, clearly, a priority for regulators, industry and politicians alike.

Now that we live in a ubiquitous and complex media and communication environment, we must recognise that this shapes our identities, our culture and learning, our approach to others and thus the conditions for our participation in society. No one can live outside it, no child wants to. In this article I have not sought to assert that children should watch more television. Rather, I have argued that the television they do watch should benefit them. This is, I have argued, a matter of fairness in society, of meeting children's developmental needs and interests, and of children's rights. And as society imposes ever more restrictions on what children are free to do outside their front door (Livingstone 2008), what we provide for them at home becomes ever more crucial.

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Endnotes

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[1] The number of hours of UK originated first run programmes for children is fairly stable in recent years, the percentage drop being a consequence of the expansion in channels

dominated by imported and repeated programmes - these hours were 1303 hours per year in 1998 and 1253 in 2006. See Ofcom 2007, p.30. The loss of ITV's children's commissioning is yet to be included in these figures.

[2] See http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/kidstv/responses/SaveKidsTV.pdf. Retrieved 6 February 2008.

[3] Early Day Motion # 585, 13/12/07

[4] The classic case here is *Sesame Street*, whose benefits especially to disadvantaged children have been clearly shown (Messenger Davies and Thornham 2007).

[5] BBC *Newsround* is all there is, however, since Channel 4s *First Edition* closed in 2003, followed by the demise of Nickelodeon's *Nick News.*

[6] See http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/kidstv/responses/MessengerDaviesM.pdf. Retrieved 6 February 2008. p.2

[7] See http://www.dfes.gov.uk/byronreview/index.shtml

[8] See http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/culture__media_and_sport/cms071205.cfm

[9] United Nations. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Retrieved 29 January, 2008 from http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm

[10] Children's Television Charter (n.d.). Retrieved 28 January, 2008 from http://www.wsmcf.com/charters/charter.htm