

## **Response to Ofcom's document**

### **The Future of Children's Television Programming**

from

#### **The Campaign For Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF)**

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The CPBF was established in 1979. It is the leading independent membership organisation dealing with questions of freedom, diversity and accountability in the UK media. It is membership-based, drawing its support from individuals, trade unions and community based organisations. Since it was established, it has consistently developed policies designed to encourage a more pluralistic media in the UK and has regularly intervened in the public and political debates over the future of broadcasting in the United Kingdom. During 2007 the Campaign submitted responses to the Culture Media and Sport Committee for their inquiry on Public Service Media Content, and has responded to Ofcom's Digital Dividend Review; its proposal for a Public Service Publisher; its consultation on Press Regulation and on the Terms of Reference for the Second Review of Public Service Television.

We are responding to this discussion paper on children's television programming because we are concerned that children's programming is not only at the heart of UK broadcasting, but is an essential part of both children's and adult culture. We feel that the importance of children as a social group is too often overlooked in a society moving ever faster towards the dominance of market values. Because children are inevitably outside 'the market', they continue to draw our attention to social and cultural values which cannot be expressed in monetary terms.

#### **1. General comments on the report**

We welcome the statement that 'the provision of a wide range of high quality and original programmes is a matter of concern to Ofcom' (10.1), and Ofcom's recognition that children's programming has been at the heart of the UK's system of public service broadcasting in which a plurality of provision has played an important role (1.2.1 and 3). We would add that children's programming from a variety of sources has been important to society as a whole, and has made a substantial contribution to cultural values in the UK over the last half-century. Television for children has an important place as part of the general television output.

We welcome Ofcom's detailed research which makes the current situation of children's programming very clear.

Finally, we welcome Ofcom's recognition of the widely expressed feeling amongst parents, educators and others who are interested, that some sort of intervention to support UK-produced children's programmes is desirable. Due to the limitations of Ofcom's role set out in the

Communications Act, such intervention would require government action. We therefore urge Ofcom to make appropriate recommendations to the government.

### **On the definition of public service television**

We have certain reservations about the assumptions which underlie the discussion paper. These are similar to reservations expressed in our response to the Terms of Reference for Ofcom's Second Review of Public Service Television.

The first is the assumption that 'public service programmes' which meet Ofcom's admirable list of purposes and characteristics (1.2.8) are separable from the main body of the output. Even more than for adults, this boundary cannot be clearly drawn for children's programmes (who is to say whether Dennis the Menace, or Thomas the Tank Engine are 'public service' or just a bit of zany frivolity). The aim to provide education, information and entertainment should spread across the television output. If 'psb' is seen as a separate type of programming, it is easier for commercial channels to argue that it is the province of the BBC alone (6.2.5)

Secondly, there is a danger that, 'public service' may be used as a synonym for 'publicly funded'. We would argue that all channels received in the UK should be seen as contributing to television as a public service, and that certain obligations should go along with that recognition. As Ofcom have themselves noted (1.2.3), an energetic and productive public service system has long been based on competition, innovation and a plurality of provision, not sterile box ticking.

Thirdly there is a danger that, especially when speaking of children's programmes, 'public service' may be seen as equivalent to 'educational' or 'contributing to socialisation' or some similar description. By contrast one of the 'characteristics of public service broadcasting' as drawn up by Ofcom, is that it is 'accessible and enjoyed by viewers'.

It would be helpful if Ofcom make it clear that the 'purposes and characteristics' of public service broadcasting include children. For example, in references to 'ourselves' as in 'to inform *ourselves* and others'; 'to strengthen *our* cultural identity' it should be clear that this implies an intention to inform and strengthen the cultural identity of children, for they are an important part of 'our' society.

### **Children's citizenship rights**

Just as Ofcom is expected to consider the rights of viewers as citizens, children's citizenship rights should also be considered. The Discussion Document contains one reference to children as '*future* citizens' (10.1), but in fact they are an important *current* segment of society, with citizenship rights appropriate to their age. The UK is a signatory to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), which includes, 'the right to have his or her opinions taken into account, and a right to participate, more fully with increasing maturity, in all the activities of society' (Unicef summary). This means that children's programming should address children in an age-appropriate way, should include children speaking to children, and children speaking to adults, as well as adults speaking to children. It should also take into account the ethnic and linguistic diversity of UK children. Finally, it is important the children's perspectives are included in 'adult' programmes. Children too often feel themselves to be excluded, although they are an important part of the general audience.

Ofcom should aim to create the circumstances whereby broadcasters and creative programme makers can provide this wide diversity of output and approaches.

### **Responses to Ofcom's questions**

(10.2, but not in the same order)

## **Questions relevant to the second public service television review**

### **4. What is the role and importance of UK-originated programming for children?**

Maire Messenger Davies's review of academic work on the importance of television for children, reveals its role in creating a sense of citizenship and identity. Children have a right to programming which reflects their own daily lives and experience, but which also raises problems and questions through drama, age-appropriate news, and debate (perhaps my parents really are aliens!). This does not imply a narrow sense of 'Britishness' but a recognition of the ethnic diversity of the UK experience.

The UK is fortunate in having a considerable number of talented programme makers with a great deal of imagination and skill, who ought not to have their creativity constrained by the need to produce 'internationally' saleable programming.

### **5. What is the role and importance of plurality in the provision of children's programming?**

As the Discussion Paper itself points out, the rich diversity of provision for children on UK television developed in competition between the BBC and the terrestrial commercial broadcasters, who were required to produce children's programming by the Regulator of the day, and did so with flair and enthusiasm.

Producers, Heads of Department and commissioners have been able to move between the channels, building their experience and expertise; with the growth of independent production companies, the existence of several broadcasters with the ability to buy or commission programmes has helped keep standards high. It is clear that the non-UK based children's channels have neither the ability nor the inclination to commission the sort of quality programming that generations of UK children have become accustomed to.

### **6. Should further consideration be given to provision of public service content for children over platforms other than linear television?**

As the document makes clear, television is not the only platform on which children receive their information and entertainment. Clearly, age-appropriate, diverse, high quality material should be available on all platforms.

In this context, the description 'public service content' can easily come to mean 'publicly funded'. In which case, serious questions arise about the source of the funding (see our response to Question 2 below).

### **7. Does the policy approach for children's programming need to be different from the policy approach taken to public broadcasting overall?**

Children's programming is an intrinsic part of a public service system which seeks to address all parts of society, not just those which are desirable to advertisers. The steps taken to ensure the continuation of a diverse public service system, with a plurality of providers, should automatically include age-appropriate programming for children.

In particular, where Ofcom's powers are limited, we would urge Ofcom to make the appropriate recommendations to the government to support the broader public service system.

At the same time, as the document makes clear, the reason that UK-produced children's programming is under threat, is that, apart from programming for the very young, broadcasters and

programme makers cannot make profitable programmes. The special needs of these age groups should be specified when commercial channels are required to provide material for children.

At the same time, children should be protected from inappropriate marketing, so we support the ban on 'junk food' advertisements.

## **Question 2. Responses to the policy approaches suggested by stakeholders**

### **Maintaining the status quo, leaving provision to the BBC, the commercial public service broadcasters, and the market.**

As the document makes clear, no intervention means that the BBC will be the only provider of UK-produced programming, and this is unacceptable. To maintain the status quo and ensure that ITV continues its historic role would itself require intervention. ITV's commitment (1.2.6) in response to Ofcom's comments, is far too vague.

### **Broadcaster-based interventions, including a dedicated fund or output quotas**

Options such as direct government funding or an allocated part of the licence fee would be completely unacceptable, as they would

- a. reduce still further the BBC's commitment, and
- b. not provide the proper competition for quality which, in the past has come from broadcasters with different types of funding.

The idea of a levy on broadcasters who benefit from access to the UK audience would be a preferred option.

### **Production incentives, such as tax credits**

These would help producers, but a broadcast outlet also has to be ensured

### **Extending the remit of existing public service institutions, including Channel Four**

This is a good idea. Although it long ago stopped making regular children's programmes, Channel Four has an honourable history of taking children seriously (for example *First Edition*, its news programme for children; *Look Who's Talking* a series fronted by children, broadcast in 1994).

### **Creating new public institutions, including a non-BBC public service channel**

This is similar to Ofcom's proposal for a Public Service Publisher (PSP). In our response to Ofcom's proposal, the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom concluded that, although this was an interesting and innovative idea:

- “2. The funding of PSP should not in any way be associated with the BBC licence fee income
- 3. A PSP should not be used as an alternative to supporting ITV, C4, S4C and C5, so that they can continue to act as serious, commercially-funded public service broadcasters. They should continue to compete with the BBC and contribute to a diverse public service system in the digital future”

We have similar reservations about the potential funding of a new institution for children. If an innovative funding formula could be found, an institution dedicated to children's programming would be an interesting addition to the broadcasting ecology.

We would add a further suggestion:

### **Use of the radio spectrum**

Many have argued that the radio spectrum should not be seen as a commodity and put up for sale as is currently proposed, but should be considered as a public good. (see the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom's response to Ofcom's Digital Dividend Review).

If this were the case, the options open to the government and to Ofcom to offer incentives to commercial broadcasters, particularly ITV, to honour their public service obligations, including the provision of children's programming, would be increased.

### **Question 3. On supporting age-appropriate programming:**

The term used throughout the document for the youngest age group is 'pre-school', which is clearly the one used by the television industry. However, specialists in working with young children prefer the term 'early years'. This means that two or three year olds are not seen as incomplete creatures, defined by the fact they are not yet old enough for school, but as people in their own right with their own specific needs, interests and amusements (Teletubbies was criticised when it was first broadcast because the tubbies were baby like creatures who spoke in baby language. But the toddlers loved it.)

This is a lesson that the best children's programmes illustrate. Children are not simply deficient adults, but people with their own perspective on the world, which can often illuminate and challenge the views of adults.

However, the document makes it clear that some UK-produced children's programmes are under greater threat than others. These include important genres such as live programming and drama for older children. The special needs of the older age groups should be given particular support.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of children and children's culture to society as a whole, should be recognised, and children's television should not be left to the forces of the international market place.

We would point out that one reason that 'the future provision of UK-originated content for children...looks uncertain' (Executive Summary) is that a policy decision has been taken to lighten the regulatory requirements on commercial channels. We would also note that Ofcom's other de-regulatory policies, in particular the sale of the radio spectrum, make it more difficult to support a public service television system in which children's programming would take its proper place.

The forward to the Discussion Paper concludes, "we hope that with this research and the discussion which follows, we have laid the groundwork for maintaining and strengthening future provision of a wide range of high quality and original programming for UK children." We would comment that, useful as research and discussion are, they are no substitute for a commitment to positive regulation, which will *ensure* that high quality and original programming for children continues.

CPBF

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