

Ofcom Advisory Committee for Scotland – Response to Ofcom Discussion Document on The future of children’s television programming

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to discussion on this vital area. The research and resulting discussion document raise many important issues which need careful consideration and in some cases further research. Our responses are loosely grouped under the four areas feedback was particularly requested on.

References to sections/figures are those in the research report rather than the discussion paper.

1 What is the role and importance of UK-originated programming for children?

From the report this appears to be regarded as important in other countries too. Although there are varying views from parents and children, we feel this should be considered an important measure. It is probably more important for the under 12 age group (although the children may not realise this). Above that age it is perhaps more market driven ie teenagers are much more savvy about what is available and are able to make more informed choices. Quality as well as quantity must be measured, just because a program is produced in the UK, it is not intrinsically better than content from elsewhere.

1.1 Is the level of UK-originated new programming actually in decline?

The level of UK-originated new programming appears to have stayed relatively constant over the last 10 years (Section 2.1). However, the statistics are hard to interpret. It is obvious from Figure 15 that in 2002 the introduction of CBeebies and CBBC led to a big increase in first run original programs, and that this has been tailing off steadily since then. It is now at the level it was in 1998, but it is impossible to tell if it is levelling off or whether it will continue to decline. This needs to be monitored closely over the next 2-3 years.

1.2 What is the lifespan of a children’s program?

Is there a natural cycle for original first run children’s programming? If we look at the figures:-£127m 1998, £163m 2002, £109 2006. Figure 13 only cover the last 9 years.

If a program has a natural life of around 8-10 years, then as the 2002 peak of programs dates, in around 4-5 years time, will there be an increase in spending again?

It would be interesting to look at the longevity of programs produced, both now, and in the past. It is obviously longer for pre school programs than for those aimed at older children.

1.3 Are more repeats needed in a time poor society?

The number of repeats of UK originated programming being shown is not necessarily a problem, more a sign of the times. More than half of under 5's now have both parents working. Many will be in nurseries. This means fewer children are at home at the traditional times for preschool programs on the basic terrestrial channels, ie early afternoon. However these children will be viewing that content either on other channels like CBeebies, or on video/dvd at other times, either early morning or later in the evening, while parents prepare meals etc. Figure 93 shows that the highest viewing figures for CBBC/CBeebies are from 5.30pm onwards which ties in with this. In figure 91, it would be interesting to see a breakdown by age of viewing patterns, and also have the viewing for 2-3 year olds included. Figure 93 also seems to indicate that there is a demand for CBBC/CBeebies to continue past 7pm, both channels shut down at one of the highest peaks in their viewing. This was born out by the research report, see p128. The Controller of BBC Children's programs has expressed a desire to extend children's programs to 9pm and we would support this.

1.4 Can you repeat something too often in children's TV?

'The biggest criticism overall levelled at CBBC by children was they felt there were too many repeats' (section 5.4.4)

The growth in the number of dedicated children's channels is largely supported by running repeats of existing programs. Supply and demand relationship, unless channels are running new programs, their viewer share will drop once they have repeated the existing pool of programs too often, will this actually lead to a demand for more new programming?

1.5 Is there a 'SE' bias in the nationwide channels?

In section 9.3.1, it is stated that 'there is a large gap between parents' perception of the level of importance of, and their satisfaction with delivery of 'children's programming that shows a range of different cultures and opinions from around the

UK'. Seventy-eight per cent of parents gave this aspect a high importance rating, whilst only 43% were satisfied with delivery by the PSBs taken as a whole.' In informal consultations with parents within Scotland, this was a subject that came up frequently – 'Television is too London based/too SE based'. This seemed to apply particularly to the continuity and linking presenters, rather than just the content of the programs themselves. This is an area which could be tackled relatively easily and cheaply.

In terms of programs themselves, apart from reruns of Balamory there are few examples of children's programs set in Scotland currently available. There is a demand in Scotland for programs produced and set in Scotland, and we would support any funding model that encouraged this.

1.6 Educational role of Children's TV in poorer households?

An issue that has been raised in the press is the concern that in particular, children in poorer homes, who watch most television, need access to programs which reflect their own language, literature, values and environment. (Professor Maire Messenger Davies, Voice of the Listener and Viewer 13th Annual Conference on the Future of Children's Television). This would seem to be a sensible suggestion, but there is little in the research to indicate whether the children in poorer homes only have access to terrestrial TV, or whether in fact they have access to and are watching the satellite channels. The latter seems more likely, but there is no evidence of whether this is true. Figure 90 indicates that children in the C2DE group watch nearly 5 hours more television a week than those in the ABC1 group, but gives no indication of what platform they watch those hours on. This information should be used in deciding on the policy for PSB for children's TV.

2 What is the role and importance of plurality in the provision of children's programming?

Competition is generally a good thing to keep quality and applicability focused, if it can be supported with good quality programmes. However if there is a struggle to fund children's programs then some good programming is more important than much poor programming.

Clearly, relying on one or two big program producers is likely to lead to a lack of regional identity within programs, and this impacts on meeting the desire for programs produced and set in Scotland.

2.1 Valuing PSB channels but not using them?

It is interesting that in the 65% of households with children that had cable/satellite, 79% of viewing of children's programs was on commercial children's channels (Section 4). Very approximately one could then say that in around half of households with children there is little or no viewing of PSB children's channels. In section 5 however 65- 85% of parents felt it important that the PSB channels provided programming that delivered each of the PSB purposes and characteristics. Parents appear to value what the PSB channels provide even though they have children who are not viewing PSB channels. Viewing figures alone cannot be relied on to indicate what license payers want from PSB channels.

2.2 Plurality seems to lead to satisfaction

There would seem to be an indication of the importance of plurality in the fact that children and parents in terrestrial only households (analogue and digital, particularly analogue) are less satisfied with children's television. They wanted access to a wider range of programs, particularly those available after school and into the evening. (5.4.9). As discussed in 1.3 above, the Controller of BBC Children's programs has expressed a desire to extend children's programs to 9pm and we would support this.

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

There is definitely a need to think about content on other platforms. Children, especially as they get older, have access to many different sources, see Fig 67 for an example of how TV importance changes and other platforms eg Internet increases. We can't ignore this change and different platforms must be considered.

3.1 Younger children don't make a distinction between linear TV and other media.

Children's media consumption is increasingly sophisticated (or possibly just different!). Preschoolers for example find it hard to accept that TV can't be stopped when they go out and then restarted when they return. They don't distinguish in the same way as most adults do between television, PC, computer game, DVD etc. A better division would probably be between passive visual and interactive visual. Given this, we probably should be looking at provision of public service content as they expect it, ie primarily not via linear television. The programs should be viewed more as a resource to be accessed via a selection of media. Parents value the ability

to access high quality DVD's and videos as much as being able to access the same content on linear TV. TV on demand will meet the same requirement as DVD's and videos currently do.

3.2 Websites are also a resource parents value.

Spin offs from children's TV programs are a valuable resource, providing parents with web content they can trust. Schools frequently use these as teaching materials in computer literacy lessons etc. We feel that PSB funding for children's television should cover this area.

3.3 Viewing a children's 'channel' isn't cool!

Young teenagers are likely to avoid channels aimed at children partly because it isn't cool. The same is probably true of any channel which markets itself for teenagers, in the same way as 'teen' magazines are read by 9-12 year olds, and not teenagers. Allowing teenagers to select individual programs for online viewing might avoid some of this stigma, and reduce levels of 'aspirational' viewing.

4 Does the policy approach for children's programming need to be different from the policy approach taken to public service broadcasting overall?

4.1 Who profits from Children's TV?

Now that options for advertising revenue associated with broadcasting children's programs has been reduced, a main source of revenue for program producers and broadcasters could be the income they can generate from spin-offs such as toys, clothing and books. Could there be a better model of licensing such spin-offs in order to direct the income back into producing more high quality UK based children's content?

Obviously this is not core business for the existing channels. Perhaps a none BBC public service children's channel would find it easier to have a wider remit, licensing the producing and marketing of linked computer games, toys, books etc. to go with the programs they commission. This could be controversial, but provided there was no advertising of these items on the channel itself, it shouldn't cause too many problems. For example Balamory sparked a large number of spin off toys, items of clothing etc, but did the profits from that go to the BBC, or to the program maker, or to the toy manufacturers?

The more lucrative pre school programs would then help fund development of the less commercially attractive drama and factual programs for older children. This channel would have to be free to view however.

4.2 Educational role of Children's TV in poorer households?

See 1.6 above

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