

THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN'S TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

A Response by Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) to Ofcom's Consultation, December 2007

Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) is an independent, non-profit-making association, free from political, commercial and sectarian affiliations, working for quality and diversity in British broadcasting. VLV represents the interests of listeners and viewers as citizens and consumers across the full range of broadcasting issues. VLV supports the principles of public service broadcasting and is concerned with the structures, regulation, funding and institutions that underpin the British broadcasting system. VLV does not handle complaints. VLV established its Forum for Children's Broadcasting in 1994. The Forum has since held 13 annual conferences on the state of children's broadcasting in the UK, each of which has been addressed by leading broadcasters, academics and others who care about the well-being of children.

1. Introduction

VLV wishes to see a wide range of high quality indigenous children's programmes, aimed at different age groups, and believes that it is vital that these should be originated from more than a single source, and should be distributed both by traditional and new media technology. Therefore, while not losing sight of the need to maintain the BBC's output at the level it has provided in the past, we would stress that plurality of sources and distributors is essential.

2. Comments on stakeholder policy approaches

VLV welcomes the Review of Children's Television conducted by Ofcom in 2007 – indeed we had repeatedly urged Ofcom to undertake such a review and congratulates Ofcom on its quality and comprehensive approach. We have the following comments to make on the various stakeholder policy approaches outlined in the Ofcom Discussion Paper (section 6, figure 30)

3. Maintain status quo

3.1. ITV, for half a century the biggest investor in original children's programming after the BBC, has abdicated from the production and commissioning of children's programmes. Channel 4, a sporadic but valuable provider of programmes in the past, currently has no children's – as opposed to schools – output. Five has ceased, for commercial reasons, to provide any programmes for older children, while its commissioned pre-school programmes, though very welcome, have always been modestly budgeted or made via co-production with an eye to the international market. We welcome S4C's growing commitment to the genre but consider it ironic that there is currently a greater investment in Welsh language programmes for children in the Principality, than the combined investment by the three other public service broadcasters (PSBs) in programmes for the English speaking majority of children throughout the UK.

3.2 . In the light of the above, the current status quo is not an acceptable option, as we strongly believe that plurality is necessary to ensure a market of competition in excellence, choice for the viewer, and to keep the BBC on its toes. We further believe that the BBC's output and transmission patterns should be closely monitored on an ongoing basis, as we are not reassured by the BBC's explanation of recent cuts in the proposed budget for its children's programmes over the next five years. We welcome the statement by the chairman of the BBC Trust at a recent conference that this is something the Trust will undertake.

4. Broadcaster-based interventions

4.1. We accept that market forces alone will not provide the finance needed to ensure a healthy output outside that of the BBC. We do not believe that 'top-slicing' the current BBC licence fee is desirable, but would not rule out an addition of £1-2 per annum collected as part of the licence fee but hypothecated to indigenous children's programme production. A more desirable option would be some form of levy on the profits of the cable and satellite commercial broadcasters hypothecated for the production of indigenous children's production, together with a stricter interpretation of European regulation which requires a majority of content to be produced in the European Union. With more than twenty foreign-owned dedicated children's channels targeting the UK, a requirement to produce even a small percentage locally would produce both a wider choice of programming and a wider market for specialist producers. It might also be possible to devise some form of 'levy' on the profits of the producers of those pre-school programmes which generate large incomes from merchandising and ancillary rights, to be spent by the producers themselves on more threatened genres such as drama and factual programmes for older age groups. We acknowledge that some of the larger producers already do this to some extent.

4.2. The money raised by these means could be allocated directly to one or more of the existing PSB broadcasters, subject to a definition of the type of programming planned. We believe this arrangement would be preferable to the creation of a detached, Olympian 'Arts Council of the Air', with its inherent bureaucracy, sitting in judgement without reference to the priorities of the ultimate broadcaster.

5. Production incentives

We would support the Pact tax credit proposal as an interim measure, but this would have to be dependent on an identified broadcasting outlet in each case. We are sceptical, however, as to whether this mechanism on its own would have any appreciable effect on the children's programme policies of the commercial PSBs.

6. Extending the remit of existing PSB institutions

We agree that Channel 4 seems in many ways to be a suitable home for children's programmes, at least in the medium term. We have referred above to the Channel's track record in the area – while it has not always had a formal policy of commissioning children's programmes (and does not at the present time), it has been involved in commissioning high quality animation from *The Snowman* onwards, in specialised programmes for disabled youngsters (*Beat That*) and in programmes for older children (*Wise Up*). In the short to medium term we would envisage the greater part of the funding outlined under broadcaster-based interventions being allocated to Channel 4, with a system of safeguards to ring-fence the money. We are concerned, however, that Channel 4 itself is predicted to face funding problems in a very few years as digital switch-over progresses. It would be a tragedy if hopes were pinned on Channel 4 only for them to be dashed in two or three years' time.

7. New institutions

7.1. We are wary of the considerable infrastructure costs inevitable in starting up a dedicated PSB children's channel, as well as the premature ghetto-isation of these programmes while the current regime of generalist PSBs exists. Children's programmes should be available alongside other programming on both BBC and other PSBs, as well as on dedicated channels. If, however, the Ofcom-proposed PSP comes to fruition this would seem a natural home for PSB children's programmes.

7.2. We are supportive of the Save Kids TV proposal for a new media 'destination' to be available online and on demand, and agree that in the long term this might

provide a service that could meet all our objectives. But, however rapidly this could be achieved, some immediate action is essential to reverse the decline of children's provision on the existing PSBs.

7.3 Ofcom Special Interest Group or Officer

We revert to a suggestion VLV made in the early days of Ofcom, and recommend that Ofcom itself should play a more active role than it has to date and set up either a special interest group along the lines of the group that represents the interests of older people and those with disabilities, or delegate responsibility for maintaining a special interest in the genre to a specific official who can draw the attention of the members of the Ofcom Board, the Content Board and the Consumer Panel to problems as they arise.

8. Conclusion

VLV considers it is vitally important to ensure the continued provision of a range of children's programmes of high quality, aimed at different age groups and specifically at British children: programmes which acknowledge cultural diversity and Britain's place in Europe and the wider world but also reflect the UK's rich cultural heritage of language, literature, values and environment. Far too many imported programmes reflect only a mid-Atlantic fantasy world. At the moment the UK has a vibrant creative community in children's programme production, but this is already being eroded and will be rapidly dissipated if action is not taken very soon. The commercial cable and satellite children's channels, while offering well-made programmes aimed at an international audience, commission very little in the UK; their output is almost all imported, consisting largely of animation and soaps. The BBC must not be allowed to become the sole provider. We are concerned that the BBC is already showing signs of reduced commitment in the face of economic pressure and a lack of competition in high quality, innovative content. Drama and factual programmes for children over seven are genres which are particularly endangered but, contrary to Ofcom's finding, we believe it is also important to ensure that younger children have access to a range of high quality indigenous programmes, made in the UK to meet their particular needs and interests. If pre-school children only have access to imported programming, that is what they will continue to seek out as they grow up.

Children are the future of our nation; they deserve the best. VLV, through its Forum for Children's Broadcasting and its annual conferences for the past 13 years, has tracked the decline in the budgets for children's productions and in the diversity of programmes available, and continually drawn the attention of Government and others to the threats facing children's programmes. We are dismayed that these threats are only now, at the eleventh hour, being taken seriously. It is absolutely essential to the well-being of our children and our future cultural heritage that the funding nettle is grasped, and the political will found, to ensure that the necessary money is raised to enable this vital strand of programming to be maintained.

We believe that in the short term help should be given to Channel 4 to provide an innovative and competitive service for children, and, in the longer term, to piloting the SKTV proposal.

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