

The Future of Children's Television Programming: Response from Teresa Orange

(i) Role and importance of UK originated programming?

It was interesting that when Ofcom put this question to the Westminster forum – nobody wanted to reply. In the subsequent coffee break – we concluded that this was because the answer feels too obvious. Of course, UK originated material is of critical importance within the children's schedule. But, articulating why can be awkward – simply because, the answer taps into our instincts as parents, as much as it reflects our proven expertise as media professionals.

As a starting point, it is important to consider what makes children so unique as an audience – and here, we should focus on their susceptibility to be influenced by the media. We often talk about children being 'media sponges', and it is important that we don't lose touch with the simple truth that children, even more than adults, are influenced by what they see and relate to on screen.

They are developing as individuals – establishing their own moral / value systems – prioritising their own motivations / aspirations – and crafting their perceptions of the world around them. In recent years the screen has often become one of the single biggest influences in a child's life, and consequently, it is so important that they can relate to the content of the screen experience, and understand how it relates to the world around them.

In order to expand on how UK originated material plays its role – I would like to point to 'The Response Check' that we devised in our book 'The Media Diet for Kids' and 'How to stop your kids watching too much TV'. We designed this tool to help parents appraise how screen media either has a positive or a negative influence on their child. It also provides a good framework for this discussion – because it highlights exactly where home grown material can make a positive contribution.

In 'The Response Check' we highlighted seven key responses that are fundamental to how a child relates to a TV or computer programme. With one exception, all these responses can be enriched by the home grown character of UK originated material.

Here are the seven responses, and examples of their relevance to this discussion:

1. Learning – what learning does my child take out of the programme? For example, is that learning pertinent to the immediate world around them? How does that learning help them adapt to life around them and their development as citizens of this country?

2. Motivation – what does the programme motivate my child to do? For example, what hobbies and pass times does it inspire that are relevant to UK children? What dreams does it fuel – are they aspirations that are relevant for the young of this country?

3. Energy – how does the programme influence my child's energy levels? No examples here – this relates to how a programme calms / excites a child – it is as much a physical as a mental response.

4. Language – what language does my child adopt as a result of the programme? For example, does the child pick up accents / vocabulary that are relevant to this country? Are the child's own communications skills enriched as a result of the media experience?

5. Role models – what role models does the programme give my child? For example, are they role models that he / she can identify with? Are they role models that feel close to home and that offer the child relevant goals?

6. Emotions – how does the programme influence the mood of my child? For example, can the child identify with the scenarios – do they trigger heart-felt feelings in the child?

7. Relationships – does the programme encourage my child to be social, and if so, in what way? For example, does the content encourage the child to relate in a positive way to the people in his / her life? Does the programme help address prejudices that exist within our communities?

In conclusion, through understanding how TV / computer influences our young, we begin to get a clear picture of how UK originated material can play such a positive role in the media mix. Of course, children will survive without it – the question should be – are we exploiting the full potential of the media without it?

(ii) **Importance of plurality in the provision of children's programming?**

Yes, plurality is important - to encourage the competition and energy that ensures creativity and quality in the long term. Broadcasting is a creative business – and that is why healthy competition is as important, as a sound regulatory framework.

However, it should be noted that it is plurality through the mainstream channels that is required as much as plurality through the segmentation of the digital / internet channels. And without the former, too much poor choice through the latter can be a danger for children.

In this digital world children are easily drawn to a very one dimensional schedule. For example, hours in front of YOUTUBE, or hours in front of TV channels that offer similar 'bite-sized thrills'. Or, hours in front of the football / sport channels. And even, dare I say it, hours spent on the US cartoon channels. It is not the quality of the individual channels that is a concern here – more the addictive character of their content – if children are not offered alternative excitement.

The danger of a non-stop diet of these channels is a very real threat in many homes with children. It is wrong to argue that the digital channels are offering all that is needed according to the statutory requirements – the important point here is to look at children's individual media schedules. And here we need to ensure that the commercial world is contributing to the quality of the mix within each child's media diet – not simply to the mix within the market place.

More specifically, we should look at how the commercial companies can deliver mainstream excitement to ensure children watch a mix of programming types. It is mainstream excitement that fuels playground chatter – and it is what encourages children to watch programmes that stretch their schedules into new territories. For example, it is this mainstream excitement that accounts for the enormous appeal of programmes like the X Factor / Little Britain amongst younger audiences.

What's more, it is this mainstream excitement that is so lacking from the children's / teenage sector. Yes, *Sherlock* / *Evacuation* are examples of how it can be achieved – and this is where the commercial companies should be challenged to make more of a contribution.

In conclusion, it is plurality within a child's individual media schedule that is important – and this is where the commercial PSBs should be encouraged to make more of a contribution. In particular, they should explore how they can use mainstream excitement to lure children away from the dangers of one dimensional media diets.

(iii) Role for 'seed funding' awards and need to win back commercial funding

Yes, Ofcom must address the funding crisis – maintaining the status quo is not an option. The new media environment has fuelled the crisis – and it is important that funding models adapt to the new challenges of today. In our media driven world it is so important that we maintain the quality of children's programming – we cannot afford not to respond.

As well as backing tax breaks – I would like to push the idea of 'seed funding' awards. The role of these awards would be to precipitate more commercial funding opportunities and to encourage commercial companies to take risks they would not be prepared to take without an additional pot of money.

Ofcom should also explore other ways of luring commercial funding back to broadcasting. It may be right that the new advertising regulations are not the chief cause of the current crisis – but Ofcom cannot ignore that they will have aggravated the situation. It feels dishonest / politically correct – not to recognise this. It seems that all is being done to keep 'the role of advertising' out of this conversation – and this seems wrong.

In the long term – Ofcom needs to relook at the anomalies of the current regulations – and look at ways of attracting back some funding. In particular, it needs to focus on the reluctance of children's companies to sponsor programming. There is much confusion in the corporate world regarding what is or isn't within the spirit of the new regulation.

In conclusion, given the current funding crisis – all should be done to attract commercial money back to broadcasting. This could be done in a variety of ways – but above, Ofcom needs to show companies that their support is valued – and reassure them – that responsible sponsorship doesn't break the spirit of the new regulations.

(iv) Provision for the 13 – 15 year old group

We all agree that this age group are poorly catered for – and we need to be more creative in the way we treat them as a group. In particular, we need to find solutions that recognise that most of their viewing is done in adult time. And we need to be more inventive in the way we segment the schedule – the children's vs adult distinction feels a bit irrelevant when it comes to this age group.

For example, may be we should put more emphasis on ensuring that there are a sufficient number of adult programmes that are suitable for them. This could be done via a quota system. Or, may be we should think how adult programmes could be adapted for them. For example, shorter / edited versions of big budget documentaries, etc.

(v) Increasing role for media literacy

Territory that is close to my heart – and hence our two books / and the time I have spent on media parenting session in schools. So important in this world where it is impossible to regulate everything – we all need to take more responsibility over what our children watch – and that means parents and the children themselves need to be more wised up to the dangers / opportunities of the media world.

This is also important when it comes to ensure the quality of a child's media schedule – parents need to take a more proactive role in determining the mix of what their children are watching. In a world of so much choice, it is easy to say that we must celebrate the 'empowerment' this offers children. The problem is that children don't always know what is good for them – and just as with junk food – parents need to ensure that their children consume a healthy mix of what's on offer.

There is much to be said here – the important thing – is that Ofcom recognises the critical importance of media literacy – and that it progresses from a period of research and deliberation – to a phase of implementation (or at least fuelling it!)