

Response to discussion paper: Citizens, Communications and Convergence

The starting point in my response to Ofcom's discussion paper on Citizens, Communications and Convergence is the wording from paragraph 2.21, namely "*An important principle is that all citizens are equal and have the same rights and responsibilities. In relation to media and communications services, this includes a right to have the access to services and content that are needed to participate in society.*"

My concern is that the BBC, one of the world's most renowned broadcasting organisations, does not abide by this principle - resulting in harm to UK society. If all citizens are equal, shouldn't they be entitled to roughly equal services by public service broadcasters? But if we look at BBC children's television services, which are split into different age groups, we find that the Corporation fails to treat teenagers as anything like equal to younger children. CBBC, which is aimed at 6 to 12 year olds, provides about 100 hours of TV programmes per week, including a choice of channel at some times of the day. BBC Switch, on the other hand, provides only two hours per week of programmes for 13-17 year olds. **There isn't even any pretence that the BBC treats teenagers as equal citizens.**

In 2006 the Corporation implemented a covert policy which [discarded feedback](#) to CBBC Newsround from children over the age of 13. It seems that this malfeasant practice has now been relaxed, though wrongdoing hasn't been admitted and the paucity of services for teens is worse than it has been for some time. The BBC Switch news magazine programme, Revealed, is only screened in the Saturday afternoon slot and so can never be as up to date as CBBC's Newsround, which is on TV at least three times every day.

But it's not just teenagers who get a raw deal from the BBC. Other groups have complained that they are badly treated. Following the [King Report](#) the BBC acknowledged that the UK regions are poorly served, but it has not accepted that other problems may exist such as a [predilection for Islam](#) reported by Hindus and Sikhs. And when, in 2006, Stonewall accused the BBC of [sidelining lesbian and gay people](#) the BBC summarily dismissed the suggestion, and some time later concluded, obiter dictum in 'From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel' page 72, that the BBC institutionally supports equality for gay people.

An article in the Guardian from 2003 indicated that the BBC's then Director of Television believed children should be protected from knowledge about same-sex relationships. Here I am grateful to Jana Bennett, currently the BBC's Director of Vision and a member of the BBC Executive, for help with this submission to Ofcom.

On 8th September 2008 I contacted Jana to find out whether there had been any change in attitude:-

Dear Ms Bennett,

I am hoping to respond to Ofcom's discussion paper entitled Citizens, Communications and Convergence. My starting point is from page 6 of their discussion paper: "An important principle is that all citizens are equal and have the same rights and responsibilities. In relation to media and communications services, this includes a right to have the access to services and content that are needed to participate in society."

With reference to this article from The Guardian (Feb 2003):-

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2003/feb/14/broadcasting.bbc>

Please could you let me know if the article misrepresents your views in any way? Or do you have any comments.

A reminder on 30th September 2008 provided an opportunity to expand on my particular area of interest:-

Dear Ms Bennett,

Please could I remind you again that I am awaiting a response to my email on 8th September. Your views would be most valuable in formulating a submission to Ofcom's consultation which closes on 8th October 2008, and not having heard otherwise from Richard Tyrrell I assumed you would take the opportunity to clarify your position.

The linked Guardian article gives an impression that you regard same-sex affection as 'adult content' - something which you feel children should not know about. But it's also clear from numerous BBC children's programmes that the Corporation doesn't have similar reservations about programmes with straight affections and relationships. Recently screened examples on CBBC are:-

- 1) Basil Brush episode called Dave's First Girlfriend in which Dave shouts out "I'm in love" and gets a response of "Oh that's totally sweet. Dave's finally seen past material possessions and opened his heart to true love."
- 2) Continual references, including kissing scenes, in Grange Hill
- 3) Alistair Fury's crush on Pamela Whitby
- 4) Six year old Eliot Kid and his crush on Loretta
- 5) Young Dracula - episode about Valentine's Day
- 6) Mortified - episode in which Taylor tries to get her parents to undergo a traditional wedding ceremony.

And the above examples represent only a small proportion of programmes of this type. As far as I am aware, and please correct me if I'm mistaken, there have been no lesbian/gay/bi/trans-inclusive kids' programmes on CBBC for almost three years.

In your Showcomotion keynote speech last year you asserted that the BBC helped children understand the world around them, but that speech seems at odds with your earlier remarks to the seminar on the impact of TV on the family reported by The Guardian.

Could you therefore clarify where the BBC stands on the representation and depiction of same-sex affections and relationships within its children's services? I would also be interested to know why the BBC implemented discriminatory policies against teenagers, and why the online help section about growing up - Your Life, No Problem - was taken off CBBC's website in September last year, just two months after the remarks in your Showcomotion speech.

The Ofcom discussion paper refers to the "important principle" that all citizens are equal and have the right to services and content that are needed to participate in society. You're in a position of influence on matters which have real impact on fairness in society, so if you are able to explain your reasoning it would be appreciated.

As previously promised I'd be happy to send you a draft of my Ofcom submission.

Jana Bennett replied on 2nd October 2008 as follows:-

Dear Mr Mason,

Thank you for your e-mails and I'm sorry for the delay in responding to your original query.

It was interesting to re-read the Guardian article from 2003 and reflect on how far we have come since then.

The 9pm watershed is still recognised by broadcasters and viewers as the time when parents need to take responsibility for their children's viewing. The BBC's policy is to provide accurate content information about post watershed programmes in order to help parents make informed choices about what they view themselves and what is suitable for their children.

Content for all post watershed programmes is considered carefully before guidance information is given. On our linear channels, guidance advice will take the form of on air announcements backed up by text labelling within the EPG.

In the on demand world, the BBC is leading the way in developing text based guidance advice. Last year we launched 'G for Guidance' which offers additional text information for those viewing post watershed programmes 'on demand', away from the context of a fixed transmission schedule. The BBC i-Player has a guidance lock option which, when activated, allows parents to prevent access to programmes which carry guidance advice. You can find more information on this via this link: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidance/> . This winter we are planning to introduce a Children's version of the i-Player which will allow children to search for their favourite CBeebies and CBBC programmes in a secure environment, without the risk of them stumbling upon other content aimed for older audiences.

Digital channels have a high proportion of self selecting viewers and expectations on these channels will generally differ from those of our terrestrial channels. Similarly, audiences seeking content on the web will have

differing expectations of what they will find. Our guidance policy for both the linear and on demand worlds is designed to ensure that post watershed programmes carry clear and unambiguous information when they contain stronger content, enabling adults to make their own choices regarding their children's viewing and online usage.

Regarding your subsequent email, the simple and short answer is that we do not ban or censor same-sex relationships on CBBC. We have covered them and will continue to cover them but, in general, sexuality whether homosexual or heterosexual will only have brief references on the service given the age of its target audience. I believe you have been in dialogue with Richard Deverell on this matter.

I replied the same morning:-

Dear Ms Bennett,

Many thanks for your email this morning.

I must admit that I was a bit unsure as to what you meant by "how far we have come since then [2003]" - whether you meant technological advances since 2003, or maybe you meant the acceptability of same-sex kissing in public of which you seemed to disapprove at that time.

I will try to get the draft of my Ofcom submission to you by Monday.

I didn't receive clarification on the interpretation of "how far we have come since then."

Questions remain unanswered and the situation remains unresolved in practice. Precisely where, for example, does the BBC stand on the representation of same-sex families in programmes intended for children? Is this what the BBC regard as a "sexuality" issue, and therefore inappropriate on CBBC programmes? Can civil partnership ceremonies be depicted in CBBC programmes, or are they also seen as a sexuality issue? If they are a "sexuality" issue why is the same not also true of marriage? And then there is the question of crushes and love, which receive a great deal of programme time on CBBC, but only where these affections are directed towards members of the opposite sex. Does that mean that same-sex affections are less acceptable and should be hidden away? My assertion that there hadn't been any LGBT-inclusive programmes for almost three years wasn't contested.

I wanted to know why the BBC had discriminated against teenagers, and why online help and advice about growing up had been removed from CBBC's website only two months after Ms Bennett had [told an audience at Showcomotion](#) how much CBBC does to help children understand the world around them. All these questions remain unanswered.

As long ago as 1993 BBC children's TV recognised gay characters in programmes such as Grange Hill and Byker Grove, but since about 2000 the Corporation has become less inclusive, and taking account of changes in society the situation regarding LGBT inclusiveness on children's TV has probably never been worse. Both Byker Grove and

Grange Hill have now been axed. One of the justifications Anne Gilchrist gave for axing Grange Hill was that the BBC felt it owed it to their audience to reflect the change in children's lives since the programme began. The BBC claimed it was "actively seeking out new and exciting ways of bringing social realism to the CBBC audience through drama and other genres." CBBC factual programmes are also part of the problem. The main kids' TV news programme, Newsround, hasn't reported any LGBT-relevant news for ages, and even the arrival of civil partnerships in 2006 was ignored.

A detailed look at threads on the [CBBC Bullying message board](#) revealed an apparent filtering policy whereby messages about homophobic bullying – which is unfortunately very common - are excluded. The Corporation therefore needs to explain why from July 2006 to July 2008, 'ginger' was found on 164 threads and 'fat' was found on 181 threads on CBBC's Bullying board, yet there were no messages about bullying for being (perceived as) lesbian or gay. The British Psychological Society has made clear that young people should not have to put up with homophobic bullying and that it should, like all forms of prejudice, be combatted at school as early as possible - Key Stage 1. The BBC has so far been unwilling to allow an independent examination of their message board databases and procedures in order to suss out the truth, and consequently to find out whether human rights have been affected by what is seemingly a discriminatory practice.

With so few TV services aimed at teens, children in that age range are left feeling that they are outsiders by the UK's national broadcaster. Yet Sara Bragg and David Buckingham said in an October 2002 Broadcasting Standards Commission review of research:- ".. it is increasingly recognised that the diversity of young people's responses to television – and indeed their understanding and experience of sexual matters - cannot be neatly encapsulated within a developmental model based purely on chronological age." And a recent CBBC Newsround report (19 September 2008) seemed to confirm that kids watch mainly programmes aimed at adults.

If the BBC insists on maintaining its 'Switch' brand then it must observe the principle in Section 2.21 of Ofcom's discussion paper and provide teens with proportionate TV broadcasting time, which would be around 70 hours per week rather than about 2 hours as at present. Instead of receiving help and support teenagers feel disenfranchised, because to all intents and purposes the BBC effectively leaves them to their own devices, arguing that they will be catered for online, even though families may not have internet access. Some teens are joining ghettos or gangs and become involved with drugs and the associated culture of knife and gun violence; others spend loads of time in gaming, or on social networking sites with the potential dangers of cyberbullying or meeting their networking 'friends' in real life. Television, whilst obviously not ideal, could at least help young people understand their place in the world, and with high quality content could provide them with a readily available and safe form of entertainment.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of the discussion paper 'Citizens, Communications and Convergence' was to clarify Ofcom's role in furthering the interests of citizens.

In summary, significant discrimination is taking place at present, since broadcast services for teenagers are woefully lacking compared with output for younger kids. Discrimination against LGBT kids is taking place within BBC children's services, both broadcast and online. Despite the likelihood of a knock-on effect in terms of cohesiveness of UK society, the BBC has been unwilling to address the problems identified to them in detail over a prolonged period of time. Although these issues were included as part of my submission to the BBC Trust consultation on children's services, past experience has led me to believe that the BBC Trust is not sufficiently independent of BBC management.

- ⇒ Issues touching on impartiality, equality, fairness and integrity should be addressed by a Code of Behaviour for public service broadcasters.
- ⇒ Such a **PSB Code** should cover general ethical principles as well as being more specific where appropriate.
- ⇒ It should be made clear that all public service broadcasters should conform to the PSB Code or will otherwise lose their special PSB status.
- ⇒ [The Content Board](#) may have responsibility for drawing up the PSB Code, with full public consultation before the Code is finalised.

Any broadcaster wishing to maintain their PSB status must adhere to the [PSB Public Purposes](#), conform with relevant UK legislation, and be open, honest and transparent with the public. The highest standards of propriety involving integrity, impartiality and objectivity must be maintained. **DM 8/10/2008**