

The Impact of the Commercial World on Childhood Consultation Response from Save Kids' TV

Save Kids' TV (SKTV) is a coalition of parents, producers, artists, educators and others concerned about screen-based media for children in the UK. We are campaigning to persuade the Government to acknowledge the value of children's television, and protect it in the face of growing financial pressures. Our response therefore does not deal with the impact on children of openly commercial **messages**, but with what we see as the impact of increasingly commercially-driven **decisions** on the cultural content and choices available to children. We think it is important that the assessment should consider the impact of the commercial world on childhood within this wider frame of reference.

In making this response, we are conscious that we are deliberately yoking together ideas and activities that are normally seen as separate and different. This is an important part of our case. We regard children's television as a significant part of children's cultural life, to be considered in the same way as other cultural experiences. In contrast, most current public discourse about children and any moving image media, including television, tends to be quite different in tone and content from public discourse about children and the arts. We want to challenge the assumptions about children and about culture that underpin this discourse.

1. How has children's engagement with the commercial world changed?

1.1 SKTV came into being precisely because UK investment in first-run original television programming for children by the commercial public service broadcasters – ITV1, GMTV, Channel 4 and Five - has halved in real terms since 1998.¹ Further reductions in this investment seem likely:

- The future provision of new UK-originated content for children, particularly drama and factual programming, looks uncertain other than from the BBC.
- While BBC hours and spend on children's programming have actually increased over the period, its long term commitments to children's programming are by no means guaranteed.²

1.2 It has been widely reported that the main reason for the reduction of provision for children was the loss of revenue to commercial broadcasters as a result of the ban on 'junk food' advertising to children, but in fact wider, and longer term, factors were at work:

In recognition of increased competition from other broadcasters in the lead-up to digital switchover, the Communications Act 2003 changed the requirements for regulation of children's programming. Since then, there have been no specific requirements mandating levels of provision of children's programming, with children's treated in the same way as many other PSB genres such as religion, arts and drama.³

¹ Ofcom, *The Future of Children's Television Programming*, at <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/kidstv/kidstvresearch.pdf> (Executive Summary, p 1)

² *ibid*

³ *ibid* 1.1; p 3

This change in legislation opened the way for commercial pressures to be brought to bear on children's programming, with the inevitable result that the overall number of hours of programming for children has been reduced, and the number of imported, cheaper, non-UK children's programmes (particularly English-language material from the US) has grown. So there has been a decline in both quantity and diversity. This demonstrates the increased role of commercial interests in determining whether it is worth making high quality, indigenous cultural products for children. Questions about whether such products might be of intrinsic value to children themselves, are thus removed from the agenda.

1.3 It has been argued that the decline of UK investment in children's television programming merely reflects an inevitable decline in television consumption as other forms of leisure activity and entertainment become available.⁴ But Ofcom's report on children's programming shows that "television ... remains the most-used medium by children of all ages, with all children aged 5-15 using a television at home"⁵ and explains that, while children's overall consumption of television may have declined to some extent, more of that viewing is now concentrated on children's programmes:

As more media compete for children's attention, BARB data show that children's total viewing has been in decline across all television platforms and across all age groups since 2002. Viewing among children aged 4-15 has declined from 16.7 hours per week in 2002 to 15.5 hours in 2006. However, viewing in children's airtime has grown over this time, as a proportion of total viewing, from 27% in 2002 to 30% in 2006.⁶

1.4 Given that the reduction of programming for children has been most noticeable in the commercial sector, this might seem to leave the field clear for the BBC to consolidate its reputation as one of the world's best providers of children's television. But Ofcom's report makes clear that this view is not endorsed by parents:

While a clear majority of parents regard public service programming for children as very important, less than half think it is being delivered satisfactorily, especially in reflecting a range of cultures and opinions from around the UK.⁷

There are clear dangers in leaving production for children wholly in the hands of a single public service broadcaster. Ofcom argues for a plurality of sources, identifying three ways in which competition could function to drive up quality and diversity:

- plurality of outlets: so that viewers are not reliant on a single provider;
- plurality of commissioning: so that a range of commissioners working for different organisations can bring their different perspectives to bear; and
- plurality of production: so that there are different creative organisations competing for commissions.⁸

⁴ "British children prefer Internet surfing to watching TV" Internet Business News, July 25, 2001

⁵ Ofcom, *The Future of Children's Television Programming* 4.4.2; p 74

⁶ *ibid*, 4.1; p 71

⁷ *ibid*, Executive Summary, p 1

⁸ *ibid*, 1.6; p 16

2 What impact are those changes having on children's wellbeing?

2.1 It is notoriously difficult to find empirical evidence that "proves" the benefits of cultural activity. Efforts to do this in relation to child development and education have had mixed results and in any case risk diminishing culture to the level of tricks and techniques designed to boost learning. Recent writers have argued that the arts need to be regarded as of intrinsic benefit, not as causal agents.⁹ But television is not often regarded – at least in the public discourse of policy-makers and the media – as part of culture or the arts. Indeed, the very name of the government department responsible for culture separates out "media and sport" as distinct from culture, and film and television do not form part of the remit of the UK's Arts Councils. Television has been widely regarded as a causal agent, being singled out for blame in relation to almost every negative news story about children and childhood, from obesity to language deficits.¹⁰ But the research evidence points in a different direction. Professor Jackie Marsh's important study of over 1800 families found that parents' view of the role of television in their children's lives is generally positive:

- Young children are immersed in practices relating to popular culture, media and new technologies from birth. They are growing up in a digital world and develop a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding of this world from birth.
- Parents and other family members scaffold this learning, either implicitly or explicitly, and children engage in family social and cultural practices which develop their understanding of the role of media and technology in society.
- Parents report that their young children generally lead well balanced lives, with popular culture, media and new technologies playing an important, but not overwhelming role, in their leisure activities.
- Engagement with media is generally active, not passive, and promotes play, speaking and listening and reading. In addition, engagement with media and new technologies appears to be a primarily social, not individual, activity, taking place most often with other family members and in shared parts of living spaces.
- Parents are generally very positive about the role of media in their young children's social, emotional, linguistic and cognitive development. They feel that their children learn a great deal from film and television and that it has a positive impact on many aspects of their lives.
- Parents support their children's interest in popular culture, media and new technologies through the provision of resources and interactions with children (e.g. shared play, visits to theme parks) around their interests.¹¹

These parents' views of the benefits of the media in their children's development seem to be endorsed by Dr Paul Van den Broek and others at the University of Minnesota. Investigating the conditions that may foster reading achievement, they found that six-year-olds who scored highest at recalling narrative features of a children's TV episode were the ones who consistently turned out to have become better readers by age eight. Indeed, the children who continued to score highly in their recall of TV narratives, continued to improve as readers.¹² It seems

⁹ Elliot W. Eisner (2002) *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, Yale University Press; Hetland et al (2007) *Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education*, Teachers College Press; and for an account of the controversy on this issue see <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/04/arts/design/04stud.html>

¹⁰ For example Neil Postman (1982) *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Delacorte Press; Sue Palmer (2006) *Toxic Childhood*, Orion.

¹¹ Marsh et al (2005) *Young Children's Use of Popular Culture, Media and New Technologies*, at <http://www.digitalbeginnings.shef.ac.uk/DigitalBeginningsReport.pdf>

¹² see Kathleen E. Kremer et al, (2002) "Role of Early Narrative Understanding in Predicting Future Reading Comprehension" AERA Conference 2002, available at www.ciera.org.)

that television offers very young children opportunities to interpret television narratives and thus to learn key skills such as inference (ie the ability to interpret textual features concerning characters, settings and actions that indicate “good”, “bad”, “happy”, “sad”, “scary”, etc) and prediction (ie the ability to interpret textual features that indicate genre, time-frames and causality, and thus to anticipate what is going to happen). The British Film Institute has used this research to argue that schools’ failure to appreciate the extent to which young children are arriving in school with a considerable portfolio of “pre-literacy” skills derived from their consumption of audio-visual media may be contributing to later failure in learning to read and write. Working with the Primary Literacy Strategy, they have created a successful initiative to build on children’s media-related comprehension skills, using high-quality short films as the basis of critical study within literacy teaching, which has been widely praised and promoted by literacy consultants and advisers, and taken up in over 60 local authorities.¹³

2.2 These research findings underpin our argument that we should regard television as a significant cultural force in children’s lives, not as a commercial product whose risks and benefits can be described in the same terms as food or domestic equipment. We are pleased that Ofcom’s review of public service broadcasting (PSB) seems to recognise the cultural value of television, as in the following list of characteristics that they claim for PSB:

- High quality – well-funded and well-produced
- Original – new UK content, rather than repeats or acquisitions
- Innovative – breaking new ideas or re-inventing exciting approaches, rather than copying old ones
- Challenging – making viewers think
- Engaging – remaining accessible and enjoyed by viewers
- Widely available – if content is publicly funded, a large majority of citizens need to be given the chance to watch it¹⁴

But we are concerned that Ofcom lacks the statutory powers to ensure that television production for children by all UK broadcasters meets these standards. The danger is that high quality children’s programmes may become ghettoised in a reduced, boringly “worthy” sector of publicly funded television, whereas the standards listed above ought to be a powerful stimulus to the market as a whole, encouraging commercial companies to take risks, not only with their own productions but also in importing films and programmes from the wide range of very high quality audio-visual material for children that is produced around the world, as evidenced in the Prix Jeunesse and in numerous children’s film festivals in the UK and abroad.

2.3 The rhetoric used both by the researchers cited in 2.1 and by Ofcom as quoted in 2.2 is very close to the kind of rhetoric used in the arts sector, for example by The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts:

Engaging with the arts enriches young people’s lives, nurtures creativity and improves self esteem and skills... Other areas which arts access can impact upon include:

- Unlocking talent
- Raising aspirations
- Improving confidence

¹³ British Film Institute (2008) *Reframing Literacy*

¹⁴ Ofcom (op cit) 1.4.3; p 14

- Developing intellectual, social and emotional skills
- Developing physical skills
- Changing behaviour and attitudes to learning¹⁵

If the following statement from the Arts Council of England were rewritten with the word “television” in place of “the arts” it might seem shocking to cultural conservatives but would, in our view, be entirely defensible as well as effectively make the case for regarding children’s television as a vital cultural form.

Engagement in the arts and creative opportunities transforms the way children and young people learn and explore the world around them. It can change the way children and young people see themselves – even what they dream of for the future – as well as helping them to develop specific skills. We believe that everyone in England, through early childhood to young adulthood and beyond, should engage with the highest quality of arts and creative experiences. Through listening to children and young people and valuing their artistic practice, we will provide relevant opportunities that stimulate a lifelong passion for the arts and a lifetime involvement as reflective and critical spectators and/or as creative practitioners in and beyond the arts.¹⁶

Conclusion

Television is in children’s homes, is valued by them and by their parents, and makes a significant contribution to their wellbeing, including their social and intellectual development. If children’s television becomes subject to purely commercial forces, as is already beginning to happen, it will be diminished in both quality and quantity, and one important opportunity for contributing to children’s wellbeing will be lost. This is why, in our submission to the Ofcom Children’s Review – 17th December 2007 – we proposed a publicly funded multi-platform, online, interactive and participative service to pump-prime a thriving new market in children’s content that can, in time, be largely self-sufficient.¹⁷

¹⁵ <http://www.childrenandarts.org.uk/>

¹⁶ *Children, young people and the arts*, Arts Council of England 2005, at www.artscouncil.org.uk/publications/publication_detail.php?browse=recent&id=478 (p1)

¹⁷ See our proposal for action in full at <http://www.savekidstv.org.uk/wp-content/d/SKTVofcomresponse.pdf//>