Children's Content at the Core of Public Service Media in a Multiplatform Era

REPORT

on

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INTRODUCTION

It is little wonder that public service broadcasters in many countries remain at the forefront of children's media, commissioning new content from local sources that makes them popular with children. National broadcasters' funding mechanisms and public mandates often require them to meet certain benchmarks in terms of origination, innovation and relevance to diverse age groups, which may not apply to private channels. The 47 Council of Europe countries had a total of some 320 channels aimed at children in mid-2013, of which only 21 formed part of a public broadcasting system. Yet, according to European Audiovisual Observatory data, the public ones were 'in most cases' the most popular in their respective countries.

How sustainable is this popularity and what are the most important factors behind it? Can public broadcasters in Asia, Africa and Latin America learn from successes and failures in other parts of the world? How will public service media fare around the globe in a fast-changing landscape for children's media, driven by global expansion of groups like Disney, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon, an accelerating shift to multiplatform delivery of content, and the rise of new intermediaries like YouTube, Netflix and Amazon?

What are the optimum strategies for public service media when even the youngest children are using tablets and smart phones and downloading apps? Studies show that 20 million minors in France actively used Facebook in 2011, more than one-quarter of whom were aged below 10. The UK's media regulator, Ofcom, found in a 2013 survey that use of tablet computers at home had tripled among 5-15s since 2012, with the percentage of 8-11s saying they used the internet mainly in their bedroom up from 12 per cent in 2012 to 17 per cent in one year. As has been shown by public broadcasters who are ahead of the curve, the challenge is to devise online tools and cross-media programmes that promote media literacy among children, giving them confidence in the areas of online privacy, identity and trust.

This workshop set out to explore public service models for maximising effective content creation for children. Session 1 began with participants introducing themselves and putting forward names of children's programmes that in their view combined 'quality' and popularity. Session 2 explored different models of public service media around the globe to consider whether funding is crucial to producing optimum outcomes for children or whether other factors are equally if not more important. Session 3 put ideas about innovation and 'quality' programming to the test by reviewing clips of different genres aimed at different age groups in different parts of the world to assess their compatibility with the public service remit. Session 4 examined various approaches to regulation and what measures public service media can most usefully seek from regulatory authorities to benefit children. Session 5 enabled participants to synthesise ideas and insights from previous sessions with their own experience and objectives. This report summarises key points that emerged from each session.

SESSION ONE: Examples of 'quality' programmes that are a hit with children

The first part of the workshop was attended by approximately 40 participants, representing 20 different countries, namely: Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Kiribati, Malaysia, Maldives, Morocco, Myanmar, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, Timor Leste, Uganda and UK.

As participants introduced themselves they were asked to recollect the name of a programme or programmes from their own or other countries that they considered met quality thresholds while also having proved popular with children. The first name that came up with the very first speaker was *Sesame Street*, mentioned in all by six people, along with its local co-produced versions (e.g. *Sisimpur* in Bangladesh, *Baghch-E-Simsim* in Afghanistan) and programmes inspired by *Sesame Street*, such as *Batibot* (Philippines) and *Abu Bakr* (Pakistan). Other programmes named included *Bananas in Pyjamas* and *Dirt Girl World* (Australia), *Children of China*, about ethnic diversity, *Gold in the Ground* (India), *Al-Darb* and *Allo Marhaba* (pan-Arab), *Upin and Ipin* (Malaysia) and talent contest shows such as *Malaysian Idol* and *Superstar*. The latter were cited as shows that are extremely popular although the content might be 'questionable', according to some participants. Radio shows were also mentioned, such as the Kiribati collaboration with Germany's RadioJojo and a Sunday morning show on New Zealand radio that lasted 25 years.

A few speakers expressed concern about what they saw as a decline in the quality of children's shows, while another blamed the rise of television for a decline in children's play. Funding issues were seen as the reason for the withdrawal of some programmes (e.g. *Batibot*) and the fact that only a quarter of Indonesia's 290 TV channels carry any content for children, 72 per cent of which is imported. In South Korea, children's shows are on a dedicated public service educational channel. Mention was made of Mobile Mini Children's Circus, a travelling entertainment and educational project for Afghan children, run by a foreign NGO. Some participants called for more attention to be paid to media literacy.

Drawing on some of the themes raised during these introductions, the facilitators gave a preview of the issues to be discussed during the coming sessions.

SESSION TWO: Finding a formula for success in public service media for children

The facilitators introduced the concept of Public Service Media, as defined by UNESCO, in terms of four criteria. These criteria are essential to generating the key features of relevance and trust, which should be at the heart of the public service mandate. The four criteria are:

- *Universal access* - meaning not only physical availability to the whole population but also accessibility in terms of languages spoken in the country and accessibility in terms of content and treatment, i.e. topics should be *relevant* and readily understood.
- *Diversity* - in relation to types of programming, audiences targeted (among whom children are an important segment) and subjects covered. Thus entertainment is as important for public service media as information and education, to meet the diversity criterion, especially since drama and other genres can handle social issues with a more diverse outlook than current affairs programmes may be able to. Diversity in audiences, opinions, approaches and topics is seen as key to promoting social cohesion through mutual understanding.
- *Independence* from political, commercial and corporate interests. This is a pivotal factor in whether or not media users *trust* a media outlet. Sponsorship, product placement and advertising are particularly challenging in relation to children's programming, where promotion of toys, fizzy drinks and salty or sugary snacks risks compromising levels of independence in content provision but is also often seen as the only route to funding children's content. In those cases where advertising has been restricted in children's schedules, broadcasters have often been deterred from commissioning or even screening children's programmes unless required to do so through regulation (see SESSION FOUR below) because of a reduction in economic viability.
- *Distinctiveness* derives from combining diversity and independence in locally-made home-grown programming that speaks to children in a particular country or locality. Too often such programming reflects the educationally-dense content that adults think children need. It ultimately has to appeal to children; there is little point investing in material that children find too boring to watch. *Teletubbies*, highly controversial when first launched, was distinctive in its style, colours, pacing, repetition and live inserts. It got a mixed reception from adults but was an instant hit with children.

Participants picked up on various aspects of these criteria, particularly in relation to funding and to serving ethnically-diverse populations. A situation was mentioned where one religious group objected to programming that foregrounded the practices of another religion. In another case some members of the public objected to public funding for programming in a language spoken by only one population grouping. Two participants stressed how important advertising was for getting the funding to make children's programmes, to the extent that programme makers sometimes have to identify the market before they make the programme. It was pointed out that one article of Morocco's Audiovisual Communication Law requires the country's two public service broadcasters to provide at least 10 hours each per week of programming for children.

Determinants of success in serving children: The facilitators then raised the question of whether the amount and type of funding received by a broadcaster is the main determinant of its success in producing content for children. They compared six indicators for six broadcasters from around the world, most of them with a public service remit. The chosen six were, in alphabetical order: the BBC (UK), JCC (Qatar/pan-Arab), NHK (Japan), PBS (US), SABC (South Africa), TVN (Chile).

1. The first indicator selected was the start date of television broadcasts, on the basis that **years of experien**ce might represent a significant resource. The range here was very wide among the six operators, with the BBC's television output dating back to 1946, NHK's to 1953, PBS and TVN to 1969, SABC's having been delayed to 1976 through fear and reluctance on the part of the apartheid government, and JCC having been a recent start-up, launched in 2005.
2. Next was the broadcaster's **source of funding** or support. The sources here ranged across: membership and donations (PBS); licence fees (NHK , BBC, SABC); sales of co-productions (BBC, NHK); grants (from the state in the case of SABC and JCC, and from the regulator in the case of TVN); and advertising (SABC, JCC, TVN). It was noted that JCC had relied solely on Qatari government support from 2005 to 2013, at which point its funding model changed to include advertising.
3. Third was the range of **delivery platforms** for children's screen content provided by the broadcaster, i.e. whether content is available on linear terrestrial television only (TVN) or whether there are channels mainly oriented to education, whether for children or adults (NHK, SABC) or whether children can also access content online (BBC, JCC, NHK). In the case of PBS, its content for 7-9 year-olds airs as a 'kids' block' on affiliated stations. Of the six examples, only the BBC and JCC have channels aimed at different age groups: CBeebies for under-6s and CBBC for 6-12 year-olds in the case of the BBC and, in the case of JCC, Baraem for 3-6s and Jeem TV for 7-12s.
4. Fourth was the percentage of children's programmes accounted for by **animation**. Animation is significant within children's schedules because of the ease with which it can be dubbed and therefore exported (to boost revenues for reinvestment) or imported (meaning the content is not home-grown and may not be directly relevant to local children). The lowest ratio of animation to non-animation was the 15% recorded for the BBC, representing 3% for CBBC programming and 30% for CBeebies. Not all operators measure their programming in this way but analysis of a dozen shows featured on the SABC Educational website indicated a ratio of 25% animation. Official figures collected from TVN gave a ratio of 30% animation. By far the highest percentage was for JCC. A minute-by-minute analysis of JCC schedules over a 24-hour period at the end of August 2014 yielded a ratio of 80% animation.
5. The 5th indicator is linked to the 4th, namely the presence or otherwise of a vibrant local **production community**, where practitioners have a professional interest in making children's content and tend to communicate or collaborate with each other across company divides. Research on the six selected broadcasters showed that a production community does exist in at least five of the countries involved, as evidenced, for example, by programme entries to competitions and by the re-running of successful programmes on other channels. JCC, which does not operate within a public service framework, started with a mission to create a market for pan-Arab children's content and thereby stimulate the formation of a regional production community. However this was interrupted by a switch to a much higher level of imports after management changes at JCC in 2011.

6. Programmes' **relevance** to local children is a facet of the features of public service provision. Achieving it reflects the extent to which providers have managed to grapple with challenges such as ethnic diversity (mentioned by workshop participants in SESSION ONE) or a multiplicity of languages being spoken within a country (e.g. SABC). In the case of NHK and PBS, the content is largely Japanese or US in origin respectively. Yet it is also relevant for children to learn about other countries and societies around the world. The more content there is for children the more relevance becomes attainable. Hence the urgency of securing a place for it through diverse delivery platforms.

Possible other indicators: Participants suggested further indicators to consider. One was whether states have child-friendly legislation that underpins guaranteed funding and incentives for children's content. Another was whether the public service operator has a commercial subsidiary or enterprises department, since this can lead to marketeers driving storylines to ensure toy and other merchandising spin-offs, which can potentially militate against diversity and innovation. A third was related to the pedagogical handling of online educational content.

Applying the indicators more widely. In applying the indicators to their own countries and communities, participants raised interesting questions. One was about the dilemma of whether or not to devote internal resources to animation, given the expense but also given the assumption that children like animation. The amount of airtime devoted to material for children clearly varied greatly from country to country, ranging from 30 minutes per week in one case to 10% of the total in another, enforced through fines. The handling of funding was also mentioned because of the power it can give governments over the children's media landscape. Evidence of lively production communities was provided; there were also examples of production communities existing inside organisations rather than across them.

SESSION THREE: Evaluating innovations in public service content for children

In this session the group evaluated clips of four programmes in light of the public service media criteria discussed in SESSION TWO. The aim, while watching, was to consider the clip's cultural relevance, its production values, entertainment value for children, etc. Participants were asked to regard themselves as critical friends of the programme maker.

Clip 1 was a preschool puppet show called *Tsehai* from Ethiopia. This episode (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLvvnvqjk30&list=UUuwN2Z76kbHIlXmpnPx807g was about germs.

Reaction from the group was generally positive. One member commented that the combination of voices from different ages, including an adult, was well suited to the target age group and the message was clear. Another observed that the clip, besides its relevant health message, was also teaching language (small, smaller, smallest) in a way that can be achieved more effectively on television than through print. Production values were fairly basic. It was suggested that more use of music could have alleviated the 'worthy' feel.

Clip 2 was a drama from the Netherlands, aimed at tweens, with the title 'The Hairdressing', in which a small child tries to be kind to her recently widowed grandmother by giving her a haircut while the grandmother is asleep. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8NFNBInldI

The feeling expressed by several group members here was that the idea behind the drama would make more sense to adult viewers than to children. They appreciated the underlying story about bonding, love and tenderness between generations, and showing that children can have good intentions that adults may misconstrue. Two viewers found the drama rather slow-paced and wondered whether children would have the patience to see the episode through. Another suggested that the facial expressions were key to conveying emotion, which would be understood by children as well as adults. It was pointed out that elderly people do not feature in children's drama very often.

Clip 3 was a pre-school CGI series shown simultaneously on Nickelodeon in the US and the BBC's CBeebies in the UK, based on the Beatrix Potter stories about Peter Rabbit.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frLPFdApvVo

There was questioning of both production and cultural values in this clip, containing anthropomorphised rabbits, a bland, explicitly 'educational' narrative and strong US accents. One comment suggested that contemporary children would find the imagery very outdated, since it looked like 'something from 1985'. It seemed to some like a cynical Hollywood-ised exploitation of a 'brand' (*Peter Rabbit*) that parents may remember from their own childhoods, and consequently assume there must be some aesthetic value or moral element to the episodes, especially in view of its screening on a 'trusted' channel.

Clip 4 was *Burka Avenger*, a Pakistan-made animation aimed at tweens and up, showing a female superhero who covers up and uses pens and books to fight evil.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frLPFdApvVo

This animation, shown at the 2014 Prix Jeunesse, has not yet been televised. One group member said he would never broadcast it because it reinforces negative stereotypes and exposes children in a region torn by conflict to yet more images of the very same things – guns, bombs – they see too much of already. The negative stereotyping of male tribal characters (eg. 'baba bandook', where 'bandook' means 'gun') as being opposed to girls' education because they are evil and corrupt is guaranteed to alienate the very people who need to be persuaded about the message of the story. One comment summed up a widely-held feeling that 'the message is good but it's an awful way of putting it across'. The show's popularity with children is not yet proven.

SESSION FOUR: How can regulators best help public service media meet children's needs?

The facilitators introduced this session by comparing 'positive' and 'negative' types of regulation, the former being intended to promote desirable outcomes in terms of quality and quantity and the latter designed to prevent other outcomes deemed detrimental.

Examples of **positive regulation** include the terms of the CBBC's Service Licence, under which CBBC (for 6-12 year-olds) has an annual commitment to provide 85 hours of news to 'sustain citizenship and civil society', 550 hours of factual programmes to 'promote education and learning' and 665 hours of drama (including repeats) to 'stimulate creativity and cultural excellence'. Some countries have quotas for children's programming (as mentioned in SESSION TWO). Wherever such commitments or requirements exist, resources and expertise are required to monitor compliance and sanctions are needed to deal with non-compliance. The UK previously required commercial broadcasters to air 550 hours of original programming, with specific amounts for drama, factual programmes etc. But the quotas were dropped after the passage of the 2003 Communications Act, which left the decision about amounts to the broadcasters. In 2006 the UK's ITV virtually stopped showing children's content on its main channel. Other positive interventions can come in the form of subsidies and tax breaks. These may attract big conglomerates to invest but do not necessarily promote locally-relevant content.

Negative regulation includes advertising bans, mentioned in SESSION TWO, as well as bans on violent or other unsuitable content, or the imposition of a cut-off point ('watershed' or 'safe harbour') in the schedules before which unsuitable content should not be aired. Participants noted that some ethnically-diverse countries vet all children's content before it is screened and block material that is not approved.

A third alternative to positive or negative regulation is **no regulation**. Where this situation prevails, local children's content is often lacking, leaving children to watch adult programmes. Instead of investing in local production the trend in a 'no-regulation' context is to rely heavily on dubbed imports, mostly from the US and Japan. Since it is hard for local companies to compete with the production values of international heavyweights (Disney, Nickelodeon etc), children may be seen to prefer imports over local material, in which case there is pressure for local material to resemble international formats and aesthetics ever more closely. An absence of subsidies or any sense of state responsibility for children's learning through entertainment leaves the development and pre-production side of children's content unsupported. Thus investors may see potential for returns in creating animation studios, but without development and a supply line for pre-production there is nothing local to animate.

Potential checklist. The facilitators introduced a preliminary checklist of measures that children's media services might seek from regulatory authorities. The checklist started with quotas (in terms of airtime and origin) and continued with multiplatform potential (i.e. whether or not broadcasters are permitted to provide content over other platforms), gender equality issues (staff recruitment, management positions and content), monitoring (how much, of what) and enforcement (incentives vs penalties). It ended with social diversity (which should be guaranteed through states' obligations to outlaw discrimination under UN international treaties) and training (since a regulatory body may be responsible for promoting opportunities for training, including by broadcasters themselves).

The facilitators pointed out that monitoring can encompass, or be linked with, continual research by regulators into actual trends in media use to ensure that this information informs policy decisions. As for enforcement, if this is carried out through fines, it risks undermining an operator's financial viability. On the issue of gender equality, it was noted that children's television is widely perceived as a feminised profession because of the routine association of women with caring for children. This may have adverse implications for the prestige it enjoys vis-à-vis other parts of the sector. Meanwhile, investment into what is perceived as 'boys' content' is often influenced by the truism that girls will watch 'boys' television', but not vice versa. Recent research has shown that current assumptions that girls are well served by 'strong girl characters' are misplaced, as there is widespread sexualisation of the way young girls are portrayed in children's TV.

Comments on the checklist. Participants talked through the proposed checklist in groups and then shared their comments with everyone. The matter of **gaming** came up as a potential issue for regulators, although one commentator suggested that gaming could be an offshoot of publicly-funded content and it might be better for local children to be playing local games related to local content than to be overwhelmed with US-originated games.

Participants suggested that ethical behaviour should be distinguished from regulation, since regulation is to be enforced whereas **ethics** should be self-imposed. Thus, for example, issues of gender equality and social diversity could, in the view of some workshop members, be considered matters of ethics rather than regulation. Getting high **quality** was considered the top priority in recruitment, regardless of gender — a view rendered less controversial by the high proportion of senior posts in children's television already occupied by women. The point was also made that positive regulation of the kind that conducts **monitoring and training** is very expensive and the decision as to whether media providers themselves should fund the regulator's monitoring activities is highly political. One item found to be missing from the checklist was a **complaints** procedure.

SESSION FIVE: Participants' concluding observations based on their previous experience

Benefits and challenges of online video: The key issues facing people involved in children's screen content are: getting sufficient powers to do what is needed and sufficient funding to make original content that children want to view. This has been made harder by the global move away from regulation. This was the summary offered by one participant, who also noted that the biggest headache today is caused by the move away from linear TV toward time-shifting and place-shifting in viewing. The proliferation of online video makes it harder than ever to know where best to put resources in order to bring the best results culturally and financially. The big global aggregators rise to the fore, making it very hard for smaller sites online to get known.

'In children's TV repeats at 3-year intervals are not repeats'. The observation about marketing challenges for small independent online video websites was directly relevant to another participant who was considering launching a children's channel through YouTube. It was felt that children would return to a site if they liked it enough, but they had to find it in the first place, which could depend on branding, brand loyalty and trust in a brand. But it could also depend on marketing, since good content online is liable to sink without trace if it is not efficiently marketed. As for the volume of investment needed to produce good 'quality' content, some participants were relieved to discover that children's content enjoys a particular pecuniary advantage over content for adults in that children grow up – so that material repeated after a three-year gap will be playing to new audiences for whom it is not a repeat.

Defining 'quality'. Two participants suggested that this could only be effectively measured in relation to the purpose of the content. In this definition, quality content is that which achieves its purpose and is attractive to children. The latter can only be assessed through direct research on media use in families, involving talking to young children with their parents' permission. Nielsen ratings are really only useful for primetime; where children time-shift and place-shift their viewing other ratings methods are needed. Resource constraints mean such research can only be attempted infrequently.

But, if potential users of the research findings are doing their jobs, they should already have a rough idea of the findings in advance.

Risk can never be eliminated. On the other hand, if producers are too slavish in following what viewers say they like, this can result in programmes that fail. Thus risk-taking and innovation have to be part of the public service media ethos because if public service operators neglect to innovate, who will? Ultimately, public service media are more about developing a particular creative environment and regulatory ecology than about individual institutions.

ENDS, *9 October 2014*