

The Future of Children's TV

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1. Introduction

In response to the OFCOM consultation of 3rd October 2007

Children's TV is in crisis. But why does anyone care? Why would it matter if children's television disappeared completely? Is this just about losing jobs in an industry, or is it an issue of providing an important and worthwhile service to young people and therefore to society as a whole?

2. What's the purpose of Children's TV?

There is a children's TV crisis, and although the reason is due in part to advertising restrictions that doesn't in any way excuse the BBC's shoddy treatment of children detailed in this submission to OFCOM.

Jocelyn Hay, from the Voice of the Listener and Viewer, told BBC News 24 on 15 May 2007 that children need programmes made in this country, and pointed out that they "want to be entertained but they also have a right to information, to educational programmes, live programmes, programmes that reflect their own rich heritage of speech, language, culture and their own environment and locations which help them to grow up to be informed citizens of this country, not of some mid-Atlantic fantasy world."

Mrs Hay's statement goes to the heart of why it is so important that this country has our own good quality children's programmes. But there is no point in having children's programmes made here in the U.K. unless they fully reflect our society and values too.

Many children have games consoles and therefore have access to as much fantasy world as they like, and what's more, unlike with television, they can interact directly and become part of the fantasy adventure.

Broadcasters can't compete with the best immersive fantasy software titles, and should instead seek to engage children and young people in *quality* factual programmes and *realistic* drama such as were once common in children's TV schedules. And modern children's TV must be relevant to all British children whatever their age, including those who wish to identify as lesbian, gay, bi or trans.

- Children's TV must concentrate on factual programmes and realistic dramas
- Television should aim to provide a distinct form of entertainment
- Programmes must be relevant and inclusive for 21st century youth

3. BBC Children's Television Failings

If we examine children's TV we can see that the BBC is currently failing children aged 14 and above, as well as failing LGBT children of all ages. Creative Future, announced by the director-general on 25 April 2006, appears to have exacerbated the problem. The original

Creative Future proposal was to aim CBBC at 7-11 year-olds and add another broadband based "brand" for 12-16 year-olds (Appendix B). Here are the BBC Press announcements:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2006/04_april/25/creative.shtml

http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2006/04_april/25/creative_detail.shtml

Less than a month later, the BBC announced that Byker Grove was to be axed. Byker Grove was set in the north east of England and looked at the lives and relationships of a diverse group of teenagers in the Byker youth centre. In autumn 2005 the storyline included one of the teens, Bradley, realising that he was gay, coming out to his girlfriend and eventually dating another boy.

In May 2006, very shortly after the Byker Grove axing announcement, Richard Deverell was interviewed on CBBC Newsround. The full Newsround interview is included in Appendix C, but to summarise, there were many "upset and angry" viewers wanting to know why the BBC had taken the decision.

One viewer, Mark, said "**So now there'll be CBeebies for toddlers, CBBC for primary school children, BBC for adults. Where does that leave us teens?**" Mr Deverell said that the BBC had recognised there is a gap for teenagers and announced some new services for them "hopefully in the near future." That was in May 2006.

However far from trying to become more inclusive of disaffected teens, by September 2006 it was apparent that the BBC had begun to further alienate these kids (see Appendix A)

In mid-September 2006 I wrote to the BBC about this apparent age discrimination and received a reply from Richard Deverell on 22 September 2006 acknowledging that it does take place: "The CBBC services (sic) does discriminate by age - our core audience is 6-12. That does not mean we will completely exclude children outside this range - but it is our policy to focus on the 6-12 year olds. The BBC offers other services for both older and younger children."

It is worth noting that children taking part in the CBBC 'Serious' series (eg Serious Arctic or Serious Ocean) are required to be aged between 12 and 15:-

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/wild/arctic/>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/newtalent/under_16/seriousocean/

Perhaps this is because of difficulties insuring under 12's for the dangerous pursuits involved. However, it is an example of BBC double-standards and hypocrisy as far as children's TV is concerned.

BBC Director of Vision, Jana Bennett, made the very worthy claim in July 2007 that CBBC helps "children understand themselves and their relationships in all their rich complexity and in particular, understand their world – begin to fathom their navigation of relationships, their situation, through the experience of others whom they can relate to." (Showcomotion speech)

Those sentiments were true in the past: CBBC dramas such as Byker Grove and Grange Hill between them realistically covered issues such as friendships, domestic violence, school bullying, peer pressure, racism, homophobia, family breakdowns and divorce - in fact issues

which kids will often come across in day-to-day life. But, in today's BBC, Jana Bennett's words couldn't be further from the truth. Just two months after her keynote speech to the Showcomotion meeting a whole swathe of advice - "Everything you need to know about growing up" - was removed from CBBC's website.

Following the unveiling of Creative Future on 25 April 2006, BBC bosses further concentrated efforts on younger children, and all but abandoned children from the very age group which is becoming most disaffected and, without care, could soon swell Britain's NEET population.

The newly announced government schools initiative, going by 'stage' rather than 'age' in examinations, is an example of a modern approach to development. But the BBC ethos seems to be rooted in a 50's approach to children's development: firstly, it has limited nearly all its programmes in a literal sense to under 13's; and secondly it has rigidly defined the boundaries between what *is* and *isn't* acceptable for under 13's. A double whammy.

4. Recommendations

- Programmes should aim to be **inclusive** rather than exclusive
- Kids' TV must operate in the interest of **all** children, without discrimination
- Children develop at different rates and their understanding and appreciation are not delimited by rigid age boundaries.
- There's a condescending attitude to kids at *all* levels of CBBC's management structure. This must cease.
- The Corporation determinedly remains deaf to all attempts to raise these issues. This attitude is unacceptable in the 21st century for a national broadcasting service.

BBC Statements of Programme Policy 2007/2008: **The BBC is a major force in UK society, contributing through its programmes and services to the quality of life in our society as a whole. But in order to do this successfully, it must be inclusive and also strive to consistently offer value for people as individuals.**

5. Conclusion

OFCOM found a clear majority of parents regarded public service programming for children as very important, but less than half thought it is being delivered satisfactorily, especially in reflecting a range of cultures and opinions from around the UK. They found the gap between expectations and delivery of this characteristic is greater for children's programming than for adults programming. Parents wanted more drama and factual programming for older children and young teenagers. OFCOM also point out that parents of young teenagers are particularly dissatisfied with current delivery of public service programming; and young teenagers themselves would like more of this type of content aimed specifically at them.

At present BBC children's programmes aren't inclusive, and in that respect the BBC has detracted from the potential overall quality of children's lives in our society. As a side effect, this may well have contributed to the decline in viewing figures. Children's TV must value **all** children, and not just those selected/preferred by the BBC or any other broadcasting organisation.

Appendix A

BBC cements an age discrimination policy

The BBC Statements of Programme Policy 2003/4 contained the following information:-

BBC One a broad range of high-quality, popular British programmes

BBC Two innovative, challenging television programmes for a wide audience

BBC Three delivering news, information, arts and entertainment to a young audience

BBC Four the most intellectually and culturally enriching channel on television

CBeebies educative and entertaining programming for children under six

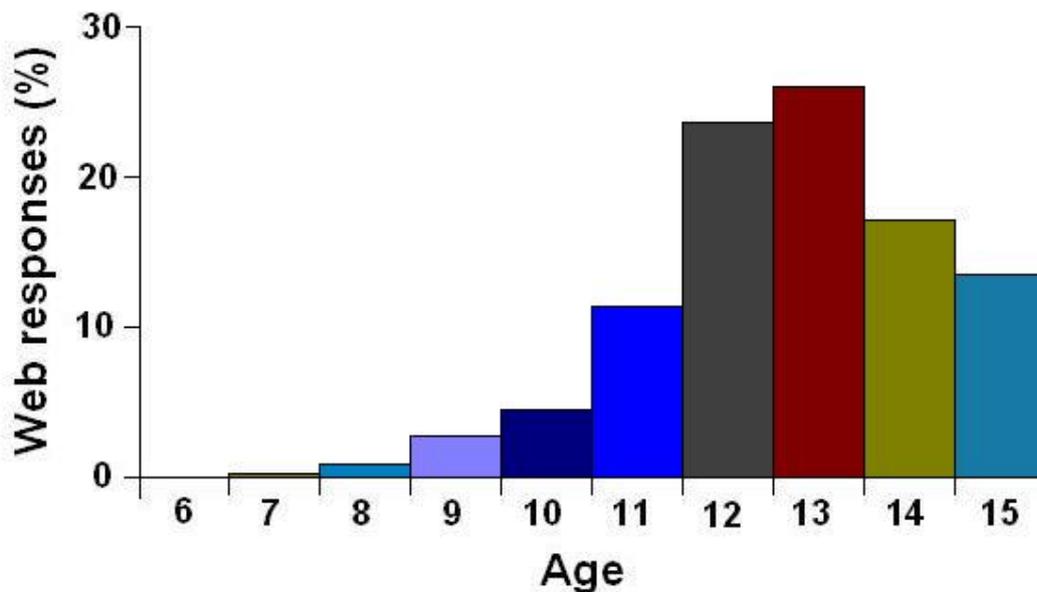
CBBC interactive, mainly UK programming for six to 12 year olds

Despite CBBC being aimed mainly at six to 12 year-olds, the channel was also popular with older children as evidenced by the wide age range of feedback on CBBC's news programme, Newsround. Here is a typical Newsround feedback page from 2003:-

http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/chat/your_comments/newsid_3233000/3233694.stm

In fact feedback from older children was quite common and welcome until 2006 – the year Creative Future was unveiled. A study of the age distribution shortly before the unveiling of Creative Future yielded the following bar graph:-

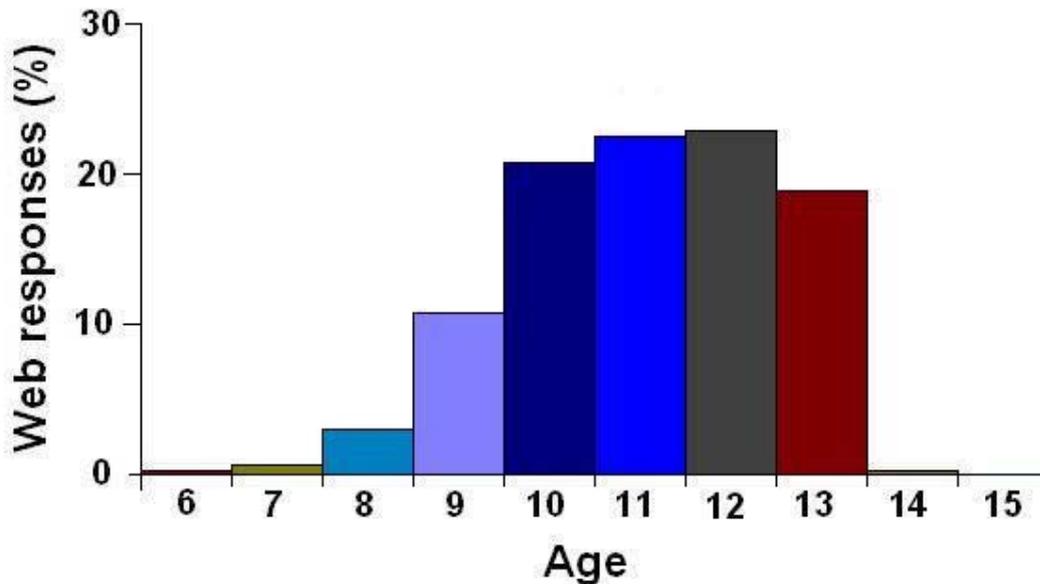
APRIL 2006



Notice (above) that the majority of feedback came from children aged 13, 14 and 15.

By September 2006 it was clear that 15 year-olds were being deliberately excluded and by December 2006 the same had become true of 14 year-olds as well, as can be seen here:-

DECEMBER 2006



Full details of the studies and methodology are given at the following website:-

http://newsarchive.awardspace.com/newsround_age_survey.html

Feedback was via Newsround's website or via a standard rate text message to 62222, though older children weren't warned or informed about the introduction of a discarding policy, meaning that those children's text messages wouldn't be used and the cost of the text message therefore wasted.

Appendix B

BBC Creative Future

Creative Future was unveiled on 25 April 2006 as “an extensive cross-media, audience-focussed project involving hundreds of people across the BBC and key external partners.” Its aim, the BBC says, was “to produce an editorial blueprint for BBC programmes, content and services for the emerging on-demand world over the next BBC Charter period. “

BBC Children’s television, had previously been aimed at 6 to 12 year-olds (see Appendix A), but was also popular with teenage viewers (see Appendix C).

Creative Future affected children’s television by narrowing CBBC’s target age range. It was to be aimed instead at 7 to 11 year-olds. The intention was to add a broadband based service for teenagers at some time in the future – this *broadband* proposal was despite an earlier promise that the BBC was committed to “universal availability of BBC services”.

Sometime in summer or autumn 2006 the BBC seems to have decided to retain the original target age 6-12 after all. There was no BBC Press Office announcement and not all CBBC staff were aware of the policy reversion until some months afterwards, as is clear in this extract from an email from Newsround's former editor, Tim Levell, dated 26 February 2007:-

Firstly, I wanted to clear up about the target age range. You are right; the overall age range for CBBC, including Newsround, is 6 to 12. I have tended till now to say 7 to 11, for the following reason: CBeebies aims from 0-6, and the teens offering which launches this year will aim at 12-16, so I thought we aimed at the ages in between. But in fact we pick up at 6 and continue through to 12, where we will hand over to the teen operation -- so in future I will be saying 6 to 12 for our age range. Thank you for helping me clarify this.

So it is clear that the BBC reversed its original decision, and in consequence CBBC programmes are, in theory, targeted at the same age group as before Creative Future.

However it is apparent that Creative Future has resulted in a deliberate policy of excluding older children (Appendix A) even though the BBC teen brand launch was eighteen months away from the Creative Future announcement. When eventually the new brand launched it offered very little TV programming for British teens - even the soap was from Canada. No wonder *BBC Switch* had a publicity-free and low-profile launch. To make matters worse, no sooner had the teen brand launched than a cut to its funding was announced:-

http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2007/10_october/18/reform.shtml

The BBC’s decision to narrow CBBC’s target age range failed to take account of the differences between children and the rate at which they mature. Putting kids into narrower age categories was a serious error – something the BBC are loath to admit, even though the decision has resulted in making the situation of children’s TV more problematic and causing an unnecessary, avoidable and wasteful use of resources, as well as the consequent misuse of licence payers’ money needed to pay for it. Further, the net effect of Creative Future is that the BBC has all but abandoned teenagers.

Appendix C

Axing of Byker Grove Newsround Interview with Richard Deverell

The following is from a live Newsround report which took place on 12 May 2006 at 5.25pm when Newsround's regular presenter, Ellie Crisell, interviewed Richard Deverell, Head of CBBC

Ellie: Why is it over for Byker Grove? We put your questions to the boss at CBBC.

Yesterday on Newsround we told you how after 17 years the Geordie drama is coming to a close. The next series is going to be the last one ever. One reason for the decision is that CBBC wants to focus more on shows aimed at younger children of primary school age.

Well since yesterday so many of you have emailed us to say how upset and angry you are about Byker going that we've brought in the head of CBBC, Richard Deverell to answer some of your points.

Richard, thanks for coming in. We've had so many emails about this - people saying how important Byker Grove was to them.

Nicola says Byker Grove is useful for younger children. She says it deals with issues like bullying and relationships so it's educational. And Max says surely the BBC needs more shows that relate how hard teenage life is, not less. What do you say to them?

Richard: Well I agree with Nicola and Max. I think it's very important that we cover those subjects, and we will continue to cover those subjects both in our existing shows such as Tracy Beaker and Grange Hill, but also of course we've got a number of exciting new projects in the pipeline.

Ellie: Several people have also picked up on this idea of CBBC going for a more primary school audience. Mark says "so now there'll be CBeebies for toddlers, CBBC for primary school children, BBC for adults. Where does that leave us teens?"

Richard: Well, he's right. I think there is a gap there for teenagers, particularly for the 12-16 year olds and actually the BBC has recognised this and they've announced that they're going to launch some new services aimed at exactly that age group. So hopefully in the near future you'll see some services and programmes aimed exactly at the people that he describes.

Ellie: And what about other shows? Things like Grange Hill, a similar kind of age to Byker Grove. Is that going to go as well?

Richard: No. I think, you know, it's important to keep the programmes fresh, we can't keep programmes forever. Having said that, there are no plans to change Grange Hill.

Ellie: Are you sad that Byker Grove's going?

Richard: I am. It's been around a very long time. It's launched some great careers, some fantastically talented people and some great stories. But we felt it was the right time to end it. We wanted to make sure that all the shows on CBBC were right for that 6-12 year old audience. And of course we needed to end some shows in order to be able to launch new ones.

Ellie: And also Luke has emailed us from Newcastle saying "I'm gutted Byker Grove is finishing. Not only is it a great teen drama, but also a pillar of Newcastle's culture. Is there going to be anything else coming from the North East to replace it?"

Richard: There will be. We are determined to maintain our commitment to the North East. I hope that, maybe not next year but the year after, we will absolutely be doing a drama or some other major production based in the North East.

Ellie: Lovely, thanks for joining us today Richard.

And we'll keep you posted of course with news about what's going to replace Byker Grove as soon as we get it.

Appendix D

BBC and inclusiveness

The BBC's commitment:-

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/diversity.shtml>

The BBC says it's committed to reflecting the diversity of the UK audience in its workforce, as well as in its output on TV, on radio and online. And that it aims to reflect the population of modern Britain - through gender, age, ethnicity and cultural diversity, disability, faith and social background, and sexual orientation.

The BBC doesn't even monitor the commitment as it affects programming and sexual orientation - this was confirmed to me after I contacted the BBC Diversity Centre on 30th October 2007. Without appropriate monitoring, the commitment is meaningless and effectively worthless.

CBBC's website includes a 'Your Life' forum for children's growing problems. Indications from children's posts to the forum are that LGBT children are often excluded, although the moderators attitude seems to vary. The forum message board regularly allows and even encourages children to talk about love, crushes and relationships. But, as an example of discrimination, a post called 'Hi, I like boys' was edited by the moderators a short time after the message appeared so that it then became unclear that the message was posted by a boy named Jason. The consequence was that many of the later replies, assuming the request was from a girl, missed the point of Jason's request for advice.

Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child makes clear that children's rights must be protected against all forms of discrimination. Other guidance and laws confirm the importance of the right to freedom of expression. However the above example shows that the BBC refused to let Jason self-identify as a boy on the CBBC message board.

Newsround is a news programme for children, and as such should report news in an impartial way. The reality is that Newsround has an anti-LGBT bias. The programme has never reported an LGBT-related story, and its website only rarely includes LGBT news – most recently, and for the first time in 5½ years – when it reported JK Rowling's comments about Albus Dumbledore.

That gay people are treated unfairly by the BBC is clear from the following post which appeared on Newsround's forum in late December last year, only to be deleted a few hours later from the message board along with its replies:

[Gay rights. Messages 1 - 1 of 1](#)

[Message 1 - posted by MzKiedis \(U6934819\) **, Yesterday](#)

I know this can be a sensitive subject and i'm probably not going to be allowed to post this thread here, but we were discussing this the other day so i thought i'd see what all you lot think.

I thought our society was pretty laid back and accepting of these people, but then i heard that apparently ours is one of the worst for this kind of thing. Even the ancient greeks and many other countries learnt to embrace the minority. I know things have changed since the war etc. when it was a punishable crime, but what do you think? Also what about the meaning of the word changing so much? being used as an insult etc.

[Would like to hear your views.](#)

xxx

Sometimes the BBC has tried to explain the lack of LGBT coverage by claiming that CBBC doesn't cover sexuality because they don't want to "sexualise" children prematurely. That claim is totally false. *Crush*, for example, is a CBBC programme which visits primary school classrooms and asks a child to *spill the beans* about a crush they have on a classmate. The programme has included children as young as 9.

Apart from *Crush*, sexuality makes frequent appearances on the CBBC channel schedules, as these extracts from programmes on three consecutive days in November 2007 demonstrate:

'Best of Friends' shown on the CBBC channel Monday 5 November, 4.30pm :-

Friends - Joe, Matthew, Miles, Nathan, Richard
Presenters - Michael "Abs" Absalom and Rani

Rani: Let me find out a little about you, Nathan.

Nathan: Hello

Rani: (enthusiastically) Ladies' man! Tell us about it?

Nathan: Well I can be a bit, but I try not to.

Abs: How many girlfriends have you got at the moment then if you're a ladies' man?

Nathan: Just the one at the moment.

Abs: Oh, just the one.

'Best of Friends' shown on the CBBC channel Tuesday 6 November, 4.30pm :-

Friends - Amy, Becky, Natalie, Ryan, Savin
Presenters - Michael "Abs" Absalom and Rani

Abs: Let's meet today's team. Hi guys.

All: Hello

Abs: Now this is Becky. You'd like to go on a date - not just with one person, not with two people, but three people. Who?

Becky: erm Robbie Williams..

Abs: Yeah

Becky: David Beckham and Justin Timberlake.

Abs: Wow, what a date.

.....

Abs: Ryan, apparently you fancy Becky here, don't you?

Rani: Ahhh.

Ryan: (smiles and nods in agreement)

'Prank Patrol' shown on the CBBC channel Wednesday 7 November, 5.30pm :-

Presenter - Barney Harwood
Children – James and Henry

Barney: (speaking to James) Let's find out a bit more about this Henry. Then we'll talk about his prank afterwards. Here he is.

(video of Henry and James begins)

Barney: (voiceover) James and Henry have been mates since Year 6. They both share a love of football and support the same team - Manchester United. (cheering crowd on sound track) C'mon the Reds. Henry is into computers, MSN-ing and dating girls (wolf-whistle on sound track).

(video shows Henry and a girl looking fondly at each other, kissing noises on sound track)

(voiceover continues) James says that Henry has a different girlfriend every week (photos of girl blowing Henry a kiss) and loves to rub his face in it. I think it's time we arranged Henry a date with the Prank Patrol.

(video ends and Barney chats to James)

Barney: Well he's a bit of a Casanova isn't he? I think he needs taking down a peg or two here, James. Talk to me. What have you thought about for his prank?

James: I want to get him messy. (sound effect)

Barney: Ah, I like mess. Why?

James: Because he's so worried about his appearance because he wants to look best in front of girls (another wolf-whistle sound effect).