'THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN'S TELEVISION PROGRAMMING', Ofcom, October 2007: SOME RESPONSES FROM THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

The following notes have been put together as a result of meetings and conversations between academics who have carried out research on children and television. This group includes those who met in London on November 9th 2007 with members of Save Kids TV to discuss the Ofcom review; this meeting was chaired by Cary Bazalgette and hosted by David Buckingham, at the Knowledge Lab of London University's Institute of Education. The responses below follow the format for responses set out in the Ofcom Discussion Document

Answers to the questions for discussion, section 10.2, Ofcom's discussion document.

1. General comments

As academics, we appreciate the fact that we have been involved in these discussions about the future of children's television by Ofcom and by the industry. Academics such as ourselves have a stake in the future of the media industries and, as educators, a professional concern with their audiences. We wish this to continue, possibly in some consultative role based around the group who have been meeting and responding to the current debate on children's television, who also conduct research on other aspects of the media. Part of our 'stake' is the research that we ourselves and fellow-academics have done in the past on behalf of government and regulatory bodies. We would like this work to be acknowledged and referred to in subsequent studies commissioned by Ofcom and other Government agencies. An example is the recent report commissioned by Ofcom from Sherbet, on 'Children in programmes' which revisits issues raised in the Broadcasting Standards Commission Study 'Consenting Children', 2001. [1] It would be helpful if reports such as Sherbet's referred to earlier studies and included a bibliography of them so that research findings and policy debates can be monitored over time.

Academic input to policy issues generally, and specifically children and media, includes the following aspects:

- Unlike market and industry researchers, academics have a degree of critical distance; while often sympathetic to the needs and skills of the industry, we do not have the same degree of vested interest in, for instance, sustaining employment. The latter is a perfectly legitimate interest, but it can lead to industry workers' views being discounted.
- We represent a variety of research skills from a number of different disciplines, all relevant to discussions about childhood, children and their place in society. These disciplines include: psychology; sociology; education; political economy; journalism; history; literary, film, TV and cultural studies. As such, we are well placed to answer uninformed criticisms and comments about children, young people and the media which regularly appear in the media.
- We can and do act as independent consultants, for instance in carrying out research on behalf of public bodies and on behalf of the industry itself.
- Academics have a vested interest in an educated and critical public. We are educators, teaching, researching and fostering critical thinking in the media workers and policy makers of the future, as well as in their constituents. Many media academics see PSB as helping us in these goals.
- As academics working in an international knowledge community, we have international contacts and perspectives; we draw on research from around the world, we are in touch with other academics who debate these issues and we see this international perspective as essential in a globalised media world.
- Historical perspective is also necessary. Media historians look at the media over time; they have an overview of childhood and the changes in the worlds and cultures which children inhabit, and this, too provides a necessary perspective on the impact of fast-changing contemporary technological and social developments.[2]

The position of British children's television

With these various perspectives in mind, we want to make the point that children's television, as developed in the UK, publicly funded through the BBC license fee, and partly mandated via the PSB requirements laid on commercial channels, is a model that has delivered valuable cultural experiences to several generations of children and has been widely admired internationally. Importantly, the medium of television is still the most universal form of communication, reaching all classes, including the poorest and least advantaged; in many ways, it acts as an equalising influence, what Rachel Cooke of *The Observer*, in an October 7th article about ITV's children's drama, called 'social glue'. Studies with children by people in our group have found few major class differences in use of, responses to, and tastes for, TV; see the Academic Literature Review at http://ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/kidstv/litreview.pdf. PSB children's television thus fulfils many of the requirements of the Government's 'Every Child Matters' agenda: http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/culturesportplay

Specific evidence from the Ofcom review

At a time when changes in technology and children's leisure habits are placing the industrial base of television production under pressure, we want to draw attention to the following information in Ofcom's report. This includes information in the Academic Literature Review Annex (http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/kidstv/litreview.pdf)

a. Television is still watched on average for 15 hours a week by British children, and this figure is unlikely to change that much, judging from trends over the past 15 years. The most recent analysis, by Attentional (Ofcom, 2007) suggests that average viewing in the 4-15 audience will go down to around 14 and a half hours by 2010. What is changing is the spread of viewing across channels, with all channels getting smaller shares, but, as Attentional's report points out, more of this viewing will be to dedicated children's material, rising from 30.5% in 2007 to 31.5% in 2012. Because of TV's continuing pervasiveness in their lives, *what* children watch during these 14 hours remains a matter of concern to them, to their parents, to teachers and to other 'stakeholders'.

b. Even where children are using computer games, internet material, websites and mobile phone downloads, much of it is TV derived (e.g. You Tube). TV is also an important source of information about current affairs and news; evidence suggests children do monitor these genres, and appreciate their own factual and news programmes and websites, particularly at times of crisis.[3]

c. Despite children's increased use of the Internet as a leisure and entertainment medium, it appears that they fail to find many of the most interesting and challenging websites that are potentially available to them, and that much of their Internet use involves flitting from site to site rather than the sustained attention required by, for example, long form drama.[4] Thus the argument that cost savings could be made by migrating children's content from TV to online services without damaging the value or accessibility of what is available to them, is not sustainable on the basis of current evidence.

c. The evidence from the Ofcom report is that - *given the choice* - British children in the aggregate (and of course there are very wide individual differences in taste) prefer home-grown programming, particularly for certain genres such as live action drama and comedy. As one child in a group consulted by Mediacom about their tastes in television commented: 'They [home-grown shows] have understanding of the British culture and sense of humour'.[5]

d. Parents, too, want support in the raising of their children from producers and writers who broadly understand the range of their assumptions and values in the current UK social world (which of course changes over time.)

e. The evidence for the value of children's television as it has been developed in the UK, in terms of its popularity with children, its appreciation by parents and teachers and its increasing cultural interest to scholars, is strong. The issue, however, is not whether children's television in the UK has been a 'good thing'; however we define 'good', virtually everyone acknowledges that it has. The problems are: how to fund it; how to accommodate it within a multi-media world; how to

enable children to find it; how to cater for different age groups and their changing tastes and needs; how to persuade policy makers who may know very little about television generally, or children's television in particular, that children's TV matters enough to enable these things to happen through appropriate legislation and regulation.

2. Policy approaches suggested by stakeholders:

Stakeholders as reported by Ofcom have suggested five options for 'saving Kids TV':

- 1. maintain the 'status quo' (leaving everything to the BBC);
- 2. broadcaster based interventions, such as a dedicated fund from the government, lottery, license fee, or levy. This would be tied to a broadcast distribution outlet: or there would be a fixed quota across all children's broadcasters;
- 3. production incentives e.g. tax breaks;
- 4. extending existing PSB remits, perhaps more involvement for C4
- 5. a new institution, e.g. a multimedia service as suggested by SKTV

Our responses to these suggestions:
There are at least three separate issues here, which require separate answers:

First, there is the immediate crisis for the industry, which would seem to be best served by a temporary solution as in Option 3, suggested by PACT – tax breaks for a limited period, e.g. until 2012.

Second there is the mid to longer term: here, Option 2 - of broadcaster based interventions and/or a fixed quota of PSB programming across all children's broadcasters - serves the purpose of acknowledging the industry's obligations to children across the board, not just leaving everything to the BBC. The multi-media model (Option 5), already to some extent in operation in the way that children use different platforms of their own accord, also serves this purpose. This is so long as these platforms are accessible to children; not expensive; and not hard to find. However, there is little reliable evidence yet that children are successfully finding high quality internet and multi-media content. The top sites visited by children are dominated by commercial sites and search engines, especially for older children, while for younger children, top sites are typically those linked to mainstream television programmes. In other words, children find quality online content when it is clearly signposted for them by their prior familiarity with broadcast content. Otherwise, they tend to congregate around commercial rather than public sector sites, search engines (which rarely prioritise content dedicated to children) or user-generated content sites (of highly variable quality). Since, for younger children, parents are also involved in guiding their children to high quality sites of value to them, parents too must be made aware of these sites.

The **third** issue is how to make any or all of these desirable things happen, and how to pay for them: funding from the industry as a whole – including a levy on broadcasters (Options 2 and 3) - plus a mandate to make sure that PSB criteria were served through legislative action/amendment – e.g. making children's Tier 2 - would be required for this.

Keeping the status quo (Option 1) seems the least realistic, because the status quo is changing all the time, regardless of any policy interventions. If we believe that public service children's media content is a public good, and the consensus seems to be that it is, then means need to be found to ensure that it is provided. The status quo would thus imply a strengthening of the BBC's service licenses. The service license commitment to children's on BBC1 and 2 is lower than what they are currently providing, and even within the BBC, there are fears that children's may be 'dumped' from the terrestrial channels at some point. The service licenses for CBeebies and CBBC are also quite vague on levels of investment in programming and how much of that programming should be new; the current BBC policy for 'fewer, bigger, better' might not benefit

plurality and diversity. Where children are concerned, given the great differences in the audience's age range, 'more, smaller and better' would be a more feasible guarantor of quality.

We want to point out that, even were there to be plenty of money for diverse PSB children's programming, it still would not (and does not) happen without some kind of legislative or regulatory compulsion (see, for instance, the fate of *Nick News*). This point is underlined in the Ofcom report's section on the regulatory provisions of other countries. None of the various industrial problems being discussed at the moment about the economics of children's television alter this point, i.e. the need for positive regulation to ensure high quality public service content for children.

3. Should policy approaches be tailored to different age groups?
Implicit in any children's service is a recognition of the needs and tastes of different age groups, and hence different kinds of material and genres; so the answer to this question is 'yes.'

4.The role and importance of UK TV programming for children
This is spelled out in the report itself: UK programming is important as a valuable branch of a creative and potentially profitable media industry. It is important because children and their parents, on the whole, prefer it. It is important because of the academic evidence that children use familiar settings, narratives, characters and other ingredients of TV to aid socialisation and learning (See the Academic Literature review at http://ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/kidstv/litreview.pdf.)

5. The importance of plurality:
Plurality has at least two values: 1. It stimulates competition and provides alternative outlets for different kinds of programming material, including new and experimental work. 2. It provides for the audience different sources of information and points of view. If it's important for adult audiences, then it is also important for children.

6. Should PSB for children be on other platforms?

Yes. Why not? If other platforms are where children are spending their time, then we should provide them with material which is seen by both them, and the adults in their lives, as valuable. But - see the point above and in our summary notes below about the difficulty for children of finding useful and interesting material on the internet, in contrast to the relative ease of television viewing.

7.Should policy for children's be different from adults?

No and **Yes**.
No, because if regulation acknowledges that adults have a guaranteed right to pluralistic sources of news, information, current affairs and regional programming, then the argument for giving these things to children (whose sources of information about the world are fewer than those of adults) is even greater. If there is a case for regulation at all, then the case is strongest for those who are most in need of information and most in need of the protection of their rights, (i.e. children) since their ability to champion their own rights is limited.
Yes, it should be different because of the various points made above: the age range of the audience; the diversity of background of the audience; the limited knowledge and experience of the audience; the precluding of the audience from other sources of information which are available to adults.

Summary from notes from the meeting between academics and industry workers of November 9th 2007:

The following points from this meeting between academics and industry producers could be pertinent, so they are appended:

'Some interesting emergent evidence from the discussions was noted – these may reflect things we feel we already know, but it is important to have them confirmed by independent research. The internet evidence is important in a context where one solution is to migrate a lot of content to websites.

- Amongst the range of media available to them, children still very much like TV and tend to choose programmes that they think represent the reality of their lives.
- In using the internet, children are generally failing to find the most interesting interactive sites.
- What children look for online is material that 'stretches' them, and for sites where they get a response (as opposed to just sending something in or posting an opinion, and getting no reaction.)
- Production of TV for children requires specialist skills and experience: by cutting this sector the industry risks the loss of a unique and internationally valued skills base.

Key issues that we all felt were important are:

- Children's rights: if adults are entitled to something, children should be also.
- The Every Child Matters agenda: "The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is working to improve access to culture" – see http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/culturesportplay: government needs to be called to account on this in relation to children's TV.
- Children's voices are listened to and we need to find ways of ensuring that they are heard.
- UK children's TV is a valuable export (and it would be useful to quantify this value).
- Ofcom's research lacks evidence from post-2006, which is likely to show a much sharper decline in quantity and diversity of production.'
- There is a need to support existing provision of children's news (*Newsround*) and extend PSB remit to ensure that broadcasters provide news for children and young people as part of their remit.'

We hope that these remarks will be seen as constructive and helpful.

Submitted by Máire Messenger Davies, University of Ulster, with contributions from Cary Bazalgette ; David Buckingham, London University, Institute of Education ; Sonia Livingstone, London School of Economics ; Jeanette Steemers, University of Westminster ; Cynthia Carter, Cardiff University ; Stuart Allan, Bournemouth University.

[1] Davies, M. M. and Mosdell, N. (2001) *Consenting children? The use of children in non-fiction television programmes*, London: Broadcasting Standards Commission.

[2] **Specific skills**
Among the group which met on November 9th, chaired by Cary Bazalgette, recent relevant research included:

- Children's responses to news and to sexual content on TV (David Buckingham & Sara Bragg, Ofcom, 2005)
- Children's 'media landscape' and the place of TV within this; children's internet use – especially music and social networking (Sonia Livingstone – see http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/whosWho/soniaLivingstone.htm; http://www.eukidsonline.net/)
- The changing ecology of pre-school TV production, including the skills base and the overseas market (Jeannette Steemers)

- Children's perceptions of conflict in the media, and a six-country study of what 7-12 year olds laugh at on TV (Maire Messenger Davies; see http://www.br-online.de/jugend/izi/english/publication/televizion/19_2006_E/19_2006_E.htm and http://cmr.ulster.ac.uk/pdf/policy/childrenconflict.pdf) [

Other research in this area includes a group at Brunel University who are funded to research teens, news and politics; and a current study on *Newsround* and children's citizenship being carried out jointly by researchers at the Universities of Cardiff, Bournemouth and Ulster.

Useful distinctions between types of research and what they can and cannot tell us:

- Qualitative methods: interviews, focus groups and observation, (face to face and web based), which involve small numbers (ie 100s or fewer) but a huge amount of very rich, descriptive data, especially when repeated over time, and can tell us **how** and **why** children use, interpret and/or enjoy TV and related media in particular ways. An increasing amount of research is now being done into children as producers.
- Quantitative methods: large scale surveys (ie 1000s or more) using standardised short interviews and/or questionnaires, which produce numeric data, can indicate larger trends and tell us **what** children watch, and relate these finding to other factors such as gender, class, age, ethnicity, postcode, etc. They can also explore attitudes, media use and opinions, and relate these to demographic characteristics such as age, gender, socio-economic background and so on.
- Experimental research, used particularly by psychologists, establishes a controlled comparison (such as comparing the consequences of children watching specific material with a control group), while also eliminating the influence of extraneous causes. This is useful for testing recall of content and changes in attitudes or behaviours, though questions remain regarding the generalisability of such findings to everyday situations, particularly in the absence of longitudinal research.
- Literature reviews simply collect together evidence on a topic from existing published material; they can hit the headlines (as in Aric Sigman's case for example) but can only tell us what researchers (and their funders) have been interested in.

Academic researchers ideally like to achieve a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, resources permitting.

[3] Carter, C. (2007) "Talking about my Generation: Children's BBC *Newsround* Website Feedback and Chat about War, Conflict and Terrorism," in Götz, M. and Lemish, D. (eds) *Children and Media in Times of Conflict and War*, Creskill: Hampton Press.

Carter, C. and Allan, S. (2005) 'Hearing their voices: Young People, Citizenship and Online News,' in Thurlow, C. and Williams, A. (eds) *Talking Adolescence: Perspectives on Communication in the Teenage Years*, New York: Peter Lang, 73-90.
Carter, C. and Messenger Davies, M. (2005) "'A Fresh Peach is Easier to Bruise': Children and Traumatic News," in Allan, S. (ed) *Journalism: Critical Issues*. Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press, 224-235

[4] Livingstone, S. (2008) Internet literacy: Young people's negotiation of new online opportunities. In T. McPherson (Ed.), *Unexpected outcomes and innovative uses of digital media by youth* (101-121). MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.

[5] See the findings of the IZI international humour study at http://www.br-online.de/jugend/izi/english/publication/televizion/19_2006_E/19_2006_E.htm