

CMS Select Committee Inquiry into Children's Television and Video Content

1. Who is commissioning and making original, high-quality, TV and video content for children and young audiences in the UK?

a. How can they be best supported to make more?

6. How does children's TV made in the UK contribute to:

a. The UK's culture and identity?

b. Our cultural and economic exports?

1. Our company is a Software as a Service (SaaS) platform used by performers for marketing and advertising purposes. A Spotlight subscription fulfills a function for many performers allowing them to showcase their skills and talent to those that may wish to cast them. We have been in existence for almost 100 years and we are an essential part of the success of the creative industries. With our sector outperforming many areas of the economy, we play an important part in the creative industries' ability to remain globally competitive.

Our subscribers include those who are employed in the creation of children's television and video content, whether a drama, animation, motion capture or as a voice over. This includes both young performers and adults. As such, performers in the UK have a vested interest in the success of UK domestic children's television and video content.

In 2019 the then Government provided a £60m fund to stimulate children's programming with the criteria that it must be made in the nations and the regions, and that it would include new and diverse backgrounds. Ofcom in that same year noted the lack of original, high-quality programming for older children, a limited range of programming intended to help children understand the world around them, and limited programming allowing children to see themselves and their lives reflected on screen. It noted that there was a collective responsibility for public service broadcasters to provide high quality programming for children and considered that there was more that they should be doing. Since then, however, there has been a further decrease in original programming for children with ITV closing its dedicated children's television channel in September 2023 and Sky recently announcing that it will only buy content, not produce its own. This leaves the BBC and Channel 5 as the only free to air broadcasters with a commitment to original domestic content production.

1.a. In the past, legislation and licensing conditions created a requirement for free to air broadcasters to produce domestic product for children. In light of the changes to advertising, it is now a struggle for most free to air public service broadcasters to commit to the costs associated with this type of programming. It seems overly onerous therefore to change and potentially strengthen these existing requirements. Instead we

would suggest a similar incentive as that provided to foreign film production in the UK - a domestic tax break for domestic children's programming. Alongside the investments provided by the DCMS and the Creative Industries Sector Plan as part of the Industrial Strategy, an emphasis on creating and maintaining facilities and skills in hubs around the UK, would enable broadcasters to commit to commissioning new programming without recourse to establishing capacity first.

However, the dominance of streaming and video sharing platforms has changed our nation's viewing habits, more so for young people. It is therefore essential to any consideration of children's programming that we look at its delivery. Linear television is no longer the primary way content reaches its audience, with Ofcom reporting a significant decline in traditional broadcast TV viewing for 4-15 year olds in the UK, with only 55% watching weekly in 2023, down from 81% in 2018. The way media is being consumed and will be consumed is changing, particularly for younger audiences and any policy must reflect that. It is not that we wish for domestic original children's programming to continue from a position of nostalgia, but from a recognition that content creators are incentivised to deliver their work where it will be seen, not where it has been seen historically. The value of it to young viewers, as well as those employed to produce it, is not where it is seen but that it is seen at all. The audiences are still there; we are yet to meet them where they are.

Wider benefits

6.a. Children's television is essential to the UK's culture and identity. While streaming has moved our country away from the water cooler moment, children's television provides a real opportunity for families to view programmes together. Whether it is a new Aardman production, Horrible Histories or Danger Mouse, parents sit with their children to enjoy programmes together and build their familial connections with the shared viewing time.

The UK has been making specific television programmes for children since 1946 with the aim of making it 'a service in miniature', reflecting the adult programming made by the BBC. While the sophistication of the programming has developed alongside that of the content aimed at adults, and the number of platforms it is available on has expanded, the importance of television made for and aimed at young people has not changed. In fact, in the current climate, it is even more important that our young people have the resource of programming that both educates and entertains them. Whilst it is unrealistic to imagine a return to the competition of the 1970s and 1980s for children's programming between the BBC and ITV, the value of programming like Grange Hill, Press Gang and Byker Grove in providing vital information to young people to help them make sense of the world around them has not disappeared.

Much of our identity is communicated through our television programmes to our wider society, and are still touchstones for multiple generations. Blue Peter, PlaySchool, Doctor Who, SwapShop and Grange Hill have impacted the generation of policy makers in Government and helped build their understanding of their world and the issues facing it. The next generation will also be shaped by what they access as children, and it is important to ensure that experience is one that reflects who we are and who we aspire to be. Children's programming is unique in its ability to do that. It helps children navigate things they do not yet understand but crucially boosts their creativity and adaptability in a world that can be challenging to navigate. Those skills are important to those children as they become adults and are crucial for our economy going forward.

It also provides opportunities for young performers to grow in their skills and experience. Many of these performers will progress and become actors who continue to contribute to the quality of UK programming and maintain our internationally recognised high standard for performers. Homegrown productions help develop homegrown talent. Many performers who are internationally recognised today, will have begun their careers as young performers appearing in domestically made children's television including Kate Winslet, Bella Ramsey, Nicholas Hoult, Thomas Brodie Sangster and Russell Tovey. These experiences, as for any performer, are vital in the development of their skills and experience that help shape their potential and contributions to the wider cultural ecosystem.

b) The UK has been very successful in developing programming that can be sold internationally, and children's programming has been a key part of that. In the mid-1980s, co-productions led to the BBC producing dramas aimed at breaking the international market including The Box of Delights, The Chronicles of Narnia, Tom's Midnight Garden and The Borrowers. Nowadays programming such as Shawn the Sheep, Postman Pat and Bob The Builder have worldwide fans. Doctor Who is a cornerstone of BBC drama output, and they have also seen some international recognition with Tracy Beaker, The Worst Witch and the Famous Five. Without investment in children's drama, most internationally sold content is animated like Peppa Pig, Hey Duggee and In the Night Garden. Our broadcasting ecology delivers internationally recognised programming and the skills required to create that programming should extend to and from children's programming. This can therefore be put in strictly economic terms: investment in original domestic programming is essential for our economy. It bolsters skills and experience both in front and behind the camera, it draws foreign investment in co-productions and other original content where those skills will be utilised, which bolsters our sector's reputation, which in turn draws more foreign investment that can be reinvested in skills and experience. Children's programming is part of that ecology, and it is in part, the reason for our domestic success on a global scale. It is part of our economic success.

Kelly Wiffen, Head of Public Affairs, Spotlight

kelly_wiffen@yahoo.co.uk