

**Ed Vaizey MP**

**Showcomotion conference speech “Providing the Best in Their Space”**

**July 2008**

The last few months have seen a great debate about how politicians approach childhood in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. The government now have a Children’s Plan. It neatly sets out the difficulties faced in bringing up children in today’s Britain. The most high profile mention of television though was in the section on childhood obesity in point 2 of the executive summary. By contrast you had to wait until page 45 for even the briefest of mentions of the positive impact of children’s television.

We all agree that children’s TV faces major challenges in a multi platform digital age. Just as I don’t pretend the state has all the answers for those struggling to bring up their kids today I am under no illusion that I can stand here today and offer to wave a magic wand and solve all the problems facing children’s television. Just as we criticised the Children’s plan for ‘nationalising childhood,’ we must look beyond state provision of children’s media. It is only by making it viable for the commercial sector to produce children’s media that our young people will have the range and quality of programmes that they deserve.

### **Kids TV challenges**

Last December there was a Parliamentary debate on Children’s TV. It was in response to the excellent Select Committee Report that neatly set out the challenges facing Children’s TV today. I was struck in the run up to the speech by the level of interest from the public in the issue and also the professionalism of those campaigning for Children’s TV. No one who saw or has read the debate can be in any doubt that we at Westminster treat the issue with the utmost importance.

Children’s TV has been caught in a perfect storm. There have never been more dedicated Children’s programmes yet we all know it is no exaggeration to talk of a crisis in Children’s TV. There is currently around 112,000 hours a year of dedicated programming and 25 children’s channels; this is up from around 20,000 hours and 5 channels just 6 years ago. The BBC has doubled its original Children’s output and Five continues to broadcast over 652 hours.

It is only when we start to look beyond these headline figures that we start to understand the crisis though. Of the 25 dedicated channels 18 are owned by American companies like Disney or Viacom. 86% of Children’s programmes are repeats and original programming has fallen from about 29% of public service broadcasting to 10%.

I said in that speech six months ago and am happy to repeat today that I am not anti US television. There are many superb programmes made for children by American companies that educate and entertain children around the world. It is not anti American to say that we need a strong base of producers in the child’s home country.

We know from Ofcom's surveys that many parents have concerns in this area too. Parents think programmes on the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 help their children to understand current issues better than those on Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network and Disney. It remains a priority then to ensure a sizeable proportion of children's programming is British made. We will not be maximising the benefit to our children if we allow US imports to dominate.

There are many complex reasons the current situation has arisen. The changing nature of television, the growth of new channels and the ways media consumption is evolving all mean children's programmes are fast disappearing from terrestrial stations. This trend was not started but has been exacerbated by the banning of junk food advertising during children's programmes.

It is sadly predictable that children's TV is being hit because the government have failed so spectacularly to formulate a proper obesity strategy that encouraged healthy eating, school sport and all the other factors we all know contribute to healthy kids. We spoke out against a recent Private Members Bill that tried to extend advertising restrictions and will continue to oppose these kind of measures. They are both ineffective and hit commercial broadcasters making it less likely they will be able to invest in children's media.

## **Ofcom**

It has been about 6 months since that speech. Since then Ofcom have published their Consultation on the Second Public Service Broadcasting Review. It sets out 4 options for the future for delivering children's programming.

I know many of you are waiting for me to endorse one of these 4 long term models. I am going to disappoint you though. It would be quite wrong for a politician, particularly one not yet in government, to firmly endorse any of the options set out in the review. The landscape is moving too fast and the consequences still too uncertain for me to say what a Conservative government would do.

## **Model 1 - Evolution**

The first model 'Evolution' has some obvious benefits for children's television. It sees all current providers keeping a role in children's TV with quotas for commercial providers. This could see Channel 4 focusing on programmes for older children, which we regard as a clear priority. Extra money would be provided for children's content that would in my view help to drive up quality.

There are problems though with transparency and regulation. In particular, ways would need to be found to ensure any public subsidy given to a non BBC broadcaster was not benefiting them commercially. It would distort the market if ITV shareholders were to benefit from money meant for children's programmes. We would also have to consider whether quotas, which would invariably come with any funding for ITV, represent too much of an intervention in a commercial broadcaster post switchover.

## **Model 2 - BBC Only**

The second model put forward sees the BBC take on roles in children's TV currently carried out by other broadcasters. As I stressed above I believe any Children's TV model must allow for a plurality of providers. There would however be ways in which plurality could be built into this system with separate commissioners for different types of content and an increase in the popularity of specialist channels.

I have doubts though whether this model can provide the holy grail of children's TV; a wide range of British made programmes available to all on terrestrial TV. It would be all too easy, but quite wrong, to resign ourselves to the fact that few children's programmes are commercially viable and as such the BBC is the only long term way in which we can provide a variety of home grown programmes. We know the BBC is at its best when it is in competition with other broadcasters.

## **Model 3 - BBC/C4 plus competitive funding**

The third option 'BBC/Channel 4 plus competitive funding' sees the BBC and Channel 4 becoming the main providers of children's TV. Under this option ITV and Channel 5 become purely commercial broadcasters. It is therefore a real possibility that they would in all essence stop showing children's programmes. Although I was pleased to see in their submission to Ofcom that Five stressed how they want to continue with their children's offering. Plurality would be provided from Channel 4 which would focus on older children.

## **Model 4 – Broad Competitive Funding**

The final option put forward is in many ways the most radical. It would break down the institutional walls that some say inhibit children's TV and open up funding opportunities for a wide range of content providers. The BBC's role is protected but all other services and funding would be awarded through a transferable funding process. Ofcom think this option could bring in community organisations, universities, and other social institutions along with the more traditional public bodies to provide content.

The difficulties are mostly practical. Is there capacity in these groups to deliver content? Would separating production and broadcasting roles work? And would the new independent body Ofcom envisaged grow into a bloated bureaucracy? Again we will be looking to see whether this is the best way to ensure programmes reflect life in Britain today.

## **Tax Credit**

Whilst these are the long term solutions identified, a final short term option is suggested. PACT have been leading the case for a tax credit. They see it as a short term measure to stimulate production now before finishing in 2012. For some this is the most attractive feature of the tax break option. It would be an immediate boost that does not require conclusion of the wider post switchover PSB debate before we can take measures to support children's TV.

Whilst I am unable to support it at present I think that seeing a tax break merely as a short term measure underestimates its potential. I would like to see more work done on whether a production tax break might be used to help many areas of the creative industries where raising investment is sometimes a problem. Let's build on the consensus around the film tax credit to examine other ways market failure in the wider creative industries might be prevented.

### **Social Responsibility and the future**

Despite the challenges that you all face I think there is a bright future for children's media. There is a new understanding around the role you will all play in shaping our children's attitudes and views. To descend into political jargon for a moment we are moving into a post-bureaucratic, user-driven age. People, and especially children, have never been more empowered to make active lifestyle choices. The old government tools of money, legislation and targets begin to look less and less relevant in the fight against new challenges like knife crime and obesity.

Today, media plays a more important role than ever in shaping the big debates and tackling the big challenges we face as a society. The Government's Byron review and our Broadcasting consultation both argued that the media and broadcasters could and should be a powerful force for change. We all know that at its best children's television helps young people understand and make sense of the world around them. As the forces shaping our society become ever more complex we have never needed you more.