

# 'Dear BBC': Children, Television Storytelling and the Public Sphere

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Máire Messenger Davies

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# 1 Children and broadcasting in the 1990s

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It should be mixed and something for all ages.

Boy, 9, inner-London primary school

I don't like children's television but just for little children there should be only 1 hour of children's television after school. After 1 hour you should put lots of football on the TV for 5 hours. I think you should make a new channel called BBC sport and get the rights off Sky for Aston Villa Matches. Also please get the rights off Sky for the *Goosebumps* cartoon. And *Shooting Stars* there should be more of. Please get more football. Thanks [name signed].

Boy, 11, inner-city primary school, Cardiff

I like all your programmes. I like best of all cartoon network! I would like to see more programmes please – thank-you. I am very happy [little drawing of smiley face with hair bunches].

Girl, 7, name signed, rural village primary school, Co. Durham

It's too babyish. It's starting to get really terrible. They should make grownups channels for kids too. They should stop the programme with the bus going past where a girl is and the lollipop turns over. They should stop making rude channels after 9. They should make it 12 o'clock or something.

Boy, 11, inner-London primary school

According to Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1994, p. 17), 'Television is . . . the mainstream of the common symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which we all live out our lives.' Because of this, they argue (1994, pp. 23–4) 'television viewing both shapes and is a stable part of life styles and outlooks. It links the individual to a larger, if synthetic, world, a world of television's own making.' Despite the growing popularity of interactive computer activities among children, television continues to maintain its centrality in children's lives. A recent study in the UK, part of a twelve-nation, European-wide study (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999, p. 29) showed that TV was the most popular leisure-time medium for children, with an average of 147 minutes a day spent watching it, compared to 45 minutes

on video games, 28 minutes spent with books and 31 minutes on non-game personal computer (PC) use.

The four quotations above, from children at different ends of the age range in our study, and from widely varying geographical locations, indicate an ease in the 'mainstream' cultural environment of television for these children. Their tone is representative of all the comments that children made in the free comment section of their questionnaires – a tone of confidence in an assumed direct relationship with broadcasters. One of the issues that this chapter will address is whether the nature of this relationship is as 'synthetic' as Gerbner *et al.* suggest, particularly from the point of view of the children consulted in our study.

Two of the children above – typically – address the broadcasters directly, using the term 'you'; a third, in contrast, talks *about* the broadcasters, and addresses us, the readers of the questionnaire. He uses the term 'they', rather than 'you', and confides in the reader his feelings about the shortcomings of contemporary programming 'it's terrible'. The girl, too, writes expressively; characteristically of the younger children in the study, and in contrast to the more critical 11 year olds, she tells the reader she is 'very happy'. Her happiness is addressed directly to the broadcasters, who, for her, encompass much more than the BBC, and seem to be the whole world of television – thus, she congratulates them for the Cartoon Channel, a subscription cable channel, which is nothing to do with the BBC. The two 11-year-old boys write directly, frequently using the term 'should'; they offer advice on content, scheduling, consideration of other audience groups ('1 hour for little children) and censorship ('stop making rude channels after 9'). Common to all is an assumption that their comments and advice will be heard and accepted by people with whom they infer (rightly or wrongly) an equal, and genuine, relationship.

### **Children in the maw of the monster: politics and regulation**

Television has been characterised as a 'one-eyed monster' (Gunter and McAleer, 1990) and adult fears of a monster snatching away their children 'in its maw', as Patricia Palmer pointed out in her study with Australian children in 1986, are ancient and compelling. Thus, the relationship of children to mass culture, and specifically television, to which nearly 100 per cent of all children in developed countries, and an increasing minority in other parts of the world, have access from birth, raises problematic issues of *adult* responsibility: who exactly is in charge of what children get to see in the media? Who should decide what is, or

is not, appropriate material for them? Who decides the contents of the cultural 'mainstream' described by Gerbner *et al.*, and who should make what decisions about the positioning, or otherwise, of growing children within it, or outside it? Should children be taught to swim in this stream? Given a lifebelt? Stopped from plunging into it altogether? Fish in it? Taught how to redirect, dam, pollute, or add tributaries to it? Cut it off and dry it out completely? All of these strategies would require different kinds of action from children and the adults responsible for them: different personal choices; media education in schools and in the media themselves; direct action as citizens, with children giving information to providers, not just on their own personal tastes as consumers, but also on the institutional arrangements surrounding broadcasting in their own societies, and the rights of themselves as citizens-in-the-making to comment on, and influence these arrangements politically.

For the children in the study, the actual existence of television and other mass media was hardly an issue. Not one child in the study was unfamiliar with any of the programmes discussed in it (the names of all of which had been generated by children themselves). Television was accepted completely as a naturalised part of their world, and it seemed equally natural to them that the BBC should ask for their opinions on it. Their discussions revealed a concern with its appropriate organisation in order to benefit the maximum number of people, including minority groups. For instance, these 12-year-old Welsh children in an outer-city secondary school, which taught in the Welsh language, discussed the option of doing away with English programmes altogether, because such material did not reflect Welsh identity, but in the end agreed that this would be undemocratic. One boy said: 'We've got to have these English programmes. Even though I would not watch *Slot Meithrin* [a Welsh preschool programme, translated literally as 'Infants' slot'] some people would.'

When the children in the study discussed the possible banning of controversial programmes, adult responsibilities were invoked, for instance, a 9-year-old boy in a Cardiff inner-city primary school declared: 'If parents aren't happy with the programme they don't have to let their children watch it.' A 10-year-old girl in a Buckinghamshire primary school pointed out that protecting little children is a responsibility shared by parents with schedulers: 'You could put it on later when the little children can't watch it.' As these children, pretending to be adults, were clearly aware, implicated in questions of social control are not only the rights of children themselves, but issues of who has rights *over* children. These issues are not confined to broadcasting; the whole relationship of children to adult society, to nation states, to cultural

groups and to the international community, in the fields of health, welfare, education, labour, crime and warfare, is subject to an ongoing international debate in the United Nations, UNESCO, the institutions of the European Union, and NGOs such as Save the Children. As this chapter was being written, the World Trade Organisation talks in Seattle in December 1999 broke up with no agreement, partly because poor countries could not accept the employment regulations of rich countries which restrict child-labour.

### **Regulation and deregulation in Western broadcasting**

The characteristics of a deregulatory culture in broadcasting, as distinct from broadcasting as a public service, are commercial. Deregulatory developments have gathered momentum in the 1990s throughout the world (see Blumler and Hoffman-Riem, 1992). These trends have included: the abolition of public service monopolies, and new private commercial entrants to the sector; fewer public service obligations, such as children's provision; and fewer restrictions on advertising and sponsorship. Regulation by national governments becomes increasingly irrelevant with the access to international and global channels provided by satellite technology. In a privatised system, consumer 'sovereignty' replaces the concept of audiences as citizens and they become, not viewers of programmes, but consumers of broadcasting 'product' through paying for access to commercially sponsored and operated channels. These trends have been accompanied by a public discourse which challenges the ethos of public service in broadcasting – much of it in the form of hostile press coverage of children's programming and the contemporary child audience.

As part of our literature review for the BBC, published in 1996, we carried out a review of press articles on the subject of children's relationship with television. The articles we reviewed were characterised by two dominant themes: first that children's television (that is, programmes made specifically for children) was 'dumbing down' and losing quality, however this was defined, and, second, that the child audience had become 'adultified' (as Neil Postman (1982) put it), so that there was no longer any point in treating children as a separate group within the main audience. Adult programmes such as *The X Files* were getting high audience figures among children aged 4–15 (although not necessarily the youngest of these, who are frequently subsumed in the general category, and hence overlooked); therefore, the argument went, there is no point in making special children's shows. Such press comment absolves commercial influences from any 'blame' for these twin trends –



dumbing down, and the disappearance of childhood. A typical comment came from Cosmo Landesman in the Rupert Murdoch-owned *The Sunday Times* of 11 June 1995:

Producers and parents who worry about the state of children's television tend to blame market forces but then they have been doing this since the 1950s when commercial television was first introduced. Cultural change, and not competition, is the real reason why children's television no longer knows what its role is or what sort of service it should provide.

When our report for the Broadcasting Standards Commission was published at the end of 1997 (Davies and Corbett, 1997) showing that the influx of new commercial cable channels was associated with a decline in choice and diversity in children's programming, and arguing that public service values might need defending, there was a great deal of press comment, much of it seizing the opportunity to attack the BBC. The *London Evening Standard* (4 November 1997, p. 24) proclaimed:

The BBC was accused today of being 'lazy' and 'cavalier' in allowing its children's programmes to be dominated by cheap, imported cartoons and was warned it could face changes in the law unless it improved its service. With a stinging rebuke the Broadcasting Standards Commission unveiled the results of a detailed four-year study into all children's TV and said there was no doubt standards had dropped dramatically.

If standards 'have dropped dramatically', this has come about at the same time as the impact of the UK Broadcasting Act, 1990, was making itself felt. This Act was the first major deregulatory legislation in Britain to formalise the new trends. Under this legislation, telecommunication rules were relaxed to allow TV cable companies to provide telephone services, and ITV franchises for commercial stations were to be auctioned to 'highest bidders', not just those with the best schedules, or the most-respected track records in broadcasting. Another provision was an end to a monopoly of in-house production, especially affecting the BBC; 25 per cent of programming was to be made by independent companies. The regulatory body for commercial television in Britain, the IBA (the Independent Broadcasting Authority) was replaced by the ITC (Independent Television Commission) which had a 'lighter touch'. All of this was done in the interests of market efficiency; its goal was to increase commercial competition – including many controversial changes to the BBC, such as an internal market and a system of 'producer choice', whereby producers had to buy resources from the BBC's own departments, or a cheaper external provider.

Some attempts have been made to mitigate the perceived negative effects within the public sphere of the mass deregulation of society's primary medium of communication in the UK. ITV (commercial)

companies have to meet 'quality thresholds' to win licence franchises; the commercial channels of Channel 4 and the Welsh-language channel S4C have to continue providing for minorities. Somewhat controversially, the Broadcasting Standards Council (now Commission) was set up to monitor standards, taste and decency, thus initiating a broadcasting regime which, on the one hand, was commercially liberal, and, on the other, apparently morally restrictive – a combination which many saw as the worst of both worlds. The license fee for the BBC continued, and, at the time of writing, is again the subject of public debate and controversy; the BBC are seeking a substantial increase to cover the cost of digitising their services, and, for the first time, there is public resistance to this (76 per cent are unwilling, according to the *Guardian*, 15 December 1999) as well as opposition from the right-wing press. The BBC's Royal Charter was renewed in 1996.

In the midst of all this grown-up wrangling stand the nation's children: always at the forefront of campaigns both to uphold quality and educational standards, and, at the same time, to restrict access to morally harmful material. Children's programming is protected in current British legislation. The 1990 Broadcasting Act in the USA also attempted to make rudimentary provision for 'educational' children's programming by threatening to withhold licence renewal from stations which did not provide a minimum of three hours of children's educational programming per week. It also put some limits on advertising to children. In Britain, the quality thresholds for the commercial ITV companies to hold a franchise must include:

- at least 10 hours a week of programming for children;
- programming must be diverse in genre;
- programming must appeal to different age groups;
- it must be shown at times when children are available to view.

This legislation and the spirit of public service protectionism behind it clearly influenced the discourses of the children in the study. When asked to act as though they were responsible for broadcasting scheduling, they came up with provisions and recommendations almost identical to those listed above. Why this might be so, and how the children had become so aware of the public discourse surrounding broadcasting regulation, and so adept at feeding it back to the researchers 'from the BBC', will be discussed at more length in chapter 5.

### **Competitive effects**

Children were less aware of the commercial implications of the kinds of protectionist regulation they favoured. Even though the research tasks

asked them to see themselves as commercial broadcasters, having to discard programmes 'in order to save money', they showed much less awareness of the commercial implications of regulation than of its public service aspects; the words 'money', 'cost', 'commercial', 'payment', 'advertising', almost never appeared in their discourses, despite some tasks specifically requiring them to consider costs.

Producers in the study, in contrast, displayed persistent anxiety about reduced commercial competitiveness because of legislation. Having to conform to the provisions of the 1990 Act, according to Vanessa Chapman (interviewed for Davies and Corbett, 1997), former Controller of Children's and Youth Programmes at the ITV Network Centre, had created real commercial difficulties:

I suspect if it [the legislation] hadn't been there we wouldn't have the range of children's programming that we have now . . . I actually have to fulfil some criteria and some mandates . . . Here I am looking at the coldest, hardest commercial situation, sometimes feeling as if both my hands are tied behind my back. And that's not because I think there's something wrong with regulation, the reality is that without it, CITV [Children's ITV] might not have survived as long as it has. And I think that's [true] the world over.

Chapman's dilemma is, indeed, found all over the world, where finding a balance between public service goals and finding enough money for the production of quality children's programming often seems incompatible, leading to a reliance on foreign, especially American, imports. An international attempt to formulate the ideal political relations of the child to adult society, and the corresponding responsibilities of adult societies towards children, is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), ratified by 191 nation members of the UN (only two nations – the USA and Somalia – have not ratified it), which devotes a number of clauses and articles to the question of children, media and culture.

In the UN convention, parents are identified as the people with 'responsibilities, rights and duties' for the child (Article 5), and from whom the child has a right 'not to be separated' (Article 9). This suggests that parents are the ultimate arbiters of children's cultural consumption, at least for what is consumed domestically. The Convention sometimes seems to imply that state broadcasting organisations, or commercial corporations, have the right to override, or ignore, the wishes of parents when it comes to judging what is appropriate and suitable for children to see and hear. This is an issue of acute political concern in the United States, where parents' groups have successfully objected to certain kinds of teaching materials in schools and books in libraries. The Convention provides for the 'right of the child to express

an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child' (Article 12).

Article 17 of the Convention is the section dealing with mass media and culture in most depth. It stresses the importance of 'protection' in the state's responsibility towards children:

The role of the media in disseminating information to children that is consistent with moral well-being and knowledge and understanding among peoples and respects the child's cultural background. The State is to take measures to encourage this, and to protect children from harmful materials.

Article 17 further specifies that mass media should: 'disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child'; 'encourage international co-operation . . . from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources'; encourage the production of children's books; attend to the 'linguistic needs' of minority and indigenous children; and provide guidelines to protect children from 'injurious' material. The other article concerning children's relationship with cultural forms and institutions, Article 13, further provides for the child's right to freedom of expression and information: 'This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.'

The child's right to *receive* information 'regardless of frontiers', lays open the possibility of conflict between different sets of rights: between parents, charged with duties and responsibilities for children, and media regulators, charged with 'protecting' children from 'injurious' material, and media providers – global entertainment corporations, toy manufacturers, World Wide Web providers and print publishers – seeking to profit from the child's 'right' to information. It also raises challenges for media producers who, while respecting the right of the child to have his or her own cultural background respected, also reserves the right to the freedom to represent, for instance, girls in equal roles with boys (not universally culturally accepted) or to use adult language, or to deal with sensitive topics such as pregnancy or homosexuality, in certain kinds of programming.

The conflict about who is the best arbiter for what is appropriate material for children – parents or producers – has been a fault line for many of the children's producers we interviewed throughout their professional lives. Anna Home, formerly head of children's programming at the BBC, now head of the British Children's Film Foundation and instrumental in the Children and Television World Summit movement, pointed out in an interview (Davies and O'Malley, 1996, p. 140)

that she often overrode potential parental objections in making editorial judgements about what was realistic in children's drama: 'Often I think parents are unaware of the world in which their kids live – and they are concerned when we talk about things in programmes which they don't think are of concern to their kids, but I think they often are.'

### **Global views**

The debate – at least within the broadcasting industry – about the child's right to information has been taken forward on a global scale by the 'Children and Television World Summit' movement, of which Anna Home is one of the leading organisers – a group of concerned broadcasters for children, who to date have held two international meetings on children and television. The summits have been primarily industry-based – not least because the financial resources to bring delegates and technologies from all around the world are more likely to be forthcoming within the media industry, than within educational or charitable organisations. However, educators and NGOs have been represented at the two summits held so far – the first in Melbourne in 1995, the second in London in 1998. Another 'Summit', organised by The Alliance for Children and Television, The American Center for Children and the Media, The Association for Media Literacy and The Jesuit Communication Project – all North American non-profit organisations – took place in Toronto in May 2000. This had equal representation of academics, educators and industry representatives, but there was intense post-conference discussion about the level of industry sponsorship (necessary to finance any large conference) and whether this compromised the principles of media education. The issue of the world market of children's screen culture is clearly capable of attracting both a great deal of commercial sponsorship and increasing scholarly interest.

The industry world summits addressed the survival of local cultural programming, particularly in non-Western countries and the difficulty of providing home-grown, non-American cultural representations on children's television. The issue of whether special children's broadcasting services are still necessary in the multichannel age, in the age of the Internet, and in an age when children are presumed to be more sophisticated, and less in need of specialised provision, is of particular concern to people whose jobs depend on such services, and who consider that their expertise is an essential ingredient for a proper broadcasting system. As John Marsden (interviewed for the BBC study in spring, 1996), in charge of animation at Carlton UK, a commercial company, put it:

I think most of the people working with children have a discipline in themselves. We are all slightly privileged not to come from a commercially driven area, we come from a public broadcasting tradition . . . and unfortunately we are having to become a lot more commercially edged. Channel 3 [the main independent commercial channel in the UK] was almost totally funded by money from ITV [Independent Television] stations, we didn't have to look to other countries for income to make programmes, so we could actually make those programmes for children in the UK. It's changing in the fact that we can't make programmes solely for the British market.

The broadcasting model in the UK, as outlined by Marsden, has been seen internationally as a model children's service (Palmer, 1988). However, recent changes in Britain, as analysed in a study for the Broadcasting Standards Commission (Davies and Corbett, 1997), reflect accelerating international trends of change, in particular the increasing penetration of North American channels and programmes. New technologies of satellite and cable have brought specialist children's channels, such as Nickelodeon, Disney, the Cartoon Network and Fox Kids, from the United States during the 1990s, with schedules almost entirely filled with imported programming made in the USA. This is not just a matter of commercial penetration and competition, it is also an issue of different attitudes to the child audience, reflected in different styles of programming. This is especially an issue in the most universal of children's forms, animation, a form which increasingly dominates children's provision both in cable and on terrestrial channels. Marsden (interviewed for the BBC study in spring, 1996) pointed out:

The Japanese style of animation is particularly graphic; you can see people with their heads chopped off, cracked open with great hammers, etc. . . . I wouldn't want my children to be exposed to that . . . it's just not necessary to show . . . graphic . . . sexual activity . . . In a lot of countries this is an acceptable form of animation. In France they've got a series called 'The Naughty Nun', you wouldn't have seen over here . . . not for children.

### **Traditional children's programming in the UK**

In protecting children from 'naughty nuns' and dismembered skulls, as well as in having regulations for positive educational provision, traditional children's programming in the UK has sometimes been accused of being 'paternalist' (for example, Oswell, 1995; Buckingham *et al.*, 1997). The children in our study had absorbed these traditions. Many of their remarks indicated that they themselves required a degree of 'paternalism' in judgements about what is appropriate entertainment, and that, if it is not imposed, they may generate it, for example, this 12-year-old's comments in the free comment section of the questionnaire:

I think children's programmes should be more exciting and dramatic but should not show bad language or fighting. (Girl, 12, outer-London primary school)

This protectiveness was particularly evident when children were making judgements on behalf of younger children. Here, as above, in the case of children representing adults discussing a ban, the children in the study behaved like adult members of a distinctly bourgeois (in the sense of taste, as well as citizenship) public sphere. They demonstrated a recognition that judgements made about public provision of services required citizenship perspectives, which tended to be more conservative and consensual. Private judgements, on the other hand, could be more permissive, as, for example, that of a 10-year-old girl in Oxfordshire, writing in the free comment section of the questionnaire:

I like watching blood thirsty and action-packed films on Sky. I want the films from the cinema to come more quicker on Sky. I like watching Disney films and action-packed cartoons like *Battle Tech*.

The contrasts between these positions reflected not only differences between individual children, and groups in the study, but also children's competence in accessing different kinds of cultural representations in order to express different roles – whether a citizenship role, or a consumer role. Use of judgemental terms (reflecting adult terminology) such as 'bad language' suggested a 'citizenship' perspective, contrasting with the use of (equally adult) publicity material jargon – 'action-packed' – by the 'consumer' child who wanted films 'more quicker' on Sky.

### **The official child audience**

According to Hartley (1992, p. 9), the whole concept of audience is 'an invisible fiction' – an unknowable entity, a social construct in the way in which 'childhood' is a social construct, for defining, and exerting power over different groups in the population. The major construct of the audience in terms of the institutional future of broadcasting in the public sphere is the child audience according to official ratings figures. Ratings are the audience numbers collected by the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB) in the UK, and by A. C. Nielsen in the USA, which determine income from advertisers. In the case of the non-commercial BBC, they are a major measure of their public support, and, hence, justification for charging a licence fee to every household owning a television set.

Ratings can be unreliable in a variety of greater and lesser ways, ranging from unrepresentative sampling, to viewer error, to statistical

error, but are nevertheless accepted as a common currency across the broadcasting and advertising industries for establishing who is watching, and listening to, what programmes and when. At the time of our study, regular information about the size of the child audience was collected by BARB from a socially representative sample of 4,435 homes in the UK, including approximately 1,750 children between the ages of 4 and 15. As channels proliferate and audiences fragment into smaller groups, the sub-groups of the sample (for example, 4- to 7-year-old boys, in a particular region, in a particular socio-economic group, watching Nickelodeon) become infinitesimally small. For many cable channels, no audience sizes can be measured, because the numbers of people in the sample may be less than one. In a multichannel world, this is going to create considerable difficulties in the enterprise of 'controlling' audiences via measurement; but it will have to be done because, in a commercial media industry, measuring and evaluating the audience is a fundamental economic requirement.

The child audience in the UK, as elsewhere, is a permanent minority. In the UK, people under 16 constitute around 20.6 per cent of the population as a whole, according to 1995 estimates. Even allowing for social constructions of childhood, resting on arbitrary cultural distinctions, the official child audience of 4–15 year olds also encompasses a very wide range of human development and experience. A 4 year old is a very different person from a 15 year old. He or she is also a different person from a 5 year old, who, in Britain, will already have started full-time school, and will therefore, for instance, have more understanding of what a school-based drama programme like *Grange Hill* is about. Children's producers are faced with having to subdivide this minority audience into still smaller minorities in order to serve the assumed differing needs and tastes of these precise age/experience groups. The problem for producers in trying to attract the maximum proportion of all 4–15 year olds, is that younger children often watch programmes intended for older children, which raises problems of 'suitability' as well as of comprehension, whereas older children do not often watch programmes made for very young children, not least because they have already been young children and do not want to revisit this state. As a 9-year-old girl in a study I carried out in Philadelphia, USA, put it: 'I don't need to watch *Sesame Street* because I already know this stuff' (Davies, 1997, p. 134).

The 1990 Broadcasting Act made it a legal requirement for all commercial companies applying for a broadcasting franchise that they should include a range of programmes for children in their schedules. There is no such legislative requirement laid on the BBC. At the time of



Table 1. *Shares of the 4–15-year TV audience between 1991 and 1995 (percentage)*

| YEAR | BBC | ITV | SATELLITE/CABLE |
|------|-----|-----|-----------------|
| 1991 | 44  | 49  | 7               |
| 1992 | 41  | 51  | 8               |
| 1993 | 40  | 50  | 10              |
| 1994 | 37  | 52  | 11              |
| 1995 | 35  | 50  | 15              |

Source: Television Quarterly, Broadcasting Research Dept, BBC.

the 1990 Act, the BBC was deemed to be providing the standard baseline of children's programme provision, as part of its public service remit. It was against this baseline that the performance of commercial companies could be measured. In the UK, BBC and ITV are thus in strong competition with each other for the 4–15 audience – and, in satellite/cable households, they are increasingly in competition with specialist children's channels, such as Nickelodeon, the Children's Channel, the Cartoon Network and Disney, as well as 'adult' channels, such as Sky 1 and the Movie Channel. The fluctuating shares of the child audience between BBC, ITV and Satellite/Cable over the five years prior to the study can be seen in Table 1.

The share of the child audience going to satellite/cable channels, with children's schedules based almost entirely on animation and imports, more than doubled in the time period up to our study, and it was mostly at the expense of the BBC, rather than ITV. However, children do not only watch satellite/cable for the purpose of watching cartoons; boys between 10 and 15, in particular, are more likely to sample adult programmes such as sport (*source*: Children's Satellite Viewing: Quarter 2, 1995, BBC Broadcasting Research Services).

### **Children's viewing behaviour**

Children are seen as a necessary target for media producers, and worth wooing and understanding. Children are also characterised as a source of public concern in terms of feared media effects and ideological contamination. Hence, in addition to the constant monitoring of child consumption and leisure habits by market research companies, there have recently been several major publicly funded surveys of children's media behaviour – a sign that, as rapid technological innovation is forcing change, so the relationship of children to media moves into the

public sphere to become a matter of social concern. The most recent large-scale analysis of children's screen-leisure behaviour in the UK has come from a study by Sonia Livingstone, Moira Bovill, George Gaskell and their team, of the London School of Economics (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999), part of a European wide survey of 'young people and new media'. The study surveyed 1,303 young people aged 6–17, including 334 diaries of detailed media use. Within this sample, 100 per cent had a TV set; 96 per cent had a video cassette recorder (VCR); 67 per cent had a video-linked games machine; 42 per cent had access to cable/satellite multichannel television; and 53 per cent had a personal computer in the home. Livingstone and Bovill found evidence of what they called a new 'bedroom culture': 63 per cent of their sample had TVs in their bedrooms and 34 per cent had a video-games machine there. Only 5 per cent had access to satellite/cable in their bedrooms; and only 12 per cent had access to a PC in the bedroom, so moral concerns about children secretly accessing forbidden and unregulated material via new television and computer technology still only apply to a small minority of children. Of more concern, given that society is supposedly moving towards an economy and an education system reliant on access to, and competence in using, computer technology, Livingstone and Bovill also found very marked gender differences in access; 78 per cent of boys and only 56 per cent of girls had video games, and there was a huge difference in bedroom access with 48 per cent of boys and only 19 per cent of girls with PCs in their own rooms. Within this small group, girls used computers for non-game activities at home for 20 minutes a day less than boys, that is, for only an average of 11 minutes a day. There were also significant social class differences in access to computers, with 58 per cent of social grade ABC1 (professional class) children having access to a PC at home, and only 30 per cent of C2DE (lower middle/working class) children having such access.

Our study was a younger sample (primarily children aged 6–12) than Livingstone and Bovill's, but the data were gathered during almost the same time period and, although our sample was not scientifically randomised, many of our findings parallel theirs, which suggests that our sample, like theirs, was a reasonably valid representation of the child viewing population in the UK. It consisted of 1,332 5–13 year olds in seventeen schools in England and Wales, plus approximately 40 children in a pilot study in Essex, in the East of England. Further details of the sample are given in chapter 6 and in Appendix 1.

Like Livingstone and Bovill, we also asked children about their viewing behaviour, although not about other forms of screen-media use, since dramatised storytelling was not a primary function of new media

Table 2. *Proportion (percentage) of boys, girls and all children saying that they watched/had access to the following channels*

|                       | Percentage answering 'yes' |      |       | Percentage answering 'no' |      |       | Percentage answering 'not sure' |      |       |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|------|-------|---------------------------|------|-------|---------------------------------|------|-------|
|                       | All                        | boys | girls | All                       | boys | girls | All                             | boys | girls |
| TV in bedroom         | 53                         | 59   | 46    | 47                        | 40   | 54    | 0                               | 1    | 0     |
| Satellite/cable       | 43                         | 46   | 40    | 43                        | 44   | 42    | 14                              | 10   | 18    |
| Nickelodeon           | 38                         | 37   | 39    | 55                        | 56   | 54    | 7                               | 7    | 7     |
| Disney Channel        | 44                         | 41   | 47    | 50                        | 54   | 47    | 6                               | 5    | 7     |
| TCC                   | 30                         | 32   | 29    | 58                        | 59   | 58    | 12                              | 10   | 14    |
| Cartoon Network       | 47                         | 47   | 45    | 46                        | 48   | 46    | 7                               | 4    | 9     |
| Children's BBC (CBBC) | 84                         | 80   | 88    | 12                        | 15   | 8     | 5                               | 5    | 4     |
| Children's ITV (CITV) | 68                         | 68   | 69    | 24                        | 26   | 23    | 7                               | 6    | 8     |
| Children's Channel 4  | 44                         | 43   | 44    | 43                        | 44   | 42    | 13                              | 12   | 15    |

as yet. The viewing-behaviour section of our questionnaire asked children whether they had TV in their bedroom; whether they had satellite or cable; and whether they watched a number of channels offering children's programming, including BBC1, ITV and Channel 4, as well as the specialised cable children's channels. A breakdown of their answers, first according to gender, and then according to age group, is given in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 shows that over half of our sample had a TV in their bedroom. The proportion – 43 per cent – of children who said they had satellite/cable is virtually the same as the Livingstone sample of 42 per cent, which suggests that our sample was demographically not widely dissimilar to theirs. Children's BBC (CBBC) received by far the greatest number of 'yes' responses to the question 'Do you watch this channel?' – 84 per cent overall, with more girls (88 per cent) than boys (80 per cent) answering 'yes'. Children's ITV (CITV) was next with 68 per cent overall, nearly equally shared between boys and girls. Of the specialist cable/satellite channels, the Cartoon Network did best, with 47 per cent of children answering 'yes'. The gender differences in these answers were virtually negligible – it is likely that they would have been greater, as with Livingstone and Bovill's sample, in answer to questions about new media use. At the time of our study, therefore, TV remained a leisure and information medium widely and equally used by both sexes.

Table 3 shows obvious age differences in bedroom access to TV and there was a marked increase from age 10 onwards, rising from 48 per

Table 3. *Proportion (percentage) of children in different age groups saying they watched/had access to the following channels*

|                       | Percentage of children |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|-----------------------|------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
|                       | age 5                  | 6  | 7  | 8  | 9  | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
| TV in bedroom         | 40                     | 47 | 45 | 41 | 48 | 60 | 64 | 65 | 25 |
| Satellite/cable       | 22                     | 50 | 36 | 40 | 42 | 47 | 42 | 49 | 75 |
| Nickelodeon           | 22                     | 58 | 43 | 40 | 32 | 36 | 35 | 32 | 86 |
| Disney Channel        | 40                     | 62 | 61 | 46 | 45 | 36 | 30 | 38 | 43 |
| TCC                   | 50                     | 43 | 39 | 22 | 31 | 26 | 26 | 27 | 86 |
| Cartoon Network       | 38                     | 69 | 61 | 51 | 47 | 41 | 33 | 36 | 0  |
| Children's BBC (CBBC) | 56                     | 90 | 86 | 79 | 89 | 83 | 78 | 84 | 88 |
| Children's ITV (CITV) | 67                     | 78 | 75 | 65 | 68 | 74 | 60 | 66 | 38 |
| Children's Channel 4  | 67                     | 66 | 56 | 41 | 43 | 41 | 33 | 35 | 25 |

cent at 9 to over 60 per cent at 10 – an age-related ‘watershed’ which we observed in other parts of the data, including children’s opinions. Younger children – 6–7 year olds – were more likely than older children to watch the Cartoon Network and Children’s ITV, and in general the figures showed a downward trend in viewing satellite/cable channels as the age range went up. None of the figures showed an *increase* in viewing these specialised channels as children got older; children’s BBC held up best across the age range, with 84 per cent of 12 year olds and 86 per cent of 7 year olds saying they watched it. Thus, the evidence from our study suggests that the terrestrial networks still scored with most children in terms of regular access and familiarity over new channels – and, perhaps unexpectedly, this was more likely the older the child.

### Children and channel choice

Many children in the study had absorbed the multichannel argument that, if more choice in programming was to be provided, the answer was more channels, for example, this 9-year-old girl from a suburban primary school in Oxfordshire, in the free comment section on her questionnaire:

I think there should be more children’s programmes on a Sunday. I think there is too much grown ups’ programmes. I think there should be more programmes for the whole family. I think there should be more channels.

Another 10-year-old girl, in a village primary school in Buckinghamshire, saw channels as ways of targeting different audiences:

I think you should have grown up programmes on the Channel 5 and Channel 6. Children's on 1 and 4 and science, the future, the past and other varieties on 2, 3, 6 and 7.

Younger children, too, were aware of the option of having a special channel for special genres of programming, as in the case of this 8-year-old girl in a rural primary school in Co. Durham:

I would like you to put on more cartoons about witches and monsters. And call it the spooky channel.

### **Changing choices: from 2 to 10 channels**

One of the most revealing sections of the questionnaire was a simulated 'channel-choice' task in which children were asked to choose, first between 2 programmes on 2 channels, then between 3 channels, then 5, then 10. More information about the outcome of this exercise is given in chapter 4 on the child as broadcasting consumer. However, it is worth commenting briefly on the results here, in the context of predictions about what children may do in the new multichannel dispensation, and what they actually did do in this exercise. Table 4 shows how children 'voted' at the 10-channel stage. Programmes were selected by the research team on the basis of shows popular at the time, as identified in our pilot study. The final 10-channel schedule also included, as in real-world schedules, 50 per cent cartoons. Because the focus of research was on drama, we were particularly interested in the fate of drama programmes across this series of choices. We were most interested to see the fate of *Byker Grove*, a continuing drama series about a youth centre, produced in the UK by the independent company Zenith North for the BBC, scheduled in the Children's BBC 5.10 p.m. slot, and aimed at older children and early teenagers.

Table 4 shows how the spread of scores across channels, allied to the spread across age groups, produced great variability in choices. However, there were some patterns. Nearly every programme received at least some votes among some age groups, so a channel mix like this would presumably have something for nearly all children, albeit relatively small numbers of them. This spread of programmes, appealing to different age groups, looks like an argument for the apparently greater 'choice' offered by more channels. However, within the diversity of choice, there is little diversity of genre, with cartoons predominating. If further choices were made available, the spread of scores would become even thinner, with more zero scores for some programmes. Bearing in mind the hypothetical nature of the exercise, this final 10-choice stage suggested that, in a multichannel environment, boys and girls may

Table 4. *Proportion (percentage) of children in each age group for 10-channel TV choices*

| Programme choice                                      | Percentage of children |                    |                    |                    |                    |                     |                     |                     |                   |
|---|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
|   | age 5<br>(base<br>10)  | 6<br>(base<br>118) | 7<br>(base<br>186) | 8<br>(base<br>186) | 9<br>(base<br>230) | 10<br>(base<br>193) | 11<br>(base<br>266) | 12<br>(base<br>108) | 13<br>(base<br>8) |
| <i>Rugrats</i><br>(children's cartoon)                | 0                      | 0                  | 13                 | 9                  | 10                 | 9                   | 8                   | 7                   | 13                |
| <i>Byker Grove</i><br>(UK children's drama)           | 0                      | 4                  | 4                  | 4                  | 5                  | 6                   | 5                   | 3                   | 0                 |
| <i>Art Attack</i><br>(UK children's art<br>programme) | 0                      | 6                  | 7                  | 8                  | 9                  | 10                  | 7                   | 8                   | 0                 |
| <i>Friends</i><br>(US adult comedy)                   | 0                      | 2                  | 4                  | 9                  | 5                  | 12                  | 21                  | 29                  | 50                |
| <i>Home and Away</i><br>(Australian soap)             | 0                      | 5                  | 4                  | 7                  | 11                 | 13                  | 15                  | 19                  | 25                |
| <i>Garfield</i><br>(US animation)                     | 10                     | 1                  | 5                  | 4                  | 4                  | 1                   | 5                   | 1                   | 13                |
| <i>Power Rangers</i><br>(US children's adventure)     | 30                     | 25                 | 22                 | 10                 | 5                  | 3                   | 1                   | 1                   | 0                 |
| <i>Ace Ventura</i><br>(US animation)                  | 20                     | 23                 | 23                 | 28                 | 35                 | 27                  | 18                  | 20                  | 0                 |
| <i>Scooby Doo</i><br>(US animation)                   | 40                     | 27                 | 18                 | 10                 | 6                  | 7                   | 4                   | 2                   | 0                 |
| <i>Ren and Stimpy</i><br>(US animation)               | 0                      | 7                  | 5                  | 12                 | 10                 | 12                  | 17                  | 9                   | 0                 |

polarise, with girls choosing narrative dramas – soaps, sitcom and children's drama like *Byker Grove* – whereas boys will tend to opt for cartoons and action-adventure. The programme which most sustained its appeal for both sexes throughout the exercise was *Art Attack*, ITV's art-skills programme; this magazine, 'edutainment' format seemed to be one of the safest options for attracting all sections of the child audience.

The best the realistic, UK-produced children's drama representative, *Byker Grove*, could hope for, if our multichannel simulation predicted real world behaviour, was a small, loyal core of children of both sexes, fairly stable across the age range, which would be around 4 to 5 per cent of the child audience as a whole. This finding would not be good news for those wanting to justify spending money on expensive children's

drama, which would apparently only appeal to a small fraction of the available audience, unless, of course, it could be sold overseas. But a programme with such specific local appeal, set in the north-east of England, about 'a load of Geordies' as one 12-year-old boy, himself from the north-east, described it, would not have international marketing appeal. Thus, in the multichannel universe which is on the way, programmes like *Byker Grove*, which emphasise and reinforce children's local identity – as recommended in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – may have an uncertain future. This Welsh 11-year-old boy was forthright in his views that cartoons were for 'babies', and for cartoons to drive out drama would be an undesirable development for children like him:

I would like to see a lot [of] drama on telly. I hate to see too much children's cartoons because they're on every day of the week, even on the weekend. There should be more interesting programmes for children that have grown out of cartoons.

### **Children on the multichannel future**

A group of children aged 9–11 in a Buckinghamshire village primary school, were asked what channels they normally watched and whether one was better than another. The discussion began with the subject of commercials. These were not recognised as financially necessary; they were seen, as by many adults, as an irritant and an interruption. The conversation was moved on by the interviewer to more general questions of programme financing, and Boy 1 expressed scepticism about the financial probity of the people running the system, using the characteristic voice of the disempowered. He did not use the word 'us' to mean 'us children', he used it to mean 'us' the audience, the general public. None of these children had satellite/cable at home, but all demonstrated an awareness of the impact of the arrival of new channels on the choice, range and public usefulness of programming generally:

GIRL 1 One good thing about BBC1 is that you do not have any commercials. For example they come when you are sitting watching *Coronation Street*.

INTERVIEWER Who pays for the programmes on ITV?

GENERAL COMMENTS Me, me, me, the managers and all that, all the people on the managing staff.

INTERVIEWER Where do they get the money from?

BOY 1 People are willing to give the money.

BOY 2 They rob us.

BOY 3 The lottery.

GIRL 2 But the lottery is on Channel 1 [BBC1].

INTERVIEWER And how do BBC1 get the money for the programmes?

BOY 1 From the TV licences.

...

INTERVIEWER Do you think that the news is important?

BOY 2 The news is, yeah.

GIRL 1 It is important for people to know what is going on in the world.

BOY 3 They should add on a channel with just news on it.

BOY 2 They do, but it is on satellite.

INTERVIEWER Do any of you have satellite?

ALL No.

BOY 2 There is no point because it is just repeats. They just show the same films four times a week, it is always the same film. . .

INTERVIEWER What do you think the people who put the programmes on think about when they are choosing the programmes?

BOY 1 They think about the other people, their age, and what they think they like.

...

GIRL 2 In magazines sometimes they have this poll to ask what we like and then they send them to the station and then they see what the audience like.

This conversation ranges from a degree of cynicism about the behaviour and motives of broadcasters – ‘they rob us’ – to a touching faith in the broadcasters’ willingness to consult the needs of the general public and different groups within it – ‘other people, their age, and what they think they like’. Although the children were aware that more specialised programme choices, such as news, could be offered by ‘adding on a channel’, comments about the existing satellite/cable provision offered more proof of scepticism: ‘There is no point, it is just repeats.’ In general, when children were acting as channel controllers themselves, financial considerations, and even taking systematic steps to ‘have a poll’ to find out what their audiences liked, were not prioritised. However, this is not to say that these children were ignorant of the different methods of financing broadcasting. This 12 year old, in his questionnaire, expressed awareness of the financial drawbacks of the universal licence fee, as opposed to advertising:

I think you [the BBC] are a bit over the top about not advertising. Why do people have to have a TV licence if they are perfectly happy not to have the BBC channels and just cable? (Boy, 12, outer-London secondary school)

Other children expressed confident familiarity with the new media landscape. A 9-year-old Asian girl in an inner-London primary was an