



King's Research Portal

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Carter, C., & Steemers, J. (2023). Speaking with One Voice: The Future of UK Children's PSB Provision and Policymaking: Policy and Evidence Centre, University of Cardiff. Policy Evidence Centre - PEC.
<https://pec.ac.uk/discussion-papers/speaking-with-one-voice>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**Creative Industries
Policy and
Evidence Centre**

Led by



with



**Discussion
paper**



Speaking with One Voice

The Future of Children's Public
Service Broadcasting Provision
and Policymaking

Cynthia Carter
Cardiff University

Jeanette Steemers
King's College London

July 2023

ISBN: 978-0-7017-0274-8

The Creative PEC is funded by:



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Communications Act 2003 and PSB	4
Government support for CPSBs – Young Audiences Content Fund	5
"Digital-first" children's content provision and the commercial bottom line	6
Children's PSB at a critical crossroads	7
Are public service media still fit for purpose?	8
Public service content provision across the past 30 years – a regulatory and industry context	10
Current challenges in policymaking	16
Key points for discussion and action	19
Back to the future for children's PSBs	21

About the Authors

Cynthia Carter is a Reader in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University. Her research and publications focus on children, news and citizenship, children's public service content and media policy. She is a Co-I on the "Arts, Culture and Public Service Broadcasting workstrand for the Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre. She is a member of the Academic Advisory Board, Children's Media Foundation.

Jeanette Steemers is Professor of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, and former Vice Dean of Research in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at King's College London. She has published widely on the children's media industry and children's media policy. She is a Trustee of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer and an Academic Advisory Board Member for the Children's Media Foundation.

About the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre

The Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) works to support the inclusive and sustainable growth of the UK's Creative Industries through the production of independent and authoritative evidence and policy advice. Led by Newcastle University with the Royal Society of Arts and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Centre comprises a core consortium of; Newcastle University, Work Advance, Sussex University and the University of Sheffield. The PEC works with a diverse range of industry partners. For more details visit <http://www.pec.ac.uk> and @CreativePEC

Abstract

This discussion paper explores a set of related questions around declining provision of children's public service media content and how best to address what many media commentators now regard as an acute crisis in public service broadcasting (PSB). We ask, should government and industry continue to value and appropriately fund UK based children's public service media? What would be lost if they no longer existed? We argue that children's public service media continue to matter, playing a vital role in reflecting the rich diversity of British life and our shared cultural histories and values for each generation of British children. However, today's children's public service content producers face severe market pressures and rapid technological change that threatens their future viability. To address this pressing matter and understand how we got to this point, the paper maps out key historical moments and factors that have shaped the UK children's media ecology, from the 2003 Communications Act which dropped origination quotas for commercial children's media providers, to the BFI's pilot scheme, the Young Audiences Content Fund (YACF), as an alternative, model for financing children's commercial PSBs, through to recent "digital first" policies which increasingly emphasise commercial goals for the children's media sector. We also provide an overview media policymaking over the past 30 years to demonstrate how it has consistently failed to deliver joined-up thinking about how best to support the provision of children's public service content. We then outline seven current issues and challenges for policymakers and six key public purposes for children's PSBs which offer insights into how we might best address gaps in our understanding about what needs to be done to secure the future children's media based on core, collectively shared British public service values.

Key Words: public service broadcasters (PSBs); commercial public service broadcasters (CPSBs); children's media; public service media (PSMs); children's media policymaking; public service values; child media audiences

Introduction

Over the past year, celebrations marking 100 years of the BBC have provided an ideal opportunity for the Corporation to recommit to its original public service Reithian ethos - to inform, educate and entertain both adults and children of all ages, backgrounds, and regions around the UK. Its early flagship programme, demonstrating a serious commitment to its child audience, was Children's Hour (1922-1964), first broadcast on radio on 15th November 1922 and then on television.

Later came iconic factual programming made either in-house or through commissioning independent producers, including long running Blue Peter (1958-), and Newsround (1972-), and Horrible Histories (2009), live action television drama programmes such as Grange Hill (1978-2008; 2023-), The Story of Tracy Beaker (2002-2006) and The Demon Headmaster (1996-1998; 2018-), and, globally successful, high quality productions by independent producers - for example, preschool programmes including Teletubbies (1997-2001 Ragdoll) and Bob the Builder (HIT; Hot Animation 1999-2009) and In the Night Garden (2007-2009), to name only a few. Over the past century, such programming has helped to foster children's understanding of shared social values in the UK, and the value of community, cooperation and civic belonging.

Commercially-funded PSBs (CPSBs) - ITV, Channel 4, and Channel 5, have also long made important contributions to this endeavour. Nonetheless, the total number of hours of original, public service content dramatically decreased in the years immediately after the deregulatory 2003 Communications Act which dropped origination quotas for commercial children's media providers. In the few short years that followed, first-run originated hours on the CPSB channels more than halved (51%) from 1,584 in 2006 to 778 in 2011. This drop was driven by decreases across all the PSBs. For instance, the BBC saw a decrease of 46% across its channels, whilst ITV fell by 61% to 61 hours and Channel 5 dropped by 85% to 22 hours (Ofcom 2013).

This discussion paper explores a set of related questions around declining provision of children's public service content and how best to address what many now regard as a crisis in PSB. We may ask, for instance, should we continue to value and fund UK children's public service media? If so, what makes this type of content qualitatively different from that which is primarily produced for commercial gain and, increasingly, for global markets? What would be lost if children's public service media no longer existed, or their presence was significantly reduced and harder for children to find? This discussion paper takes the position that children's public service media do matter, for reasons we outline here, and that PSBs now face severe market pressures which threaten their future viability. That a wide range of children's media stakeholders now agree on this point and that there is therefore a need to speak with one voice in support of PSB is our focus in this paper.

We begin our discussion by considering the influence of the 2003 Communications Act and some of the ways in which it has directly and indirectly led to some of the current challenges faced by PSBs.

Communications Act 2003 and PSB

As mentioned, since the 2003 Communications Act, the children's PSB sector has seen a marked decline in the number of UK original children's productions. At the same time, the BBC has come to dominate the field of children's public service content. Shortly after the Act came into force, it was already clear that something must be done to support the CPSBs, with the sector looking set for serious market failure.

It is therefore no surprise that 2006 saw the launch of the campaigning group "Save Kids' TV." Founding members were largely UK children's media creators and its chair was the highly regarded children's

television producer, Anna Home OBE (later renamed the “Children’s Media Foundation” or CMF). It was established partly as a result of concerns raised by participants at the children’s media industry conference “Showcomotion” (now known as the “Children’s Media Conference”) in light of ITV’s decision to close its children’s production arm and decrease children’s media output on ITV1. Around the same time, new regulations on advertising foods high in salt, sugar and fat significantly decreased advertising revenues around children’s content for the UK’s commercial broadcasters” thereby reducing revenues for commercial providers.

It was clear to those working in the children’s media industry during this period, as well as policymakers, media advocacy groups, Ofcom, academics and others that the provision of children’s public service content was coming under increasingly severe pressure. In the next section of this paper, we look at how the government eventually responded directly to this situation, focusing on the launch of its three-year contestable funding scheme, Young Audiences Content Fund (YACF), which started in 2019.

Government support for CPSBs – Young Audiences Content Fund

It was the CPSBs whom the YACF contestable funding scheme, worth £44.1 million, was meant to support. Funds were provided by the UK government Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and managed by the British Film Institute (BFI). The YACF was set up to provide CPSBs with the means through which to specifically redress a downward trend in first-run original productions. Its aim was to create opportunities for the development of partnerships between CPSBs and independent producers that would not only revitalise the children’s media industry, but also deliver more and a broader range of new, unique and distinctive UK public service content.¹

The scheme was also designed to incentivise CPSBs to meet their statutory obligation to deliver public service content – with its limited powers of enforcement, Ofcom had been unable to fully compel them to do so.² Releasing its final, independently researched report (Bigger Pictures Research) of the pilot in early 2023, the BFI evaluated the Fund across a range of factors, demonstrating how successful it had been in invigorating the CPSB sector in the UK.³ Upon its closure, CMF chair Anna Home declared that the Fund “will be – and is already being – sorely missed. This report testifies to the resounding success of the Young Audiences Content Fund pilot. It’s a powerful argument for continuing the funding of children’s media content that reflects UK children’s lives and their culture.”⁴ Despite children’s media industry and advocacy group campaigns to reinstate the Fund, by early 2023 it has become apparent that it is unlikely the government will do so.

The CMF hosted an event in late February 2023 to take stock of the Fund’s positive social, economic and regional value and impacts for CPSBs and how best to go forward creating content for UK young people in its absence. “YACF – Evaluating the Evaluation”⁵ provided an opportunity for children’s media producers

¹ The YACF was a three-year pilot run by the BFI (2019–2022) providing £44.1 funding from the UK government to support the commissioning of 61 projects creating “high quality public service content for young audiences across different genres and techniques, contributing to a more plural landscape in the industry and directly encouraged additional investment for projects, targeting this age group.” <https://www.bfi.org.uk/get-funding-support/create-films-tv-or-new-formats-storytelling/young-audiences-content-fund>

² As noted in Ofcom’s Children’s Content Review (2017) <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/consultations-and-statements/category-2/childrens-content-review>

³ Barratt, J. Bigger Picture Research. Young Audiences Content Fund Pilot: End-of-Term-Evaluation. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/get-funding-support/create-films-tv-or-new-formats-storytelling/young-audiences-content-fund>

⁴ https://kidscreen.com/2023/01/12/the-bfi-closes-the-book-on-yacf/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=the-bfi-closes-the-book-on-yacf&_u=Lr%2fbd4pDkja%3d

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piJHFx8914U&t=695s&ab_channel=TheChildren%27sMediaFoundation (22 February 2023)

and audience advocates, academics and policy makers to talk about the advantages of this sort of contestable funding for the children's public service media sector. As noted on the CMF website, "This is one of the most comprehensive studies ever made into the power of public service funding to transform the lives of young people. It will inform thinking on contestable funding and the entire future of public service media in the UK – particularly for young people, as the government prepares the Media Bill for presentation to Parliament."⁶

In the next section, we assess another recent challenge for children's PSBs around falling audiences and commercial pressures, faced by both the BBC and CPSBs, resulting in decisions to reconfigure their children's content to "digital first" delivery.

"Digital-first" children's content provision and the commercial bottom line

In addition to the demise of the YACF and how this might affect the economic viability of CPSBs, the BBC has also been facing financial difficulties around funding for children's programming. In recent years, financing for children's original media content has been steadily decreasing whilst CBBC has come under increasing pressure from government and OfCom, in particular, to grow its audience. This has led to cuts in free-to-air content and more emphasis on its online and commercial enterprises (i.e. BBC Studios).

In addition, in the past few years the BBC has become increasingly driven by digital-first policies (followed by CITV declaring in March 2023 a move to digital-first for autumn 2023), which have been criticised for shutting out lower income audiences who don't necessarily have the technology or affordable access to high speed broadband. Critics have also argued there are issues around equality of online access for young audiences in relation to the discoverability and prominence of public service content, which are in urgent need of attention and solutions.⁷

Additionally, there is growing concern that commercial pressures on the BBC are already leading to greater emphasis on a smaller number of genres. Animation, claim CBBC, is particularly appealing to lower income household children "compared with other genres such as drama, whereas CBBC's audience is currently skewed towards the ABC1 socio-economic group."⁸ In addition, it can be made and marketed with global audiences in mind, however sometimes to the detriment of content made specifically for UK children.⁹

The commercial bottom line is also shaped by an assumption that today's children are all digital natives who are no longer interested in what public service television channels have to offer. As former Home Secretary Priti Patel stated when interviewed on the BBC's Andrew Marr Show on 23 May 2021, "This is the Netflix generation [...] How relevant is the BBC?"¹⁰

While it is true that many children have been turning to digital platforms in increasingly significant numbers, it is also worth considering that recently Netflix and other Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) services have begun to decline due, in part, to the current cost of living crisis (see Media Nations Report, Ofcom, 2022) but also because of the continuing relevance of public service content for many young people.¹¹ Access to

⁶ <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/events/yacf-evaluating-the-evaluation>

⁷ Bryan, S. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv/2022/05/why-a-digital-first-bbc-should-worry-us-all-cbbc-shutdown>

⁸ Ofcom (2022) Original Productions on CBBC: Consultation on the BBC's Request to Change the Operating Licence. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/origprod/origprod22/origprod22.pdf>, p.4.

⁹ Steemers, J. and Carter, C. (2022) Response to Ofcom's Consultation: Original Productions on CBBC – Request to Change the Operating Licence. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/origprod/origprod22/origprod22.pdf>

¹⁰ Programme transcript, Andrew Marr Show, 23 May 2021. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/23052101.pdf>

¹¹ Media Nations Report, Ofcom (2022) <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/media-nations-reports/media-nations-2022>

free-to-air content remains an important way to deliver content to young audiences, particularly for those in low income households. Much more could be done to make this content more widely available and discoverable across platforms.

Children's PSB at a critical crossroads

From the above discussion, it is clear there is now widespread agreement amongst children's media policymakers, industry advocacy groups, Ofcom and academics, that children's public service content provision is at risk. There is a real danger, many suggest, that its underlying value in terms of distinctiveness, diversity and engagement with UK children might be further undermined, if not abandoned.¹²

A central aim of this discussion paper is to open up for wider public discussion the value of PSB.¹³ We do so to encourage the engagement of key stakeholders, including corporate and government policymakers, a wider range of government departments, children's media producers and academics and, indeed, to young people themselves. Inclusion of a broader array of stakeholders in public discussion could, we suggest, facilitate the development of fresh ideas, plans and strategies needed to ensure the current and future health of a UK based children's media ecology.¹⁴

Children's public service media matter. In a time of great technological, social, economic, and political change, to support this position it is useful to look back at developments across UK children's PSBs over the past two decades to better understand how best to proceed in support PSB. Our brief survey here clearly shows there has been an increasing set of organisational decisions made that have been contributing to the erosion of PSB for children in the UK. Examining such past decisions also allows us to take stock of their relation to policymaking over time. It is our hope this would help to clarify what may be on the horizon for children's PSBs and how best to respond to current and future challenges they are facing. What happens now matters, perhaps now more than ever, as the children's media sector becomes increasingly commercialised, global and digital-first.

Policymakers might take particular note, because reflection on the policy formation of the past two decades demonstrates little by way of joined-up thinking across stakeholders, focus or clear plans for the future of children's public service media. Children's public service content is rarely or rather briefly mentioned in broadcasting white papers, reports, and Ofcom notices (unless there is a specific children's content review). More often, where children are concerned, attention tends to focus on current "hot button" issues.

At the moment, for instance, a central focus of public discussion focuses on the protection of children from online harms, especially bullying, the growing problem of child obesity, or fake news, requiring regulation against negative effects.¹⁵ What tends to be overlooked is the positive contribution public service media are well positioned to make in support of children's social, political and personal development as young citizens.

In the next section of this paper, we turn to examine the question of whether or not public service media have been able to fulfil their central purposes in relation to the child audience, as set out in the 2003

¹² Nieto McAvoy, E. and Noonan, C. (2019). Communications and Digital Committee Recommend Greater Safeguards for Public Service Broadcasting." <https://pec.ac.uk/blog/lords-committee-recommend-greater-safeguards-for-public-service-broadcasting>

¹³ Chivers, T. and Allan, S. (2022). Envisioning Broadcasting Anew: The Future of UK Broadcasting Policy, 9 May.

<https://pec.ac.uk/blog/envisioning-broadcasting-anew-responding-to-the-white-paper-on-the-future-of-uk-broadcasting-policy>

¹⁴ Boardman, G. (2022) The UK Children's Media Plan, Children's Media Foundation.

<https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/archives/14427/the-uk-childrens-media-plan>

¹⁵ Steemers, J. and D'Arma, A. (2012) "Evaluating and Regulating the Role of Public Service Broadcasters in the Children's Media Ecology: The Case of Home-Grown Television Content." *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 8 (1), 67-86.

https://doi.org/10.1386/macp.8.1.67_1

Communications Act, each of which is underpinned by a set of values or duties.¹⁶ The first purpose is to inform our understanding of the world; the second to stimulate knowledge and learning; the third to reflect UK cultural identity; and, the fourth to represent diversity and alternative viewpoints¹⁷

Are public service media still fit for purpose?

To address the inter-related questions addressed in the previous sections of this discussion paper, we begin by examining the CMF's 2021 report *Our Children's Future: Does Public Service Media Matter?* which sets out useful terms of reference for thinking about public service media for children and asking if they are able to fulfil their public service duties.¹⁸ The report includes the views of a wide range of stakeholders addressing this question, from a broad range of backgrounds – in the media industry (PSBs, CPSBs and independent producers), politicians, policymakers, children's media advocates and academics primarily based in the UK, but also from the USA, Australia and Europe.

The CMF is a non-profit audience advocacy organisation working to support the production of high quality media content for children across genres and platforms. It is also a longstanding champion of public service media. In his chapter of the report, Deputy Director Colin Ward maintains that, "It is our responsibility [as a society] to ensure that when they [children] eventually enter that world, they have benefitted from a wide range of media experiences, which have opened up their world and helped them to understand the culture and values of our complex society".¹⁹ This point is echoed by Director Greg Childs on the CMF website, who says, "media are central to children's development, if we expect them to grow up connected to their culture and as engaged citizens".²⁰

Jackie Edwards, former Head of the BFI Young Audiences Content Fund (YACF), emphasises in her chapter of the CMF report the importance of focusing public discussion around strengthening the quality and availability of public service content for all UK children, reflecting their lives, and enabling them to see children just like them on screen. Recent debates and policymaking seem to focus too much attention on delivery platforms and technology, she insists, which may not be designed with children in mind. "Great content is what draws an audience, not a pretty interface or a snazzy algorithm that gives you more of the same (which is sort of the antithesis of public service really – we should be broadening horizons, right?)." Concluding this point, she affirms that "content is still very much king." For Edwards, public service content "remains a crucial and central part of UK life and should be cherished". Recent years, however, have clearly demonstrated "how lack of regulation, prominence and resource risk leading to market failure, can be hugely detrimental to our cultural lives".²¹

In the same publication, Children's Laureate and author Michael Rosen reinforces this point, where he contends "It's all in the name: it's for the public – that's all of us, and it's a service. It serves the people. Children are part of the people, they are people. They are entitled to be given a service that is for all of them." Moreover, he maintains, children's diverse needs today necessitate "commitment beyond that of the market

¹⁶ BBC Charter Review (2016). <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldcomuni/96/9606.htm>

¹⁷ PSB purposes and characteristics outlined in "Chapter 2: The BBC's accountability framework" (2016) – <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldcomuni/96/9606.htm> summed up from Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting in the Internet Age, Ofcom's Third Review of Public Service Broadcasting,

https://www.ofcom.gov.uk/___data/assets/pdf_file/0029/57638/psb_concise_summary.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/archives/14545/the-cmf-s-research-strategy-listening-to-kids>

²⁰ Children's Media Foundation (2022) "Who We Are". <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/about-us/who-we-are>

²¹ Edwards, J. (2021) "Children's Television: The Canary in the Coalmine." <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>, p. 95

to ensure that these diverse needs are served.²² The market cannot serve this diversity. By definition it has to compete for mass audiences; it has to 'massify' the audiences in order to survive." One of the enduring commitments of public service-oriented media is to make programmes that are popular with mass audiences whilst also ensuring it creates "programmes that express the needs of minorities, who of themselves may or may not be profitable for broadcasters to reach."²³

Globally successful programmes such as *Peppa Pig* (Channel Five), or *Teletubbies* (BBC) are not the central issue raised by the above commentators. Commercial provision only becomes a potentially problematic issue when these are the types of content that are almost exclusively commissioned - those which can generate sizeable profits and appeal to global audiences - at the expense of UK specific live action drama (e.g. *Hettie Feather*; *Tracy Beaker*) or shows that appeal to smaller and minority audiences, including factual programmes that give children a voice and inclusion in the public sphere.

Another rising issue around children's public service media content focuses on increasing digital delivery, at a time when many commentators have raised concerns about growing material, technological, educational and representational inequalities experienced by many children in the UK. *Observer* and *Guardian* columnist Jane Martinson, for instance, contends that, "The BBC cannot and should not try to ape the streaming giants, with their deep pockets and global reach. Its purpose is to serve all British citizens, whether rich or poor, urban or rural and anything in between. Local content, whether regional drama or memorable ditties about medieval kings, does not sell globally".²⁴ So, while many children in CBBC's target audience of 7–12-year-olds are using streaming services, not all are, particularly in households that can't pay for subscription services and those who live in parts of the country where fast speed broadband isn't available.

Ofcom noted in its Media Nations: UK 2019 report that homes with "only free-to-air digital terrestrial TV (DTT)" make up the biggest proportion of all UK homes, totalling 11.3 million (39.7% of all households), an increase of 2.3% since 2012.²⁵ These are typically households that are often unable to afford subscription services.

Whilst streaming services provide educational content, Martinson maintains, "there is simply not enough in educational or news-based programming to make subscription companies produce much in these areas as a broadcaster whose entire remit is to produce shows for all." Here a strong case is made for the importance of universality, which underpins the BBC's purpose of reflecting and serving the diverse communities of all the UK's regions and supporting the creative economy in all parts of the UK.²⁶

As Sir Lenny Henry has recently stated in a *Times* interview in response to the BBC's recent decision to move CBBC away from television to a "digital-first" service, such a move would make it more difficult for children to discover stories that reflect their lives. According to Henry, "It is a mistake to shove CBBC to one side and have this thing that is online. Where is kids' drama going to be, where are kids going to see themselves? If you can't see it, you can't be it."²⁷ Incongruously, the BBC decided in 2022 to bring back its youth television channel, BBC 3, precisely to engage younger audiences (under 30s) and ITV launched ITVX in early 2023 to do much the same.

From our broad discussion of the ongoing value of PSB for UK children, we turn our focus to a timeline

²² House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital: First Report of Session 2019. (2019) "Public Service Broadcasting: As Vital as Ever." <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201919/ldselect/ldcomuni/16/16.pdf>

²³ Rosen, M. (2021) <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>, p. 9.

²⁴ Martinson, J. (2022) Only the BBC would take on teaching our kids in a crisis. That's its point.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/29/only-bbc-would-take-on-teaching-kids-in-crisis-thats-its-point>

²⁵ Ofcom (2019) Media Nations: UK 2019. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/160714/media-nations-2019-uk-report.pdf, p. 12.

²⁶ BBC Mission, Values and Public Purposes (2023) <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/mission>

²⁷ The Times (2022) "BBC 'Wrong' to Push Children's Channel CBBC off TV," (30 May). https://apple.news/A_s2WDZcwTwq8Zu7WkGs0IQ

charting what countless commentators have seen but perhaps not fully appreciated as the shape of a gradual decline of children's public service content provision. The erosion started with changes at the BBC from the 1990s, followed by the deregulatory 2003 Communications Act. Many regarded it as a disheartening watershed moment that was followed by a sharp decrease in output for many children's PSBs, to the recent announcement by BBC DG Tim Davie in May 2022 that by 2025 CBBC, would be provided online-only, heralding in a "digital-first" ethos²⁸, a move followed by ITV in March 2023 announcing the closure of the CITV television channel and launch of online-only provision CITVX Kids due for the autumn 2023.

In the next section, we survey the regulatory and industry context of children's public service content provision over the past few decades to provide a contextual foundation that may help to deepen understanding of the issues faced by PSBs, and to inform future policymaking.

Public service content provision across the past 30 years – a regulatory and industry context

The following timeline charts over the past few decades, changes in children's content creation and delivery, policymaking and regulation of children's media. Each step has led to what most public service content supporters believe to be a decline in the sector but also, we would argue, a diminution of the basic principles of public service media for the child audience in ways that suggest what is relevant to adult provision is less important for children.

1990s – 2002

Expanding children's content provision

- This period saw a growth in children's public service provision. At the BBC, this resulted in expansion from a Children's Department into Children's BBC (2002). Initially, programming went out mainly on BBC1 and BBC2. With the launch of dedicated digital channels CBeebies and CBBC also in 2002, over the following years, children's provision became increasingly segregated from the BBC's linear provision. Before long, audience figures began to fall, particularly for programmes such as *Newsround*, which raised concerns around the issues of accessibility and discoverability of content amongst media critics.²⁹
- Although ITV provided (mostly bought-in) content for children and families from its launch in 1955, it wasn't until 1983 that Children's ITV was launched, as a late afternoon programming block on ITV for children aged 5-13. In 1993 it is rebranded as CITV.³⁰ While ITV has public service requirements, CITV does not, although it does produce/commission some public service content. By 2001, CITV's budget was cut due to falling advertising revenue and production was further cut in 2002, resulting in a sharp reduction in commissioning new content.

²⁸ Waterson, J. (2022) BBC preparing to go online-only over next decade, says director general. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/dec/07/bbc-will-go-online-only-by-2030s-says-director-general>

²⁹ Tobitt, C. (2020) BBC to cut Newsround bulletins after Ofcom says it can move focus online. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/bbc-to-cut-newsround-bulletins-to-move-focus-online/>

³⁰ CITV.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CITV#:~:text=Children's%20ITV%20launched%20on%203.vision%20continuity%20links%20between%20programmes>

2003

Communications Act 2003³¹

- Deregulation of public service provision – The *Communications Act* removed origination quotas for commercial children's media providers. This substantially reduced, what many children's media commentators claimed, had been a "rich, varied diet of linear TV" of previous commercial content providers, leaving children "binge-watching endless hours of repeats and imports".³²
- Ofcom was given responsibility to promote and monitor media literacy of adults and children. However, from 2010 there began to be less emphasis placed on practical initiatives around media and digital literacy. A national plan to improve digital literacy for adults and children was cancelled, curtailing Ofcom's activities in its promotion.³³ Greater emphasis on media literacy returned after rising concerns around "fake news" some years later.

2006

Declining children's content provision

- Restrictions on advertising foods high in fat, sugar and salt were put in place. This led to further reductions in children's content, especially at CITV, who blamed commissioning and production cuts on loss of advertising revenue.
- ITV – The CITV dedicated children's channel launched on Freeview, Home Choice, Telewest and Sky. However, by mid-year it shut its in-house children's production unit "ITV Productions Kids" blaming a competitive production environment. After this closure, most of its content consisted of archive programming. It commissioned very few new independently produced children's programmes between 2006 and 2011.³⁴
- The BBC became the dominant commissioner of children's PSB content, with a strategy of "fewer, bigger, better." Critics argued this approach did not allow the BBC to cater for diverse child audiences. Although in its Creative Future strategy Director General Mark Thompson pledged to create new teen brand content across genres, it was to consist mainly of programming already offered by digital television channels BBC3 and CBBC.³⁵

³¹ Communications Act 2003. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/contents>

³² Kirkham, J. (2022) Ten years keeping on keeping on. <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/yearbook-2022>, p 42.

³³ Livingstone, S. and Wang, Y. (2011) Media Literacy and the Communications Act. What has Been Achieved and What Should be Done? <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/221027.pdf>

³⁴ Ofcom (2013) Public Service Broadcasting Report 2013: Annex. Information Pack F: Children's Report. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/69522/children.pdf

³⁵ Dowell, B. (2006) BBC Creative Future: the key points. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/apr/25/broadcasting.newmedia>

2007

- Ofcom published *The Future of Children's Television*³⁶ highlighting the severe market pressures facing children's CPSBs, pessimistically noting that critics were questioning whether they can survive into the future. Further noted is Ofcom's lack of regulatory powers needed to safeguard children's content. Older children, in particular, started to abandon the BBC, initially for various commercial television providers and then increasingly online. Since then, public service content providers have struggled to win back young audiences, especially teens.³⁷

2009

- CITV Channel relaunched, with limited funding for UK originated programming, particularly live action content. Controller Emma Tennant announced at the children's media industry conference, "Showcomotion," that "the commissioning budgets for all channels next year are going to be smaller, except CITV, which is growing – but it will not necessarily spend the additional money on original commissions... it may just lead to more acquisitions rather than new programmes being commissioned."³⁸

2011

- CMF help set up the **All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Children's Media and the Arts** to "raise awareness of the issues around children's media and arts within a wide cultural, social and educational context, and support the provision of both specified in Articles 17 and 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child". The central aim of the APPG has been to provide information about the fast-moving world of children's media and cultural activity to members of both Houses, with the aim of enriching policy formation. Since its inception it has championed children's public service content provision.³⁹

2013

- **Ofcom – PSB Report – included Annex "Children's Report"** which outlined the decline of original television production, across all children's content providers, but especially ITV which had been cut by almost two-thirds (60%). Total hours on the five main PSBs were about to decline, and first-run originations halved. While total hours on commercial children's channels increased, most was archived and repeat content.⁴⁰

2017

- Ofcom – Government gave new powers to Ofcom, via an amendment to the Digital Economy Act, to regulate the three CPSBs to provide more content for children and teens and regulatory oversight of the BBC.
- Ofcom *Children's Content Review* report identified issues around falling expenditure and originations

³⁶ Ofcom (2007) The Future of Children's Television Programming. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/consultations-and-statements/category-1/kidstv>

³⁷ Children's Media Foundation (2021) Children's Media Foundation Response to BBC Public Interest Test Consultation. <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/BBC-Three-Consultation-response-final.pdf>

³⁸ Rushton, K. (2009) CITV Bucks Trend to Grow Budget. <https://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/city-bucks-trend-to-grow-budget/5003131.article>

³⁹ Children's Media Foundation (2023) "APPG. About Us." <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/about-us/appg>

⁴⁰ Ofcom (2013) Public Service Broadcasting Report 2013: Annex. Information Pack F: Children's Report. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/69522/children.pdf

of public service programming, and a lack of content that reflected the diversity of children's lives.⁴¹ The regulator considered how it might use new powers set out in the Digital Economy Act 2017 to "publish criteria for the provision of children's programming and, if appropriate, to set related conditions (e.g. quotas) on the licensed public service channels (Channel 3 services, Channel 4 and Channel 5)." The Review's authors concluded that rather than insist on clear provision, it would instead monitor the implementation of the CPSBs' plans without setting specific conditions.

2019

- Merger of BBC Children's and Education departments
- **BFI's Young Audiences Content Fund** - UK government initiative run by the BFI providing £44.1 for a three year pilot funding scheme to support children's public service content creation by CPSB (Channel 4, Channel 5, ITV, S4C and BBC Alba). Lead to the creation of 61 new commissions for children and teens (over 250 hours of content), and development of an additional 160 new projects, 9% of which were commissioned by the time the scheme shut in February 2022. An independent evaluation of the fund published in December 2022 concluded that "it demonstrated social and economic value, delivering high quality public service content across genres, increasing media plurality and content investment for young audiences.⁴² It also addressed concerns raised by Ofcom's *Children's Content Review* (2017) around programme quality, originality and range, especially around helping children understand the world and enabling children to see their lives reflected on screen.⁴³
- Ofcom **Newsround** Consultation – Ofcom agreed in advance of the consultation to allow the BBC to reduce CBBC originations from 400 to 350 hours and *Newsround* broadcast originations from 85 to 35 hours so the BBC could increase online provision. Public responses suggest the proposed changes were hasty and under-researched – there was no guarantee they would work or provide viable online news since the BBC did not provide a discernible online distribution strategy. Additionally, some argued, children were not sufficiently consulted on the changes. Public submissions tended to agree that before allowing the BBC to reduce *Newsround's* first-run hours it should be obliged to demonstrate how and where the hours would be made up in news content or other forms of public service content. Steemers, Carter and Messenger Davies (2019) further suggested that "There should be quantitative quotas on online provision of news as a guarantee that the BBC will fulfil its remit" ⁴⁴ Ofcom accepted *Newsround's* request but the BBC delayed implementation to late 2021 due to lockdowns when *Newsround* increased its presence on television ⁴⁵ and online ⁴⁶ to provide additional information to help children and their families through the pandemic.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Steemers, J. (2022) "Continuing Failures on Policy Around Children's Screen Content: Demise of the Young Audiences Content Fund and the BBC's Strategy for Children's Consent." <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/yearbook-2022>, p 12

⁴² For a discussion of the public value as a strategic concept, see Chivers, T. and Allan, S. (2022) "What is the Public Value of Public Service Broadcasting? Exploring Challenges and Opportunities in Evolving Media Contexts." Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre and Cardiff University. <https://pec.ac.uk/discussion-papers/what-is-the-public-value-of-public-service-broadcasting>

⁴³ BFI (2022) Young Audiences Content Fund: An Independent Evaluation of the Fund. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/get-funding-support/create-films-tv-or-new-formats-storytelling/young-audiences-content-fund>

⁴⁴ Steemers, J., Carter, C. and Messenger Davies, M. (2019) Response to Ofcom Consultation on BBC Children's News and First-run UK Originations and the BBC's Request to Change its Operating Licence. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0036/189396/steemers-carter-messenger.pdf

⁴⁵ Cremona, P. (2020) <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/current-affairs/newsround-team-coronavirus-lockdown/>

⁴⁶ Ofcom Annual Report on the BBC 2020-2021 (2021) https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0029/228548/fourth-bbc-annual-report.pdf, p. 40

⁴⁷ OfCom Children's Media Lives: Life in Lockdown (2020) <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/childrens-media-lives>

2020

- **Newsround** evening television bulletin was axed after 48 years of broadcasting. Provision was reduced to one television bulletin per day in the morning – repeated online thereafter. *Newsround* producers claimed children want news, but in a different format. Instead of directly appealing to them via the television bulletin, the single morning edition bulletin was aimed at teachers to use in classrooms, supported by an enhanced website with teacher resources.⁴⁸ Critics expressed concern this move de-emphasised the importance of prominent, discoverable, platform-neutral access to public service news content for children.⁴⁹

2021

- **Small Screen, Big Debate**⁵⁰ - Children's content was infrequently mentioned in this Ofcom consultation document on the future of public service media in the UK and was rarely a focus of Ofcom public events leading up to it. Critics suggest this allowed public service content providers to determine what should be provided, with few opportunities for Ofcom to determine what that is, how it is defined in the public interest, and what it encompasses in a rapidly changed landscape of different types of content delivered in a range of ways including by algorithmic mechanisms. In writing their own annual statements and setting the terms of how they are judged there is a risk that accountability to the public is undermined.⁵¹
- Newly appointed Children's Commissioner for England announced in March, "society and political structures often short-change children." The long-term impact for children and public service media would only be known in years to come, if they fail to engage younger audiences now, who are the public service content users of the future (Steemers 2021)?⁵²
- Publication of the Children's Media Foundation report ***Our Children's Future: Do Public Service Media Matter?*** assessing, amongst other concerns, the impact of Covid-19 on children's lives and media consumption in light of the importance of media during lockdowns and their aftermath. Almost 30 contributors from public and private media, academics, politicians, journalists, and authors concluded public service media is now more important than ever in children's lives, when there is a great need to come together around shared values and responses to social, economic and personal challenges.
- There was a sense of urgency around the need for a wide range of stakeholders to come together to coordinate efforts to children and young people.

2022

- Ofcom consultation – **Original Productions on CBBC – Request to Change Operating Licence – CBBC** sought approval to increase animation, alongside a request to decrease quotas on transmissions of children's original content. Criticisms were raised around why these changes were

⁴⁸ BBC Children's (2019) BBC Children's Request for Changes to Ofcom's Operating Licence.

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/178159/annex-8-bbc-request-for-changes-to-operating-licence.pdf

⁴⁹ Steemers, J. (2021) "Policy, Production and Public Service in the UK – Taking Children Seriously."

<https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>

⁵⁰ Ofcom (2021) Small Screen: Big Debate. The debate on the future of public service broadcasting and media in the UK.

<https://www.smallscreenbigdebate.co.uk/>

⁵¹ Steemers, J. (2021) "Policy, Production and Public Service in the UK – Taking Children Seriously."

<https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>

⁵² Steemers, J. (2021) Response to consultation. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/218481/steemers-j.pdf

needed. The purpose, some commentators suggested, seemed to be to free up space and resources in the CBBC schedule to acquire animation (possibly non-UK) while the BBC develops more animation series of its own. There were concerns raised that this might undermine CBBC's distinctiveness from commercial competitors and in terms of the diversity and range of its content. Critics suggested there was no guarantee this change would strengthen the appeal of CBBC as the BBC claims.⁵³

- White Paper *Up next* – the government's vision for the broadcasting sector.⁵⁴ In this document, there was little mention of children. Brief mentions included: 1) a headline noting that BBC Education provided home schooling for children when they were unable to go to school during Covid lockdowns; 2) a short comment on the YACF three-year pilot scheme and ongoing evaluation of its value to support the creation of high quality UK-produced public service content; and 3) a passing reference to the government's intention to restrict advertising of unhealthy foods in order to tackle child obesity.
- The BBC merged its Children's department with BBC Studios, a commercial subsidiary of the BBC Group (with profits of £226 million on sales of £1.6 billion in 2021/2022), to create the new, commercially oriented division "BBC Studios Kids & Family." The unit would focus on content "designed to drive an ambitious global strategy to increase the reach of in-house hits, develop new global brands and grow the value provided to younger audiences."⁵⁵
- BBC DG Tim Davie announced a "digital-first" policy for CBBC, suggesting the channel may close and its content moved to the iPlayer in a few years' time. Critics have indicated the move "raises serious questions about universal free access for all audiences and the danger of a greater 'digital divide', if growing numbers of children and families can't afford broadband, and therefore access to BBC services, alongside heating and food."⁵⁶ Some have submitted that whilst the move to digital is understandable given that young audiences have been moving to on-demand services, the iPlayer "isn't a natural destination for children and its child-friendly features were all abandoned some time ago as being too costly."⁵⁷ Others have noted how moving children's content online-only may undermine the BBC's ideal of universal access for all. Still others have expressed a wider concern that cuts to CBBC's broadcast hours in favour of digital first delivery may be "the first indication of the public service broadcaster shrinking and taking a smaller position in our national landscape" and that it undermines the Corporation's ideal of universal access.⁵⁸

2023

- **Media Bill – Policy Background** document published (28th February). This government briefing document is included in our overview as it provides a clear indication of the government's current thinking around media and the relative absence of engagement around children's public service media. Specifically, there are only three brief references to children and young people. They are: 1) to reaffirm "PSB statutory purposes and obligations"; 2) to confirm the requirement for a suitable

⁵³ Steemers, J. and Carter, C. (2022) Response to Ofcom's 'Consultation: Original Productions on CBBC – Request to Change the Operating Licence.' https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0034/237769/steemers-j-carter-c.pdf

⁵⁴ DCMS (2022) Up next – the government's vision for the broadcasting sector. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/up-next-the-governments-vision-for-the-broadcasting-sector>

⁵⁵ BBC (2022) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/bbcstudios/2022/bbc-studios-kids-and-family-division-opens-for-business>

⁵⁶ Steemers, J. (2022). (2022) <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/yearbook-2022>, p. 49.

⁵⁷ Home, A. (2022). "Yearbook 2022: Industry Under Pressure – Audience Under Threat."

<https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/yearbook-2022>

⁵⁸ Bryan, S. (2022) <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv/2022/05/why-a-digital-first-bbc-should-worry-us-all-cbbc-shutdown>

quantity and range of high-quality and original programmes for children and young people; 3) to reiterate Channel 4's obligation to "provide content which appeals to older children and young adults."⁵⁹ The Bill has been delayed, with no set date to table it yet announced.

- 10th March. ITV announced its intention to shut down CITV in the autumn of 2023 to be replaced by online-only ITVX Kids "with more content than ever before, across a range of titles appealing to both school age and pre-school children."⁶⁰ Critics noted the shift toward a streaming-first model may be welcomed by many children and young people who are amongst the biggest users of SVODs, but raised concerns ITV has "few plans to spend money producing original programmes for British children, regardless of where they appear."⁶¹

The above timeline, although not exhaustive, nevertheless provides context for thinking through some of the main challenges the children's public service media sector has faced across several decades, what they are contending with today and likely to confront in the coming years. The aim of this overview has been to provide a wide picture of the children's PSB sector to enable children's media advocates to facilitate innovative solutions to pressures experienced by public service content providers. Specifically, the timeline demonstrates how key issues and debates tend to be perennial, recurrently revolving around topics such as the commercialisation and homogenisation of content; undermining the public service ethos to inform, educate and entertain and its related purposes and values; concerns around discoverability, prominence and "service neutral" delivery and regulation; and the politicisation of children's media.

In the next section, we examine seven challenges for policymaking around PSB and how they are being addressed by children's public service media advocates.

Current challenges in policymaking

In the absence of concerted, joined up discussions around policy formation and the delivery of children's public service content, there is a risk, some suggest, of losing sight of both the longstanding commitment to child audiences and challenges in providing this content for them.⁶² The following outlines some of the key issues for policymakers to consider going forward.

1. Increasing commercialisation and homogenisation of children's media content

Critics of commercial content for children tend to assume if it is made for profit that it is automatically of lower quality and cultural value than public service content. However, there are numerous examples which challenge this assumption (e.g., Teletubbies; Peppa Pig). Nevertheless, there are growing concerns about the ways in which an increasingly commercial ethos is shaping children's media production. Various children's media academics, public service media non-profit advocates such as the CMF and the APPG for Children's Media and the Arts have argued there is a growing homogeneity in content available to children in the UK, which is a by-product of an industry that has become increasingly focused on attracting advertising revenue in global media markets. Concerns around these issues, some suggest, might be best addressed by

⁵⁹ Media Bill: Policy Background. House of Commons Library, UK Parliament. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9571/>

⁶⁰ ITVX (2023) "ITV announces closure of CITV in favour of streaming-only children's content." <https://www.itv.com/news/2023-03-10/itv-announces-closure-of-citv-in-favour-of-streaming-only-childrens-content>

⁶¹ Waterson, J. (2023) "CITV channel to close as ITV makes most of children's shows online-only." <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/mar/10/citv-channel-to-close-itv-childrens-television-online-only>

⁶² Children's Media Foundation, BBC @ the APPG (2023). Email newsletter. info@thechildrensmediafoundation.org

attracting sufficient investor capital to encourage and support the production of the highest quality content, across genres live-action and animation.

2. The public service ethos to inform, educate and entertain is under pressure

Children are the future and what they see, hear and experience in the media that adults produce for them will play an important role in shaping who they become as adults. Unlike commercial children's media producers, public service media are statutorily bound to provide a wide range of content that informs, educates, and entertains, reflecting the diversity of modern British life. As such, public service media play a vital role teaching children about themselves and their communities, local, regional, national, and international. In so doing, they support children's social inclusion, resilience, and bonds of citizenship. In a rapidly changing media ecology, with a growing volume of digital and commercially produced content increasingly made for and aimed at global audiences, as a nation we now face a growing set of challenges around the provision of content and experiences that reflect the lived realities of children growing up in the UK today.

In 2021, Director of BBC Children's and Education, Patricia Hidalgo, suggested this challenge might be addressed by injecting more funding into UK animation to attract audiences back to the BBC and other CPSBs from Netflix and Disney. UK children's media producers, she insisted, should be directed to include "more identifiably British moments" as part of the BBC's greater investment in the UK animation sector. However, critics have suggested it is unlikely such content would fully reflect the diversity of life in the UK since the UK animation industry would remain globally oriented, even if there was a nod to inclusion of specific cultural references, such as substituting "roast beef" for turkey as part of a celebration meal⁶³.

3. Discoverability, prominence and "service neutral" delivery and regulation

Steemers (2021) argues policy needs to focus on "where young people access media, making sure there is space for non-commercial content and experiences that are inclusive, diverse and which don't marginalise children in hard-to-reach minority or poorer communities."⁶⁴ Public service content should be located on both public service and commercial platforms, and content must be where it is easily and regularly accessed by children.⁶⁵ Such content also needs to be "accessible in a platform-neutral way on-demand and online so that all children can access it."⁶⁶

4. Media policy without children

Commentators often point out that despite a plethora of policies tabled over the past decade or so, including, most recently, Ofcom's Small Screen: Big Debate review of public service media (2021) and the white paper on broadcasting "Up Next" (2023), there are few references to children's media content and environments and even fewer include the views and voices of children themselves.

The Online Safety Bill currently going through parliament mentions children over 400 times, but almost entirely in terms of measures to be put into place to undertake risk assessments around content that may be harmful to them as well as adult duties of care and mitigation to protect children's online safety.⁶⁷ Although human rights are mentioned throughout this document (in relation to the Human Rights Act 1998),

⁶³ Moore, M. "That's all folks? BBC takes aim at children's cartoons." <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/thats-all-folks-bbc-takes-aim-at-us-childrens-cartoons-73ddztwpp>

⁶⁴ Steemers, J. (2021) <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>, p. 16.

⁶⁵ Sambrook, R. (2019). "The Challenge of Engaging Young Audiences." <https://pec.ac.uk/blog/the-challenge-of-engaging-young-audiences>. <https://pec.ac.uk/blog/the-challenge-of-engaging-young-audiences>

⁶⁶ Steemers, J. (2021) Our Children's Future: Does Public Service Media Matter? C. Ward (ed). London: The Children's Media Foundation. <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>, p. 14

⁶⁷ UK Parliament (2023) Online Safety Bill. <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/49376/documents/2822>

none relates specifically to children or, indeed, to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) or the more recent UN General Comment 25 (2021) on children's digital rights.

5. Children's CPSB content funding

The three-year contestable funding (YACF) scheme proved to be successful in supporting the creation of public service content and growing the CPSB sector. Its closure in early 2022 by then Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries, without discussion of a possible extension and no further funding after February, was greeted unfavourably by CPSBs and by children's media industry advocates such as the CMF. Most of the CPSBs saw significant benefits from the Fund's support to develop new public service content partnerships, networks and projects.⁶⁸

In an APPG Children's Media and the Arts meeting held at the House of Lords on 27 February 2023, Hidalgo repeated her commitment to public service media content, this time arguing for tax incentives that would be tied to quotas to support the creation of British content across children's public service media.⁶⁹ Specifically, she suggested a three-point plan: 1) An increase in the animation and children's television tax incentives to replace lost funding; 2) tax incentives could potentially be higher if projects passed a UK cultural relevance test; and, 3) prominence for public service providers on new platforms – the sort of advantage granted to PSBs on the cable or satellite Electronic Programme Guide. However, some producers at the meeting had “reservations about the viability of achieving a tax-break increase and the lack of basic funding to get projects off the ground in the first place. But there was a strong sense that the industry needs to pull together.”⁷⁰

6. The politicisation of children's media

According to Baroness Floella Benjamin, House of Lords, and Julie Elliott, MP, Co-Chairs of the APPG Children's Media and the Arts, public service media's role as a national societal service has become a party-political football.⁷¹ In their view, there is a need to set party-politics aside in order to establish coordinated responses to the challenges faced by children's media producers and to re-commit to valuing public service media in ways that address a rapidly changing media environment.

7. Public purposes and values: public service media for all

As is evident from the above, issues and debates around effective policymaking and regulation to ensure public service media are reaching out and connecting with child audiences have a long history. Ofcom's last Annual Report on the BBC (2022), for instance, found that adults and children in lower income groups, constituting approximately one quarter of the UK population, are less engaged and the least satisfied with how their lives are represented in its content. In March 2023 Ofcom announced it would undertake a BBC audience review, to be published in autumn 2023, to better understand this finding.⁷² Whilst there are likely to be numerous reasons, past academic research on child audiences indicates it is not only a failure to authentically portray lower socio-economic groups that is at issue, it also comes down to presumptions made about children as “digital natives,” their access to digital platforms, their preferred media genre (animation), less interest in educational content, and so forth.

⁶⁸ Layton, M. (2022) “UK Government axes Young Audiences Content Fund.” <https://tbivision.com/2022/01/24/uk-government-axes-young-audiences-content-fund/>

⁶⁹ House of Lords, APPG Children's Media and the Arts meeting, 27 February (Minutes not yet posted – comments come from Carter's personal participation at the meeting)

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Benjamin, F. and Elliott, J. (2021) *Our Children's Future: Does Public Service Media Matter?* C. Ward (ed). London: The Children's Media Foundation. <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>, p. 6.

⁷² Ofcom (2022). “Ofcom's Annual Report on the BBC.” <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/information-for-industry/bbc-operating-framework/performance/bbc-annual-report>

With this context in mind, in the final section of this paper, we outline six key points for discussion around the ongoing public purposes of public service media content for children, starting with universal provision; the importance of children's news; the role of public service oriented provision of complementary education for children; building and valuing children's civic cultures and identities; broadening children's international horizons; strengthening regulatory oversight and policy frameworks.

Our aim with this paper is to provide a focused understanding of past successes and failures around children's PSB provision, and how we can learn from them in order to create long-term solutions called for by Anna Home (2021).⁷³ As Home (2023) stated in the recent APPG meeting mentioned above, today's discussions amongst key stakeholders, many of whom were represented at the event, have not substantially moved on over the past two decades. What is needed, in her view, is more radical thinking and agreement to speak with one voice in the interests of children across the UK, from all backgrounds and in all their diversity. Until then, we will keep returning to the same issues and challenges without a set of practical solutions to address them.

So, what might those long-term solutions be? In the next section we look at key points for discussion and action for policymakers going forward.

Key points for discussion and action

The following are not new points of discussion and possible action, but we suggest that each should place children at the centre of future discussion and, ideally, directly or indirectly involve them in ongoing public debates, policymaking recommendations and subsequent actions.

1. **There is a need for high quality, engaging content that is accessible and prominently placed for discoverability by all** (rethink 'digital-first' as a blanket policy). This is linked to the imperative to tackle ongoing issues around economic and social inequalities of access to public service media content. Should Ofcom regulate to ensure content is both accessible to all and easily found/prominently featured on broadcast media and online?
2. **Funding** -- Children's public service content needs to build on successes and lessons of the YACF to come up with ways to financially support CSPBs. Discussions about funding should involve ongoing consultation and engagement with representatives of the children's media industry and, where possible, with children (again, especially in content creation) to generate a range of initiatives. For CPSBs, it has long been argued there is a need for greater tax incentives for the creation of first-run originated British content provided in conjunction with the use of a quota system. It is therefore notable that on 15th March 2023 the Spring Budget statement laid out a range of tax reforms to complement plans announced in November 2022 around the provision of audio-visual tax relief to support film, high end TV, animation, children's television and video games, in the form of refundable expenditure credits (available to claim from 1 January 2024). The most generous credit rate was earmarked for animation and children's TV at 39%.⁷⁴ However, the Budget did not mention the use of quotas or the importance of discoverability and prominence to ensure at least some of the content

⁷³ Home, A. (2021) "Introduction." *Our Children's Future: Does Public Service Media Matter?* Children's Media Foundation, <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>, pp 7-8.

⁷⁴ British Film Institute (2023) "Budget 2023: UK Tax Reliefs to be Remodelled as Expenditure Credits." <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news/budget-2023-uk-tax-reliefs-be-remodelled-expenditure-credits>

reflects the diversity of British society and that children are able to find it. To address this gap, there are a number of funding models that have been adopted in other countries to support the creation of home grown content that might be adapted and used for future UK policymaking and funding initiatives.⁷⁵

3. Government should ensure **child audiences are at the centre of its policy formation**. If the provision of public service content for young audiences is important for the future of their civic belonging, what structures of responsibility need to be put into place to ensure their needs are at the heart of media policy formation? The example of children's input into the formation of policy is well illustrated by young people's recent participation in drafting the UN General Statement 25 on children's digital rights, as an amendment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In this process, a wide range of children and young people were consulted about their experiences of digital technology, how it is impacting their rights, and what action they want to see taken to protect them and their views.⁷⁶
4. **Media literacy** – There is an urgent need to extend Ofcom's statutory powers and responsibilities to enhance media/digital literacy. This might include government and industry supported initiatives in schools and through children's public service media. There is also a related requirement for deeper and sustained qualitative research with children to better understand, from their own points of view, what are some of the most pressing challenges they face engaging with media today (misinformation, disinformation, online safety, fraud, search engine manipulation, etc) to feed into policy formation and regulation.
5. **Children's media rights**/building partnerships with children. There should be greater emphasis on the importance of children learning about and engaging in UK culture in all its diversity. This would include content created by adults and content co-created by adults and children that reflects children's experiences. Such content would help to create a greater sense of children's civic inclusion and encourage active citizenship. A good example of this type of action was the BFI's "Seeing Yourself on Screen" competition which encouraged children and young people to come up with programme ideas that would represent the diversities of their lives, the best of which would be eligible for production funding from the YACF.
6. **Rethinking assumptions about the child audience** and what children want and have the right to expect of public service media. What adults think about children shapes what media content they think children want, what is appropriate, and where they access content. How many decisions have been made as a result that result in a failure to connect with child audiences? To what extent have assumptions made by a largely white, middle class, London-centric children's media industry about child audiences contributed to an erosion of children public service media?⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Steemers, J. and Awan, F. (2016) "Policy Solutions and International Perspectives on the Funding of Public Service Media Content for Children: A Report for Stakeholders." Communications and Media Research Institute, University of Westminster. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/76b369e2f3c7969f50666facdd3e79664e17bbb26584ae12cbeede85345bbcad/1478454/1.%20UoW%20final%2014%20June.pdf

⁷⁶ An example of the participation of children and young people in policy planning and formation is a consultation with over 700 children and young people worldwide to ensure their views were central to the General Comment 25 on digital rights, an amendment to the UN UN Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrining into law children's rights in the digital world.(2021) <https://5rightsfoundation.com/in-action/children-offer-their-views-for-general-comment-no--25-on-childrens-rights-in-relation-to-the-digital-environment.html>

⁷⁷ Ofcom (2022). "Ofcom's Annual Report on the BBC." <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/information-for-industry/bbc-operating-framework/performance/bbc-annual-report>

Back to the future for children's PSBs

Michael Rosen (2021) suggests that children are often treated by adults as if they are a minority group and therefore as an afterthought both in terms of the provision of media content and in media policymaking and regulation. As such, "they are often overlooked, marginalised or excluded from decisions even when those decisions affect them directly." Adults talk about what children need and want from the media, rarely "listening to them, or finding ways of expressing their needs, desires and imaginations." However, public service media are in a very special position to provide such opportunities for children, less encumbered by the pressures of most commercial providers. Rosen persuasively argues that "children are not in the waiting room of life; they are alive, thinking, reflecting, interpreting, re-imagining the world around them. Giving them a voice or seeking to meet those needs with high class, high production values is not necessarily profitable."⁷⁸

If there is insufficient attention paid to the bigger picture examining the current health of children's public service content creation, legislation, regulation and audience engagement, there is a risk, many children's media commentators now insist, of failing to foster in young people a sense of civic connection today, and for future generations of children in the UK. As Home (2021) suggests, the time for action is now, setting out a positive, forward looking future for children's public service media content provision.⁷⁹

To that end, the CMF announced in November 2022 its intention to launch, with other interested stakeholders, the **UK Children's Media Plan**⁸⁰ aiming to

"bring the industry and a wide range of public stakeholders together to research, model, develop strategic options needed to develop a robust and sustainable children's public service media sector in years to come. Without prejudging the issues, this may include measures such as tax credits and government funding, but may equally include regulation, co-operation, private investment and working with adjacent sectors such as education".⁸¹

Likewise, Steemers (2021) calls on government and regulatory bodies to look for solutions to the issues outlined in this paper, specifically those that "recognise that universal access to quality information and cultural experiences in new formats across multiple platforms is what makes the UK a functioning democracy." For this reason, both industry and society are responsible for finding such solutions. Important in this endeavour is the creation of support for "media literate young people [who] contribute to the future stability of a diverse and inclusive democracy, where public service media content and experiences enhance citizenship and active participation." To do so, she continues, "requires sustainable regulatory, financial and structural interventions in the digital sphere that allows children to benefit from their communication rights, rather than having those rights curtailed by lack of adult care and communication practices that undermine society."⁸²

According to Home (2021), in the past, an inability to sustain cooperation amongst supporters of children's public service media, despite sharing a unified sense of purpose, has resulted in a failure to take concerted action. At present, she suggests, "when there are enquiries and consultations about the future of children's media, we always seem to be chasing our tails, trying to catch up, tinkering with the past, defending the

⁷⁸ Rosen, M. (2021) Children's Media Foundation. "Our Children's Future: Does Public Service Media Matter?"

<https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>, p.9.

⁷⁹ Home, A. (2021) "Introduction." Our Children's Future: Does Public Service Media Matter? Children's Media Foundation.

<https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>, pp 7-8.

⁸⁰ Boardman, G. (2022). <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/archives/14427/the-uk-childrens-media-plan>

⁸¹ CMF/APPG Children's Media and the Arts Media Plan. (2022) <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/archives/14427/the-uk-childrens-media-plan>

⁸² Steemers, J. (2021) Children's Media Foundation Our Children's Future: Does Public Service Media Matter?

<https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>, p. 17.

status quo." Many children's media advocates suggest we are still reacting in this fashion, despite the experiences and lessons supposedly learned from Covid-19 where public service media, available free-to-air, played a crucial role in getting children through lockdowns. These experiences, Home concludes, have "made us stop, think and consider whether public service media for kids still really matters and if it does, do we have a unique opportunity to rethink the whole issue and plan a new and different future?"⁸³.

⁸³ Home, A. (2021) "Introduction" Our Children's Future: Does Public Service Media Matter? Children's Media Foundation. <https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Our-Childrens-Future-1.pdf>, p 7.