

## THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN'S MEDIA

Patricia Edgar and Barbara Biggins

In the lead up to the recent election John Howard committed \$82 million over 4 years to establish an ABC digital television children's channel. The new government's response is expected in the May budget. In the context of the education revolution we believe the ABC's proposal is an outmoded approach to the needs of children.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority's Report, *Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007*, released in December describes children's lives as 'media rich'. We have more televisions than people, and more mobile phones and portable video devices than televisions. Young people are leading the technological revolution in ways no one predicted, yet the role of content is ill-defined.

Computers are more than a new tool; they represent different ways of thinking which children relish. Media use is no longer simply a leisure activity; it is integral to children's lives and their education. So as ACMA conducts its review of the Children's Television Standards (CTS) there is an opportunity for Australia to catch up with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and harness the potential of new media for an education revolution. .

Stephen Conroy, the Minister for Communication's plans for broadband, his relationship with ACMA, the networks and media companies are as central to the education revolution as Julia Gillard's and Kevin Rudd's plans are for education reform. Kids should be encouraged to 'power up for school' and show their teachers what they are learning instinctively outside the classroom. Teachers in turn must train to provide the support and the scaffolding to help students learn with new media and direct their boundless creativity.

Australia was once a leader in the international children's media policy debate with our system of regulation and subsidy designed to serve the child audience. Back in the 70.s and 80's we first demonstrated we had the talent to produce exciting, innovative, distinctly Australian programs and earned Australia a reputation among the best television producers in the world. That era has come to an end; technological change requires a changed regulatory system. Today's children have a vastly expanded range of interests and skills, with access to media that has so much potential for their benefit. Yet we show few signs of using media in their interest.

With a new government in Canberra and a new vision for education we have a chance to establish a new direction.

Activists, health workers, educators and parents have been expressing concern about increasing commercial exploitation of children through the media which they see fuelling a rise in bullying and obesity; an obsession with appearance and fashion leading to depression, as children's images of themselves do not measure up to the media ideal. Young children are sexualized while they are fed banal programming between the many

advertisements. Parents have little chance to counter these influences in the face of skilled child and consumer psychologists who assist companies to market effectively to their kids.

In the UK – once the Mecca of quality programming for children - a damning report released in December leaves little doubt that the media is seen as the root cause of much of the damage being done to children. Ofcom, the Office of Communications, the UK regulator, banned junk food advertising in children's programs (August 2007) and on December 9<sup>th</sup> announced an inquiry into the possible harmful effects of advertising on children and the commercialization of childhood.

Ofcom is struggling to find a way to preserve quality children's television. In October 2007 the regulator published the most detailed analysis of British children's television ever undertaken. It found while there is more children's programming than ever before - 113,000 hours in 2006 - only 17 per cent of programs broadcast were from the UK and first release UK programming counted for only one per cent of total hours. 61% of programs broadcast in 2006 were cartoons, with the proportion of drama - once the flagship of the BBC - down to 12 per cent. Of the imported material 46% is American.

Ofcom acknowledges a market led approach has undermined children's programming and it is looking at ways of intervention. Most solutions will lie outside Ofcom's existing powers; it will need the government's backing, but practical action is the objective. This is a commendable approach in a time of crisis.

Can the same be said for ACMA which announced its long overdue review of the Children's Television Standards (CTS) in December 2005? The objective of the CTS has been to ensure that children have access to a variety of quality television programs made specifically for them. This principle must be retained, but the development of new media in recent years and the resulting social changes means a radical rethinking of the application of the CTS needs to occur. But this is not the plan.

ACMA has said it is limited by existing legislation. But if they are serious about finding solutions ACMA will, like Ofcom, need to step outside its brief to recommend to government what should be done.

It is clear from the ACMA discussion paper, issued in June 2007 that the drama quota - the lynchpin of television cultural policy for children - is not working. The quota was intended to bring Australian stories to Australian children and did for a time. Now, as in the UK, there is a very high quota of animation within the drama quota which undermines the cultural purpose. Many programs are shaped by overseas marketing needs and going to air when there are few children in the audience because the networks don't want children's programs interfering with their main game – targeting the mass audience.

One of the most contentious ideas put forward in the ACMA paper is a 'tradeable obligations scheme' which would allow a network to take on the programming obligations of another network to increase the amount of children's programming across a

broader number of hours in a day - in fact a dedicated children's television channel would fit well under the ACMA definition.

ACMA explores a scenario where the ABC (which is not regulated by ACMA) could take on the C (Children's) and P (Preschool) programming obligations from a commercial broadcaster, thereby allowing them to relinquish any obligation to transmit children's programs. If all three commercial networks went for this option, we would have a dedicated children's channel on the ABC. One has to wonder if this is not exactly what John Howard had in mind when he supported the ABC proposal. Did he want to relieve the commercial industry of the burdensome obligation of children's programs altogether?

It is not clear what would be shown on this proposed ABC Channel; public comments are confusing. The recently appointed head of children's programming at the ABC, Tim Brooke-Hunt, was given the opportunity to spell out his plans on ABC Radio National Dec 6. His response gave no vision for the future. He said the ABC had "enormous strength" in preschool programming and, that kids older than eight years, "did not find it so attractive to be watching the same channel as their little brothers and sisters who watched *Play School*". From that comment we might assume the channel would be aimed at 6-15 year olds.

The "major attraction of the new channel" Brooke-Hunt saw as "an ability to actually create a brand, a destination of choice, a very special place that kids can call their own". This is the kind of talk we have been hearing from *Nickelodeon* and *Disney* for more than a decade. How would this be achieved by the ABC? Brooke-Hunt intends "the Australian content to be what differentiates us from the competition".

This is a fanciful response. The amount of money suggested over four years - \$82 million - won't go far if expended on new quality programs, so this means the new channel will show many repeats and look very like the UK channels described by Ofcom. The library of available good Australian programming is very limited. And the record of support over the past 15 years from the ABC for that programming was poor.

Inevitably the majority of programming hours on such a channel will still be for the preschool market. They are the only children in the audience from 8.30 am to 4.0 pm five days a week and as Brooke-Hunt says they are already well catered for – although certainly not with many programs worth watching.

Mark Scott, the ABC Managing Director, said recently (SMH December 8) he "would not compromise the public broadcaster with advertising". But children's programming has been compromised on the ABC for the last 15 years. The program is the advertisement for the merchandise that ABC Enterprises sells in ABC shops and promotes on air to parents and children. *Play School*, *Bananas in Pyjamas*, and the overseas programs designed to accompany character-based merchandise are exploited by the ABC for revenue. That is the business model on which the ABC now depends.

When asked to explain his view on cross-platform programming Brooke-Hunt responded such programming was to allow today's kids “to engage with the characters and the programs on a variety of screens”. So it seems the new technology will become simply another vehicle to promote the same characters and the same merchandise for programs already on television.

There are rare examples of genuinely new approaches to children’s television shown on the ABC or anywhere else on television in Australia and it is unlikely we will see them. Broadcast television will not become the engine for renewal of the creative children’s sector as producers comfortable in the old system will not be taking risks. And Brooke Hunt plans to look after them. In the Sydney Morning Herald on Dec 6<sup>th</sup>, he said “marketing is a necessary aspect of the most successful shows so that producers can recoup some of the investment broadcasters make in them”- an approach that does not apply to most adult programs.

The case to justify regulation and subsidy of children's programming in Australia was always based around the need to serve the child audience, not producers. The attitude that the system is there for the benefit of the producer, now so deeply embedded in the children’s production and the broadcasting industry, has contributed to the crisis for children now being soundly recognized in the UK. Producers and broadcasters should be required to reaffirm the ideals and principles we began with 30 years ago.

In the new media world 90 percent of Australian families have internet access and many kids prefer to engage with interactive technology, gaming, chat rooms, instant messaging and the joys of online content they create themselves rather than simply watch television. They are consumed by their mobile phones, Ipods and the internet. For children in the middle years television is still important but it is often background noise while they play on their Nintendo DS or with other electronic gadgets which they reach for in the morning and take to bed at night. Yet we neglect the educational potential these media offer and allow the hucksters almost free rein.

The Rudd government plans a major investment in the education of children. A media future for Australian children relevant to their needs and interests should be an essential part of that education revolution. We need to rethink literacy and learning and create new television and online programs which demonstrably support children's social, emotional, intellectual and physical well-being. They can still be fun and entertaining. An ABC digital television channel is yesterday’s model which will contribute little to this process.

We need an innovative multi-platform service to deliver children's programs; a values-driven service whose mission to inspire learning is as great as its mission to entertain. Delivered via broadband this service should empower children with opportunities to access, manipulate, create and share multimedia content that meets their needs and reflects their interests. Children will become producers and partners of this service, not just its consumers. Through a mixed economy model which blends public and private support, the service should protect children from purely commercial interests and the

values that come with them. Rather than relying on old advertising models pushing product to children, ethical advertisers could be invited to be partners.

There will still need to be a subsidised, contestable fund for Australian dramas and programs produced by professionals as part of the mix. Broadcasters who've never accepted responsibility for children's programming could relinquish their programming role but only if they are levied to support a well-financed development and production fund which would fulfil their responsibilities to the child audience as holders of licences in public trust. The ACTF (which supports the digital channel) can give the programs that are worth viewing from its catalogue to this new venture; they were all made with public funds.

Any consideration of this new service, whatever it is and how ever it is funded, will need real input from the whole children's sector, education certainly and the children themselves. The media industry will try to channel reform into a new way of protecting old interests to do old things - the ABC channel typifies this. A new service should have a global reach and extend to partnerships in different countries. There are opportunities here to reach children; to teach; to inspire, to lead and for them to participate.

The free market has demonstrated its amoral base and we fail children if we do not intervene to stop the excesses and to provide them with programming that nurtures their development and their brain power. No education revolution can succeed ultimately unless it encompasses all the media that dominate children's lives, in its plan.

Patricia Edgar and Barbara Biggins both served on the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's Children's Program Committee. Patricia was founding Director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation and Barbara a former President of the Australian Council on Children and the Media.