‘Media for children, to be truly public service, should be about them, with them and to an extent by them’: A Conversation with Greg Childs

The following is a summary of a conversation between Greg Childs OBE, Director of the *Children’s Media Foundation* and Ashley Woodfall on 15 March 2024, in which they talked about public service media for children, past, present and possible futures, and its value to children and society.

Greg Childs worked for over 25 years at the BBC, mainly as a director, producer and executive producer of children’s programmes. He created the first Children’s BBC websites, and developed and launched the CBBC and CBeebies channels. After leaving the BBC Greg has gone on to advise broadcasters on channel launches, digital futures and operational management, and producers on digital, interactive and cross-platform strategies. Greg also consulted for the European Broadcasting Union on their Children’s and Youth strategy, spent 15 years as one of the Heads of Study for the German Akademie für Kindermedien and acts as the Editorial Director of the annual Children’s Media Conference.

Ashley Woodfall

Hi Greg, thank you for taking the time to talk with us. Can you talk us through your background within public service media for children, through to what you're involved with now?

Greg Childs

I'm the director of the Children's Media Foundation, and I have a second job as the Editorial Director of the Children's Media Conference. There are two separate organisations, but interrelated, partly because I, and many other people, are involved in both. I came to children's media by accident right at the very beginning of my career. Working my way through various opportunities in the BBC, in a time when there were many opportunities, and you could move around and learn on the job. I got an opportunity to learn how to direct children's programmes through what was called the attachment system. So I had an attachment as an Assistant Producer, and I loved it, and I fell in love with the audience. I was very lucky because I worked on *Play School* (1964-88) in those heady days when there was more time to do everything, and we were given a week in the five-week cycle of programme making to actually think about what we were going to do, and actually go out and watch the programmes transmitted with children. So we did our own basic research; we watched with families, we watched in nurseries and places like that, and it was the most rewarding part of the job, actually watching it go out, and learning from children what worked, what didn't work, what children took away and what they valued and how it affected them.

So I developed a strong sense of the power of what we do in the children's department at the BBC. And then I stayed in the BBC a very long time. As an Assistant Producer I directed various programmes. I then produced various programmes, including the long running *Record Breakers* (1972-2001) series. I went on to do things like launch the first websites for children’s. I launched the first unit in the BBC where web and television people worked really closely together and crossed over in their jobs. I launched all the programming to do with children for the new BBC digital channels,

BBC Choice and BBC Knowledge. And then I went on to launch the children's channels [CBBC and CBeebies] themselves. Since then I've worked as a consultant - I helped launch the CITV channel, I worked with Aljazeera Children's and many other organisations, like Disney and the Department for Education, on all sorts of innovative projects. But then I became more and more involved in the Children's Media Conference, and that has become sort of all consuming, and then around 2007 we launched a campaign called Save Kids TV, which morphed around 2011 into the Children's Media Foundation, a more permanent body, to look at the entire ecosystem that provides content to kids - looking at the content itself, but always from the audience perspective. So the foundation is not an industry body; it tries to represent the interests of the audience and tries to bring them the best media that there could possibly be, the best range of media, and also to uphold the importance of indigenous media - that's to say, British media for British kids. That always sounds like we're little Englanders, which I can't be, because I'm Welsh, and the Children's Media Foundation isn't, because what we're talking about is incredibly important - that children's media should offer understanding of the cultures within which children live, and how that can lead to social cohesion, better well-being and better personal connection amongst the young people who are watching.

Ashley Woodfall

Thanks Greg, you've touched on some key points that seem to lead us neatly into a question around what you see as the actual point of public service media for UK children?

Greg Childs

I think if you want the point of it from a child's perspective - and I really think that's very important - the point of it is, that it should in some way speak to you very personally. Public service media places itself in a world you understand, it shows you the world that you actually inhabit, both in reality and inside your head. So it's the internal voice of a child in the UK - of many different internal voices. What's also terribly important, again from the child's perspective, is that it has some meaning and value to them in the life stage that they're at. Public service media for children should be about what concerns them. So it's relevant, and it's appropriate - which means to say it doesn't present them with perspectives which are substantially adult. It presents them with a perspective which could be said to be their own. And it brings value to them. It helps them create meaning in life, and this is more important in children's media perhaps than it is in adult public service media - although that is also what the best adult public service media will do - it should connect you with the culture and the society in which you live. It helps you make meaning from that. It gives you some sense of purpose in in the viewing process. Without being heavy-handed, it can be entertaining, and nevertheless provide you with some sense of purpose that you take beyond the screen, which you take into your life. And obviously with children, that means that it has an educational aspect to much of it.
Public service media should help children to engage with society. Because without that, social cohesion can start to break down. It helps children understand the variety and the richness of UK cultures and that again feeds into that sense of social cohesion, because even through the display of difference, you can create cohesion. And what that does, is it also then provides for children's well-being, because people can connect with each other, and people can connect with the world around them. It helps children with their sense of wholeness.

The other thing that I think public service media should do, especially with young people, is give them a sense of agency. And that's really important for all children's media, whether it's supposedly

defined as public service or not, is that the content in some way gives kids a sense of agency, a sense of something beyond engagement. Something which suggests that the child has some power. They can act, can make change, can make a difference, can be listened to, can be heard. Perhaps media for children, to be truly public service, should be about them, with them and to an extent by them.

Ashley Woodfall

That is a really intriguing note. There's sometimes a performative end to offering agency for children. But children having a voice, even if it is partly contained, is incredibly important…

Greg Childs

I think there's an interesting thing here - which is given the way media is changing, given the way that social media recommendation systems, sharing, the building of friendships around sharing, and so on - are all sorts of fantastic opportunities within interactive media. We now have an opportunity to actually provide a greater sense of, not faux agency, but real agency.

Ashley Woodfall

So we talked about why public service media for children should exist, and the point of it, but can you share your thoughts more so on why does it exist? More about the way things have played out historically.

Greg Childs

There is sort of two levels to this. Why did it start to exist in 1922? The why did that happen? [with the foundation of the BBC, as the British Broadcasting Company, by a group of wireless radio manufacturers] And then there's, why did it become widened in 1955? [with the launch of the commercial public service broadcasters]. Those are the two key dates and I think both of them are incredibly apposite for today.

You have to initially go back to the First World War, because the people who set up the BBC, and thought about the BBC, were veterans of the First World War. And in fact, many of them were injured. They had definitely been changed by their experience, and also possibly changed by technology, the technology of the war. It gave them the opportunity to see the potency that technology could have over large numbers of people. And what they saw, was this technology was intensely powerful and chaotic.

So it was a classic British ruling class, or educated class, attempt to take something and control it. But in the thinking that went into it, it turned into something that was for public good, rather than for pure propaganda. And also because of who they were, and what they had been through, they thought very seriously about the nature of it. So we have a very refined version of public media in the UK, that others never quite developed in the same way.

And I think that still holds good today, just because we have these new technologies, doesn't mean that you shouldn't take a look at them and think ‘how can that be harnessed to best serve the public good?’ Not take a look at them and say, ‘how can we make the most possible money out of that?’ I don't mind people making money out of it, I don't even mind them making super profits out of it,

provided they're prepared to give some of those profits back or prepared to cede some of those profits to the public good. That I think is the situation we're in today, we are in the situation in 1920-21, when the Tower of Babel was starting. It was going crazy, there was radio all over the place. And it was actually engineers who said, 'this is going to be chaos, we've got to control it', and some clever person came along and said, 'yeah not just the waves, but what's been carried on them needs to in some way benefit society'- or another way of looking at it, be controlled. I'm not against controlling very, very large corporations who deliver things to our population.

Beyond that, there's also a very important value to collaboration. Deciding they want to do this because it is for their good, the good of their shareholders, as well as the good of society. And when you look at 1955, television has come along, we're going to expand it and allow the famous 'licence to print money'[i] - and under those circumstances, in return for the eyeballs and the value that they're getting from those people, the companies have to give something back. And I think again, a very clever system, which worked very well for a long time, was devised to expand and develop public service media, and change the tone of the commercial relationship. And that's a tone that has run through to the existence of things like Sky News, Sky Arts and Sky Kids. And it ran through the need and the decision to regulate the multi-channel universe, to allow for prominence of public service media. You now have organisations, like Paramount, who own a public service media channel in the UK[ii], and Nickelodeon being one of the prime examples of a business that was founded on the premise of 'what's good for kids is good for business' - the American version of public service media, if you like. So again, comparing where we are with 1955, on a financial level you have these organisations who are making an awful lot of money out of British young people. They need to give some of that back. They also need to do that in a way which is responsible and recognises their role in society.

Ashley Woodfall

Thinking of that commercial broadcasters' 'licence to print money' of 1955, it's not that long ago that ITV[iii] effectively pulled out of children's and similarly not that long ago that we lost the children's slots on the main BBC broadcast channels[iv]. Perhaps we can weave into the discussion something on that and how our commercial PSBs stepped in, and then stepped out of public service media for children?

Greg Childs

In a big picture way, the BBC was a sort of backbone of it all, relatively well funded, up and down all the time obviously. But throughout the late 1950s, 60s and 70s, you had the most significant funding on ITV. It was really competing well with what the BBC was offering. Producing a very competitive schedule of high quality live-action drama, factual shows, entertainment and buying into cartoons - and all of that was down to the fact that they were required to do that up until the 2003 Broadcasting Act. They were they were required to do that by the public service regulations. And they were. And it was watched and carefully monitored.

When Channel 4 came along it did get involved in children's programmes initially and then it pulled away[v]. It was involved in interactive entertainment for a while, and then it pulled away, and now it's moving back into both those spheres. It now approaches the fourteens plus audience, which is good, because none of the other broadcasters do. But it hasn't had any great success in attracting them to specific programmes, made specifically for their life stage needs. What it has chosen to do is to

incorporate them and their interests into what you might call mainstream programming. You will see more younger people in some of the soaps and so on, and you'll see programmes that are of strong interest to young teens, but actually are intended for a much broader audience. It's a shame, but when they were doing this five to eight years ago, they were already beginning to experience the difficulty of attracting an audience without a very definite sense of branding as to this was a place where you go if you're fourteen – as CBeebies was a place you go if you're between the ages of nought and five and CBBC was a place you went if you were seven to twelve years old.

Ashley Woodfall

You mentioned the 'multi-channel universe' and Paramount earlier, maybe we might return to the satellite players, Nickelodeon, Disney and so forth, and how they joined the party?

Greg Childs

As television expanded throughout the 80s along came Sky and cable and satellite, and a massive increase in the number of channels available to kids. You had the Nickelodeon stable of channels, you had the Cartoon Network stable of channels, and you had Disney, and within them those groups produced more than a dozen popular channels that then captured the audience - and that worked on two levels. One is that you were getting a lot more international content, which is to say mostly American content. And you were no longer in a world in which content was controlled by one or two key broadcasters.

Up until then if the BBC put a little bit of money into animation, it would have strong control over how that animation turned out, because it was a powerful player in the international co-production deals that put animation together. And it used to make other organisations laugh: if the BBC might put up, say, 10% of the budget and say we want to control the editorial, and people would just sort of shrug and say, oh, OK then. Because we were the BBC, and that was the way it was done. And I think probably the same sort of things were going on at ITV.

But now come the 1980s, you had a different ecosystem, which was basically international channels, internally co-producing. So you would have a proposal that might come from the UK, or it might come from France, but eventually it would be taken into the Nickelodeon universe by, and really only fundable, if Nickelodeon US got on board. And when Nickelodeon US and Nickelodeon International come together, they created in a sense an internal co-production. The funding all comes from within the organisation, but from various different parts. But it has to address an international audience otherwise they can't afford to get it made, and that applied across the board, it applied to Cartoon Network, and you had some incredibly successful shows coming out of Britain and Europe on Cartoon Network. But interestingly, they were often voiced with American accents.

Ashley Woodfall

If I can throw in my own take from working at Nickelodeon before heading to BBC Children's. What I experienced was that the satellite channels in the UK were very much US-led culturally. We might create a bit of UK veneer for what was effectively either U.S. media or sort of an international take on U.S. media. We didn't doubt for the quality of it, even if we did doubt for the public service notes. And if there were public service notes in there, they were fairly token. A little bit of funding for one

or two runs of a kind of newsy show that was fun and funky, but it wasn't the commitment that the BBC made with *Newsround*, for example.

This perhaps takes us to where we are now. Worried both for the ways children are engaging with media that is even further away from our understanding of public service media, but isn't even made with the care and craft that's organisation like Nickelodeon or Disney could commit to. There's a lot of media out there, nominally for children, which doesn't have a sense of actually being made by people who understand the audience or have taken time to develop a skillset and understanding of working for kids.

Greg Childs

Well, let me sort of shorthand the first part of that by saying that, if we pick up on the multi-channel universe producing a lot of content through the 80s and 90s, but it was international content and it was all about entertainment and life was pretty much all 'ha-ha, hee-hee'. And life isn't quite all 'ha-ha, hee-hee'. And a lot it was either animated or made in the US - it didn't reflect children's lives as public service media. And that's one of the problems we see, animation is wonderful, and it can do the most amazing things and it is hugely popular, but it does have a tendency to be less able to show the minutiae of children's lives, where they live and who they are. And therefore, to my mind, is less public service. I hate to sort of whitewash it in that way. An animation can be deeply public service, but on the whole animation tends to be fast, entertaining, funny, and there is a tendency for it to be less able to show the reality of children's lives.

Then we had the great decrease in viewing of the public service channels, with *Blue Peter* going from being capable of attracting eight million viewers, not all of whom can have been children - that can't have been the case on a Thursday afternoon - to probably in the region of 800,000 viewers over the ten-year rise of the international channels. I personally presided over that on a sister show, on *Record Breakers*, we went from six million to 600,000 viewers over 10 years. So that tells you something about the audiences falling off a series of cliffs. More recently the next big cliff that the audience has fallen off takes *Blue Peter* from its 800,000 to 30,000 viewers, with the defection of the sevens plus audience to YouTube, and for long-form content, to an extent, on to the streamers - on to Netflix and Disney+. And it's interesting that Disney abandoned its channels, and Disney+ is only an on-demand service. In fact, that's the way CITV has gone, with the reason CITV has done that, is they can't even afford to run a channel anymore, because they make no money around their children's programmes when they have viewing figures as few as 4000 per episode on the old channel.

So, you've now got an unregulated space in which there are a number of things happening, one is children are not watching on YouTube Kids they're watching on YouTube, and they're also watching on TikTok[vi]. Even though TikTok says no children are watching, we know they are. And one or two other services as well. And it's very difficult to say what they're actually watching there because the algorithm can serve up just whatever it wants - the algorithm will serve up mostly more of the same. And we all know from watching YouTube that you click on something once and then you're going to ten versions of the same thing.

So, you've got a situation in which kids are watching on a platform which is not designed for kids, which specifically tells children you're supposed to only come here when you're thirteen, and yet

ignores the fact that they are there before thirteen - and also tells thirteen-year-olds we will now show you material that is for over eighteens. So, at seven, somehow they're thirteen, but none of which makes sense to me at all. But what is surfacing on YouTube is content which is really not designed for children at all. So that's one issue. I'm not suggesting that it's all horrific. Well, some of it is horrific. I'm not suggesting it's all massively damaging. I think it's subtly damaging. It's not porn, but it can be pretty much anything that an adult would be relatively comfortable with watching - you might ask whether it's right for a younger child.

Then even when they're finding children's content, there is no guarantee of curation. There's no guarantee that that content will be in any way mediated to surface things that provide children with their interesting eclectic mix. What's going missing, and a lot of people forget this - people talk a lot about the content as it is made. You can make all the lovely things you want on YouTube. You can make all the fantastic, clever, and brilliant and stretching and challenging and inspiring and beautiful and life enhancing things. But if it doesn't surface for the child, then you've wasted your time.

The skill that's gone missing is the skill of the scheduler. That's gone and it's been replaced by the algorithm, which it doesn't need to be. As we are learning more and more, YouTube could perfectly well put in much more manual curation to surface content differently from the way it currently does it, which is a revenue-based model - and it doesn't have to be an entirely revenue-based model. What's missing is the art of the scheduler, the art of the eclectic, the art of hammocking some slightly more difficult content between pieces of entertainment or whatever.

It's not so much that the material isn't being made, it's just that vast swathes of material are being made of extremely differential quality, even when it's made for children. And beyond that, another swathe of material which is not intended for children at all.

Ashley Woodfall

So I think that's brought us up to where things stand now. And it's messy. And from this messy space is very hard to really say where we might be heading, but do you have any sense of possible futures, some of them optimistic? What can we do about all this?

Greg Childs

Yes, let's deal with two possible futures, a pessimistic one and an optimistic one. The pessimistic one is that we do nothing about it; that we don't have a 1955 moment and say ‘you have that eyeballs and you must be responsible’, and YouTube doesn't pick up on that and we neither regulate, nor do they volunteer to change the way in which they react, not just to people and their audience, but to society in general - they don't come to accept themselves as in some way part of society. There's a strong danger that if we go down that road, I think ten years from now, there will be severe implications on social cohesion, there will be significant implications for the cultures of this country and the way in which those cultures hold us together and make us feel we belong. There'll be severe implications, I think, for children's mental health as they see stuff they really shouldn't see, or they see it in an unmediated way, and I come back again and again, do you want children to be watching Andrew Tate, or do you want them to be watching interesting people with meaningful things to say, that give them a variety of views, and a view of the of the world in which they actually live, as

opposed to a sort of massively polarised view of that world. And I think it'll have really strong implications for people personally and for society.

On the upside, I think YouTube, and the others, are the most amazing potential resource. They are fantastic in terms of education, in terms of the capacity for people to engage in media and sharing media. And this is even before we start talking about kids using AI and so on to create media or AI curating media for them - or curating and co-creating with them. The video platforms can make all the difference, they really can. Because they have the power, because they have the eyeballs, and they have the advertising cash. Which means that they are also sitting on a bucket of money which has been in the past filtered down through the production process, through advertising, on television channels to producers to make stuff for kids in a regulated environment. They're sitting on the buckets of cash and they're not filtering them down. The cash is not coming to the producer, so that that's another issue that the industry itself is being damaged by the fact that that YouTube delights in its nature as a free-for-all. Yet it isn't free, because it's advertising funded, and it isn't for all, because it's actually intended to feed into their shareholders pockets. And in the end, you have to ask yourself what will those shareholders think when society sort of starts to collapse around them? I know this is all very apocalyptic and, you know, it's my job to be dramatic about these things. But most parents look at their children watching stuff on YouTube and are concerned about it. And I include that the current broadcasting minister[vii], the shadow broadcasting minister[viii], and most people that you talk – who say, 'I just wish I sort of knew what they were watching', or 'oh God, I found out what they're watching, and now I'm really concerned', or 'they just seem to watch rubbish'.

Rubbish is an emotive way of putting it, but there is a lot of content that is hastily put together, very little money behind it, and not a lot of thought. And that is specific children's content on YouTube, that is colourful and bright, and it's made by companies who know how to play the algorithm so that this content surfaces. What's needed is for YouTube to take a look at that inappropriate content and its role in society and consider what should it do to become, dare I say it, the public service platform of the future?

Ashley Woodfall

That more optimistic take on things, of hoping that a company like YouTube, and others, can wake up to their responsibilities, does it this map back to the 1950s as you suggested earlier? And what is the answer if they don't play ball?

Greg Childs

…well it's regulation. Yes, if they won't do it, they will have to be regulated to do it. And I don't know how that relation will work. That is what we're asking the government to do right now. We're asking the government or any future government to consider how you can regulate for public service prominence, the old-fashioned term that was first created in 1955, reinterpreted for the multi-channel universe in the 1980s, and needs to be reinterpreted again for a scenario in which children are no longer watching channels. Which is why the Media Bill[ix] is almost completely pointless for sevens plus [audience]. Now you need to actually start thinking about how do you regulate public service content, and that is actually quite hard. Content is much, much more difficult to regulate for than services. It's really easy to say, 'let's regulate smart televisions and a service like Apple TV to make prominent the iPlayer, ITVX and the Channel 4 player or whatever'. It's much harder to say,

‘how do you define public service content?’ But what happens when that public service content is chopped up, thrown up in the air and lands in a different way? What is public service content on TikTok? Is it only the stuff that comes from the old public service broadcasters? Or is there some form of certification? Is it connected to the way in which it's funded? If they were a public service fund, could that immediately define that the content is public service, because of the way it's commissioned in the first place? It needs a lot of thought. It needs a lot of work, but it is not beyond us to do it.

We need a carrot and stick approach. YouTube needs to be encouraged as much as possible, and indeed incentivised, to produce a better atmosphere around the surfacing of public service content. At the same time, we need to have regulations in place, because YouTube will morph into something else, that will morph into something else, that will morph into something else. New platforms will emerge. The TikTok's may go over the horizon and something else will pop up. So, what you need is a basic set of principles for the regulation of prominence of publicly valuable content - content which is socially beneficial and culturally relevant. And you need to consider how you fund that and how you find that. And those are the questions that need to be put before government and any future government. How do we ensure socially beneficial and culturally relevant content is funded and found?

Declaration of Interest:
Dr Ashley Woodfall is a member of the Executive Group of the Children’s Media Foundation, where he acts as Co-editor of the *Children’s Media Yearbook*. He is an Associate Professor of Children’s Media at Bournemouth University and he shares with Greg Childs a background in professional practice at BBC Children’s.

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[i] This phrase is widely attributed to the Canadian-born British newspaper proprietor, Roy Thomson, who entered UK commercial television with the first ITV franchise in Scotland, Scottish Television (STV) in 1957.
[iiii] Commercial UK Public Service Broadcaster Channel 5 is owned by Paramount Global. Channel 5 air children’s programming through their *Milkshake!* brand. Paramount also own Nickelodeon, who share some content with Channel 5.
[iii] The main ITV channel discontinued its Citv block in 2023. In the same year ITV also closed its standalone Citv channel. As of August 2024 ITV still stream ‘acquired’ children’s content through its itvX streaming service, but not under the old Citv branding, and ITV2 airs an early morning Citv branded children’s content strand.
[iv] Children’s BBC content stopped airing on BBC1 in 2012, with all children's programming moving to the CBBC and CBeebies channels at that point. The BBC plan to discontinue the CBBC linear service in 2025. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-61591674)
[v] Channel 4’s remit requires them, according to the *Communication Act 2003*, to ‘participate in the making of relevant media content that appeals to the tastes and interests of older children and young adults’ (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/part/3/chapter/1). Their remit doesn’t specify what platform or by what means this participation should take, with Channel 4 never offering a standalone children’s strand and variously providing for the younger audience through content that appeals to younger people, but isn’t made exclusively for them, or is a ‘spin off’ from their family content (e.g. *Junior Bake Off* (2011-)).
[vi] According to Ofcom 25-30% of 5-7 year-olds use TikTok (https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-habits-children/a-window-into-young-childrens-online-worlds). TikTok states that users must be 13 or older to have an account (https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/youth-safety).
[vii] At the time of the interview (15/03/24) the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was Lucy Frazer.
[viii] At the time of the interview (15/03/24) the Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was Thangam Debbonaire.
[ix] Now the *Media Act 2024*. (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2024/15)