

CHILDREN'S PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA NEEDS A HOME

Dr Ashley Woodfall

Associate Professor in Children's Media, Bournemouth University

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It's a romantic image: the family huddled around a single glowing 'campfire' TV screen, sharing adventures, theme tunes and catchphrases. But as I reflect on the findings from my recent British Academy/Leverhulme Trust-funded research project on children's public service media (PSM), it's hard to escape how outdated that image now feels.

The headline shifts in children's media lives won't surprise anyone reading this Yearbook. Children are moving away from linear television towards social media, video-sharing platforms and video-on-demand. YouTube, TikTok and Roblox routinely outrank TV (as was). With most children owning a smartphone by the end of primary school, and platforms increasingly performing in 'TV-like' ways, the boundaries between media have blurred and children's media repertoires have become highly fragmented.

Those shifts are significant in themselves, of course, but they also trigger critical questions about the future of UK PSM for children, especially since children's media lives have become largely 'unsupervised' (with children receiving less parental media oversight as they get older). Where do children now encounter content made with a public service purpose, and where do they get to talk it through?

As part of my research, I spoke with 45 children aged 8–11 across Wales, Northern Ireland and England. I found a significant gap in children's understanding of who commissions and produces media for them, and why. Younger children (8–9) generally had little sense of which organisations make programmes for children. By age 10 or 11, a more mixed picture begins to emerge, including a growing sense that 'the government' might be involved in funding. That assumption was often framed around the idea that children need media that is 'educational' and 'not inappropriate'. Children were not generally aware or especially focused on the country of origin of children's media and - one for the BBC to think on - very few could say what 'BBC' stands for, or that one of the Bs is 'British'.

Beyond these perhaps unsurprising findings, two significant themes emerged. First, responsibility for engaging with PSM is being offloaded to schools. Second, there is a marked decline in family co-viewing and co-engagement with media - and, by extension, fewer shared encounters with PSM in the home.

PSM AS A SCHOOL SUBJECT

Children's engagement with PSM - especially news and factual content - has largely moved out of the living room and into the classroom. Nearly every child I spoke with reported watching *Newsround* regularly, but almost exclusively at school. Very few described watching it at home or in their own time.

In effect, schools are becoming ad hoc guardians of children's PSM, stepping in to fill a vacuum in domestic routines. It is heartening that schools value this content. We should encourage the positioning of high-quality PSM within the school curriculum. Yet these shifts come with costs.

PSM isn't just about be presented with and 'absorbing information'. At its best, it provides tools for dialogue and contextualisation: a chance to ask questions, test interpretations and link a story to a child's own experiences. In a classroom setting, there is not always space for an individualised take on a story, or for the kind of one-to-one 'confidence checking' a child might do with a parent or carer. When a child engages with news out-of-sight on platforms like TikTok (which Ofcom reports is now the primary news source for children), they are doing so without the safety net of parental dialogue.

DISAPPEARING FAMILY CO-VIEWING

The second theme is a scarcity of family co-viewing and co-engagement. By co-viewing I mean more than being in the same house: I mean a side-by-side experience where content becomes something you share and talk through.

Children can be seen as broadly 'mobile-first' (even if there is some timely pushback on this). They tend to use *personal* devices alone, or at least out of direct parental oversight. And even when children are on 'social' platforms, they are not necessarily being social with their families - or even with peers - in the ways we might assume.

The living-room TV is still in situ, but for many children, particularly as they grow older, there are fewer moments in which the TV brings them physically together with family. Ofcom's ongoing research on children's media lives adds useful texture here: children do still gather for certain 'appointment-to-view' moments (*Gladiators* has been a whole-family hit in my own home), and some enjoy occasional family film nights, often via video-on-demand services such as Netflix. But these co-viewing moments are becoming outliers within an overall fragmented, and often isolating, media diet.

WHAT IS LOST? THE HUMAN STAKES

Without domestic co-viewing, we lose time and space to contextualise and reflect on, and through, content together. We lose opportunities for active participation, guidance and the social learning that happens when a child can ask, 'Is that true?' or 'Why did they do that?'

Beyond decoding and confidence checking, there are emotional and developmental stakes. Shared media experiences can foster attunement and connection, facilitating turn-taking, shared play and shared emotions that feed into parent-child attachment. Family co-viewing can help provide foundations for the development of emotional self-regulation and overall wellbeing. Without spaces to co-engage - around a screen, or elsewhere - children are left to navigate the complexities of the world in isolation.

And yet there is a contradiction worth holding on to. When children are invited to imagine the future of television, they don't necessarily dream of higher resolution or better VR. Many share a want for television to be communal: a way for families, and friends, to come together. In recent research by Cassie Brummitt and Elizabeth Evans (2025), children were asked to design the 'TV of the future' – yet only a few focussed on futuristic headsets or other 'sci-fi' possibilities. Instead, children tended to design future TV as something communal. As one 13-year-old girl put it: 'I'm scared for the future to come. The telly's not gonna be a thing anymore... It's better to be sociable. It's better to enjoy things with family. I want TV to stay the same, because it brings people closer together.'

Ultimately, the disappearance of shared, side-by-side family viewing, combined with a transfer of responsibility for engaging with public service media from the home to the classroom, leads to us losing vital tools for dialogue and reflection - and all the good things that can come from that. At a societal level, we also risk losing a shared 'social glue' that can help connect children to each other and to wider civic life.

All this suggests a simple proposition: children's media still needs a home. Not just a platform, but a place within family routines where content can be watched, questioned and reflected on. Parents should be encouraged to find time to sit with children as they engage with media, and PSM. And if children themselves are telling us that shared viewing still matters, we should take them seriously, and make room for it. We collectively need to ensure that high quality PSM is made - and made available - for children and their families to engage with together.

References

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Possible pull quote

- “When domestic co-viewing disappears, we lose time and space to contextualise and reflect together.”
- “Children’s engagement with public service media has largely moved out of the living room and into the classroom.”

Standfirst if needed

As children’s media habits shift towards mobile, platform-based viewing, public service media is increasingly encountered in classrooms rather than living rooms. Drawing on research with 45 children aged 8–11, I argue that the decline of family co-viewing is not just a cultural change, but a loss of dialogue, guidance and social connection.

Biography

Dr Ashley Woodfall

Ashley is an Associate Professor in Children’s Media at Bournemouth University where he is Deputy Head of the *Centre for Excellence in Media Practice* (CEMP). With a PhD in children’s media industries and audiences, his research interests span children’s media experiences/culture and the children’s media production landscape. Current research projects include a (British Academy/Leverhulme Trust funded) study into children’s understandings of public service media and a (National Lottery Heritage Fund) community history project in which he is working with young people as they create artwork and tell stories about their local town centre.