



Published Opinion Piece – Broadcast

NB: This is the original version before editing for publication.

‘Kids’ TV is facing a cultural crisis’ by Guy Lambert

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We all know that original, UK-based children’s TV production is in crisis. Brilliant people at the CMF, PACT and others are doing an incredible job in fighting to protect it, and the suggestion of imposing quotas on the PSB broadcasters is clearly the only way to save it. So, why are OFCOM not acting? My concern is that although they make statements about how much they care about children’s TV, OFCOM doesn’t really care *enough*, simply because many adults don’t either.

Look at the way television is often perceived within children’s culture. While literature is held aloft as the great inspirer of children’s imagination, television is often viewed as the ‘bad guy’. Whenever there’s a public report published about it, the authors focus on the negative aspects such as blaming television for preventing children from socialising or playing sports. This contributes to a largely held belief that television is bad for kids (even if parents let them watch the good stuff) and that books are a better substitute. Where are the newspaper articles celebrating the visual representation of the disabled (*The Sparticle Mystery*), immigrants (*My Life*), or gay children saving the world (*Wizards vs Aliens*)?

Moreover, many adults consciously act to denounce all children’s culture as inferior to their own. Discussions about ‘the Arts’ barely mention children; *Harry Potter* novels are reprinted with special ‘adult’ covers, presumably because readers don’t want other adults thinking they read inferior fiction; and when an adult TV drama is slated, people often say, “it’s like something made for children”. Where are the reports about the thousands of letters or emails programmes such as *Blue Peter* receive daily? You only really hear about this when an adult celebrity wants to moan that children’s TV “is not as good as when I was a kid”, followed by an article suggesting nothing good has been made since *SM:TV*.

Plus, look at the way our part of the industry treats children's content. The main BBC Channels no longer show it, so most adults never see it; children's TV has its own BAFTAs, so the main ceremony never acknowledges it; and I'm not sure the makers of the NTAs even know children's TV exists. Where are the awards for the episode of *The Dumping Ground* concerning gay adoption, or an acknowledgement for the groundbreaking *Signed Stories*? We have effectively locked this audience away in a cupboard under the stairs where they're neither seen nor heard.

This is the real problem this audience has: they're voiceless. They can't attend Parliamentary meetings about broadcasting legislation; they aren't as powerful as a TV Executive who can sit with a spreadsheet and explain why the money simply isn't there to make shows; they're not on Twitter so can never promote what they love; none of them has yet been given a television review column in the Guardian; and children are very unlikely to storm Broadcasting House in a tank brandishing a petition.

With all of this in mind, it's very easy for OFCOM to say it's concerned, yet do nothing. With their culture often treated as disposable, second-rate and invisible, and continuously threatened by people who *do* have a voice, what chance do children and their champions really have? Who is going to stand up for them, other than people who are doing so in ways that mostly go unreported outside the industry, and who are therefore just as easily ignored by society at large?

I think in our fight for quotas we must ask OFCOM to reevaluate the audience more appropriately, with the problems they face above given proper consideration. As I result, I think children shouldn't just be discussed as a minority, but recategorised as a significant, voiceless *cultural* minority. They need to be viewed as a group that needs special protection because the economic marketplace is not designed to provide for such minorities (especially ones who can't control it) and those who are in power to make decisions can't be trusted to value their culture.

Surely OFCOM can't deny that without exceptional protection against the whim of adults, this cultural minority could be facing an even bigger crisis, one that could get even worse without anyone *really* caring.