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## ‘Creative Bloody Futures’: Discourses of Creativity in BBC Children’s Production

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This paper is an examination of the ways in which the children’s television production community at BBC Scotland articulates concepts of creativity and innovation in its production practices and professional discourse.<sup>1</sup> The genre of children’s public service broadcasting (PSB) presents a particularly valuable opportunity for analysis of discourses of creativity and innovation, because it can be considered an almost over-determined site of aspiration and social engineering for children, both in their present status of childhood and for their future status as (good) adult citizens. The criticisms of paternalism and cultural or moral imperialism that have been so frequently made of the BBC throughout its august history (e.g. Smith 1986; Peacock 2004), are perhaps especially pertinent in the discourses around what makes appropriate and beneficial media provision for children, particularly as producers of children’s media do not form part of its audience, and therefore children’s television can be seen to reflect an adult desire and vision of the childhood state. As leading children’s media academic, David Buckingham, has suggested:

The texts which adults produce for children represent adult constructions, both of childhood and (by implication) of adulthood itself. They are one of the means by which ‘we’ attempt to regulate our relationships with ‘them’... As well as asking what children want or need from the text, we need to analyse

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on research into the form and function of 21<sup>st</sup> century UK children’s PSB that I am undertaking through the AHRC’s collaborative doctoral awards scheme in conjunction with Glasgow University and BBC Scotland children’s department in 2007–2010.

what it is that adults, through the text, want or demand of the child. (2002, p.6)

In looking at the production of children's television through a lens of creativity and innovation I seek to explore not only the practical aspects of an industry responding to the pressures of PSB in the twenty-first century, but also the philosophical or ideological aspects connecting discourses of creativity with the (constructed) childhood state.

### **BBC Rhetoric**

Part of the BBC's survival strategy during the last few turbulent years has been a renewed institutional emphasis on concepts of creativity. Indeed Mark Thompson, Director-General of the BBC since 2004, drove through the most recent charter renewal (2006), a critical process for the BBC and its impartial status and funding (in which the licence fee was retained), on a manifesto of distinctiveness and quality in BBC content as predicated on creativity and innovation. The BBC sponsored nationwide debates and lectures on the theme of creativity thus:

Creativity is the point of the BBC. Our audiences expect it. Our services demand it. And, at our best, we live by it. (Thompson 2008)

With such a clear message coming from the 'top' downwards, it would seem reasonable to expect that the encouragement of creativity and innovation would be the highest priority on the current BBC institutional agenda.

Despite this seemingly renewed emphasis, concepts of innovation and creativity have long been enshrined in BBC rhetoric and in regulatory policy. The UK broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, uses a series of 'purposes and characteristics' to define public service

principles whereby creativity and innovation are intrinsically linked to notions of quality and originality. According to Ofcom, the characteristics of public service content are that they are ‘high quality, original, innovative, challenging, engaging and widely available’ (2007, p.109). Likewise the BBC itself sets similar criteria: its ‘vision’ is, ‘To be the most creative organisation in the world’ (BBC 2009), and one of its stated ‘values’ is, ‘Creativity is the lifeblood of our organisation’ (BBC 2009). Of the six public purposes set out for the BBC by Royal Charter, two make explicit reference to creativity and innovation: ‘Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence’ and, ‘Delivering to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services’ (BBC 2009). More detailed definitions and explanations of these two purposes reinforce the perceived nexus of quality/excellence and creativity/innovation as fulfilling a key cultural function: the definitions set by the BBC Trust (the internal regulator of the BBC) are that, ‘You can expect the BBC to offer the best examples of creative work that engage and delight them and break new ground and, ‘BBC viewers, listeners and users can expect the BBC to help everyone in the UK to get the best out of emerging media technologies now and in the future’ (BBC 2009). Implicit across this BBC rhetoric is the reflexive construction of PSB as a beneficial cultural artefact and societal right; innovation and creativity are thereby bound to the concept of public service itself. However, as Oswell has argued – as regards radio and television – that our very concept of ‘public’ is itself constructed by the historical specificities of broadcast form in the UK (2002, p.25), I believe the question of what constitutes appropriate PSB in the digital ‘new media’ age is further complicated by the range of platforms and formats by which the public may engage with the BBC.

## **Children's PSB**

UK based children's production is in an especially interesting position as regards notions of creativity for three reasons: firstly, the BBC is now virtually a monopoly broadcaster and monopsony commissioner of UK-produced content due to the collapse of ITV's PSB commitment to children's (Ofcom 2007; SKTV 2008). This means that the BBC faces almost no competition in linear PSB provision across five mixed programming channels, but is pitted against prolific commercial competition in a digital/satellite/cable provision of 20+ dedicated children's channels that are mainly US-owned (Ofcom 2007), where it is, therefore, very much a minority voice. The days of a public service ethos driving the entire television market are almost over, except that the PSB mission to 'inform, educate and entertain' sits well with children's media and so remains an effective means of selling commercial children's content (Steemers 2004). Although children's television is an ostensibly thriving market, certain sub-genres – notably factual and UK live-action – are subject to market failure (Ofcom 2007): if they were not provided through PSB they would be unlikely to be provided at all, thus placing a certain responsibility as to what public service priorities should be in terms of television provision.

Secondly, children are frequently considered as 'early adopters' of any 'new' media technologies (Byron 2008; Kline 1993; Livingstone 2002) and so children's content is often presented as boundary pushing or innovative in form/content and in ways conceptualised as appealing to the child audience. The (problematic) term 'digital natives' was coined specifically with children and young people in mind (Prensky 2001) reflecting that children are believed to have an especial fascination and capacity for media multi-tasking.

Sonia Livingstone, researcher of children's new media, posits that,

It is children and young people who enjoy, and play with the possibilities of, such simultaneous participation in multiple [media] activities. (2002, p.8)

Such perceptions create pressures on television providers to diversify into new media platforms, and certainly there is much BBC promotion of '360° commissioning' and 'multi-platform content' (BBC 2007b). Despite this perceived natural affinity between children and new media there is considerable authority that television remains the most widely consumed children's media and will continue to be the central media technology in children's lives for the foreseeable future (Ofcom 2009). However, the growth of dedicated children's content on the internet (Byron 2008) raises enormous questions as to what presence PSB should have within new media and how that should be funded.

The third aspect of innovation and creativity pertinent to children's media production is the potentially long shelf-life of certain children's texts: as each generation of the children's audience continues to grow up and be replaced by the next cohort, old content can be considered 'new' for successive generations. Why then should new children's content continue to be a PSB spending priority?

I will now consider the specific ways in which BBC producers of children's media address these and other issues relating to creativity and innovation in their professional discourse and working practices, with specific reference to the children's in-house production department at BBC Scotland to which I had extensive access during the 2007-2009 period. There is particular emphasis on the work of the programme development teams in which I was invited to be an active team member from Feb 2008 to June 2009. Following the classic BBC institutional research models of Tom

Burns (1977), Philip Schlesinger (1978) and Georgina Born (2004), my research utilises a combination of participant observation and personal interview to provide insights into the normally ‘closed’ or private world of BBC production. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the material given by my research participants, all but the most senior personnel are referred to anonymously as ‘producers’ of children’s media regardless of their job title or status, and regardless of whether they are under freelance or staff contracts. Unless otherwise stated, quotes from producers were taken from the personal interviews, which formed a key methodology of my fieldwork in the Spring/Summer 2009 period. As with all participant-observation and interview based fieldwork I am enormously indebted to all participants for their generosity and candour.

### **BBC Scotland Children’s Department**

BBC Scotland children’s department has been responsible for some 20% of all BBC in-house children’s production in recent years (BBC 2007a), and is constituted as a ‘significant other’ to London metropolitan production through its designation as a ‘centre of excellence’. However it should be noted that, in addition to technological change in the media landscape, the BBC is undergoing vast institutional restructuring, and in 2010 the main in-house children’s production and commissioning base will relocate to the BBC North site outside of Manchester, an important geographical and political move with implications for the entire UK children’s production community and specialist workforce (including that based at BBC Scotland).

The department is not merely a production facility, but is also responsible for the development and pitching of ideas for children’s

content. While there is a quota system by which BBC Scotland would be guaranteed certain levels of children's in-house production, it is invisibly embedded within a 'level playing field' of open commissioning competition: commissions are awarded ostensibly on merit and then offset against quotas rather than predetermined or simply 'allocated' to BBC Scotland. In this way the department has considerable autonomy in the development and creation of ideas and thrives only on the strength of the commissioning pitches of the rolling development team. Simon Parsons, head of the department, reinforced this perceived relationship between creativity, quality and success:

We live or die by our commissions and although there is an in-house guarantee, we wouldn't last long if we relied on it to get business. We have to compete on quality, pure and simple. It's our job to make the commissioners forget about quotas. If you start focusing on things like that you might as well run the planning department in a cardboard box factory. No. We stand or fall by our ideas and our ability to deliver. (Parsons 2009)

There are two separate development teams, one each for the CBeebies (preschool) and CBBC (aimed at 6- to-12-year-olds) brands, and each work to slightly different commissioning protocols for the relevant commissioners. Although at its most feverish during specific commissioning rounds or briefs, the ethos of 'development', i.e. a climate of idea generation whereby creativity is prized, permeates the department at all times and in diffuse ways. Whether it is through the wall of wonder (a large wall space where random articles, photos and artefacts are placed), circulated email links to video clips or websites, daily debate at the departmental morning meeting (a mechanism instituted specifically in order to create a responsive discussion space), brainstorming, audience research, quizzes and challenges, outreach work with children, or attendance at



seminars and conferences related to childhood, it would seem that the business of the department is creativity and ‘keeping up with the times’. Narrowing the ‘gap’ between adult producer and child audience is also attempted in this way, with much of the circulated stimuli relevant to children’s lives and interests: keeping up with the times and keeping up with ‘the kids’ can be construed as a synonymous activity, and generating new ideas is constituted as a key facet of ‘knowing the audience’, another key public service aim. At present, the work of the department is predominantly television based (hence this article’s focus on examples drawn from television production), but there is a tangible departmental desire (and anxiety) for expansion in to truly ‘new’ interactive media formats without which it is imagined that PSB will become arcane and perhaps extinct. Discussion of the challenges presented by new media has dominated the agendas of the main industry conferences in recent years (e.g. Showcomotion, World Summit on Children and Media, Prix Jeunesse, BBC Children’s Festival), and the BBC has hosted several industry events on children’s interactive media, including the ‘Children in Virtual Worlds’ conference at University of Westminster, May 2008.

Certainly head of department, Simon Parsons, comprehensively expounds the value of both development and ‘knowing the audience’ on a continual basis. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that the dangers of participant observation fieldwork are that the researcher cannot be sure whether the research subjects and situations observed are authentic or truly representative of naturally occurring behaviours (Burns 1977), and that media personnel are often highly sophisticated in their self-promotion (Caldwell 2008). The multiple ways and diffuse examples by which the value of development (as a means of serving the audience) was

promoted by the head of department, would, however, be extremely difficult to ‘set-up’ for my benefit across the extended period of my research. Far from merely reiterating the ‘top-down’ BBC line established by Mark Thompson, I believe that Simon Parsons genuinely places a high value on development activities – not as ends in themselves, but rather as a means of trying to capture an audience deemed as increasingly elusive in the twenty-first century media landscape. Nonetheless, Parsons, in an interview with me, cautioned against mistaking audience knowledge for true creativity (perhaps suggestive of the old public service dilemma of whether to lead or follow an audience):

10-to-12-year-olds are really hooked in to changing fashions, special effects, movies, games or whatever. But anyone can keep up with that. It’s easy. Anyone can talk to kids and visit schools and come up with ideas and find new stuff; because there is new stuff every time. All that information is available. But presenting them with something they love and are prepared to stay with for ten minutes when there is competition from other channels and other things that pull their interest: that is the greatest challenge. (Parsons, interview, 11 July, 2009)

Throughout my research in the department I found this particular professional discourse of creativity/success iterated fairly consistently by those at executive levels. Whether pragmatically inflected, as by Sue Morgan, Creative Director of CBBC, thus, ‘Our biggest challenge is to continue our development drive because we are only as strong as our commissions’ (Morgan, interview, 25 June, 2009), or ethically inflected, as by Sara Harkins, Senior Editor for CBeebies,

“As long as we can come up with ideas that are right for the audience then that is a tremendous freedom... that’s why I do lots of different things to connect to the audience. If you are a public service broadcaster then you should be out and about with the audience and visible within that community” (Harkins, interview, 5 June, 2009),

all the senior ranks of the BBC Scotland children's department were wholeheartedly singing from the same hymn sheet.

### **Limits of Creative Autonomy**

What then of the frontline production staff, those who are responsible for the making of BBC children's programmes? It was anecdotally suggested to me that the term 'Creative Futures' had become tainted by its association with job cuts under the BBC's 'rationalisation' and budget cut processes during the same period: children's, as a whole had incurred redundancies of almost a third of its staff in the 07-09 period. Indeed, the title quote of this paper, 'Creative Bloody Futures' was taken from a producer who felt that there was a gulf between the public message of creativity and the inner 'madness' of programme making:

I heard Mark Thompson loud and clear about quality and difference but, the only way I can rationalise it, is that that is the message for the public and on the inside it's about targets and percentages and creative bloody futures. We have the external position and the internal reality and you can't hold on to the anchor of what was said at the very top. It is a stupid analogy, but when Winston Churchill spoke everybody knew it was all about the one thing, so no one got lost in the madness of war. But here it feels like there are so many conveyor belts going in different directions. (BBC Children's Producer, interview, 19 March, 2009)

This producer, along with several others, suggested that the biggest limitation of creativity was not time or money (lack of which does contribute greatly to the stresses of production nonetheless), but the limited autonomy by which producers can implement their own decisions or ideas due to the various layers of management approval bearing on content. This was often seen as compounded by the fact that compartmentalised production-team structures, made up of

rigidly designated roles, did not fully utilise the skills base of each individual team member so therefore a real personal investment and satisfaction in the programme was almost unachievable even by the key decision makers. This view was most recurrent in those who worked in what might be considered the most creative processes of production (such as development, or artistic direction). Such producers were often frustrated that they could not have had a deeper involvement with other aspects of the project such as directing or editing (though it was also frequently noted that children's production was much better than other genres for facilitating multi-tasking).

A recurring theme in producer interviews was that the BBC, rather than using its distinctive PSB position as a means of *protecting* creativity (as promised by the 'Creative Futures' strategy), was actually highly risk averse due to its perception of commercial pressures and competition. This pressure was believed to be responsible for creating 'top heavy' management procedures as articulated by another producer here:

Multi-channel pressure allows no weak start – you have to get it right first time. There are lots of people walking round poking their noses in to your product. It is not ME saying 'I like this, this and this', it is an EXEC saying, 'What are you doing?' or 'I don't like that'. They crawl over everything and act as a safety net for what the commissioner will like or dislike. But the problem is that a lot of shows start to look the same because there is such a network of filters. My take, which is unique to me – because all producers are different – gets homogenised down in to what the execs think the commissioner thinks. (BBC Children's Producer, interview, 19 March, 2009)

It should be noted that these criticisms were not directed personally at the executive team – indeed, a striking factor of my research was the high personal and professional regard in which the departmental

senior executives were held by their staff – but rather a frustration at corporate procedures and structures.

### **Commissioning and Audience Construction**

Nonetheless, there are two important inferences to be made of this type of producer comment: first, that the commissioner's power and personal taste is absolute; and second, that much belief in commercial pressure is also linked to the notion that children, offered myriad media choice, have no reason to stay with content that does not offer instant gratification. This second inference cuts to the very heart of children's public service broadcasting, because through it the child is constructed as attracted to only that which is entertaining or immediately pleasing, and the information and education elements of the BBC mission 'to inform, educate and entertain' (BBC 2009) can be achieved only 'by stealth'. The 'betterment through stealth' objective has long been pursued by producers of children's PSB (Oswell 2002), but strikes me as being intrinsically bound to the construction of the 'captive' (and relatively passive) audiences of mixed-schedule linear television. It is a construction I find problematic for what I believe it says about childhood as some sort of continually joyous, imbecile state, and for what it logically suggests about the future of PSB: if entertainment is the only thing that children will choose to watch then why should we continue to fund it through a licence fee when it is available 24/7 across 20+ commercial channels? If in the future, as the BBC itself promotes through services like the i-player, convergence culture leads to our current broadcasters acting more as trusted web suppliers (in which TV and computer are one and we simply download the content of our choice as and when we want), no child of this construction is actively going to choose non-entertainment content for his or her

self. And if such content is not likely to be watched then what is the justification for the BBC making it? These two inferences are not disparate. Rather, they act together to generate a frenetic and anxious creative climate in which everything must be newer, cooler, faster, edgier, and above all funnier to meet the demands of the commissioner trying to meet the perceived demands of the rapacious yet fickle audience.

Certainly I would argue that Anne Gilchrist, the CBBC commissioner during my main participant observation period (replaced by Damian Kavanagh in September 2009), placed a huge emphasis on fun and humour within her commissioning briefs, with the terms ‘infectious humour’ and ‘laugh out loud’ frequently forming desired requirements of content in the CBBC commissioning briefs during the 2007–2009 period. Although Anne Gilchrist did commission some more ‘serious’ and thought-provoking content (e.g. covering topical issues such as child poverty and homelessness), her ‘bread and butter’ bulk commissions of comedy game shows drove through a particular focus on humour and reality entertainment that dictated a particular way of developing ideas, as we can see from this range of producer comments:

It’s the left-of-field, surprisingness, bonkersness of it that will make Anne sit up and notice. The whole way of developing your programme now is, ‘What would Anne least expect?’ or ‘What does she expect but how can we deliver it so that it surprises her?’ You’ve got to give her what she expects because you can’t give her what she doesn’t want – but how can we give it to her in a way she won’t expect to see? You’ve got a weird parallel thinking going on in your brain. (BBC Children’s Producer, interview, 16 March, 2009)

It is the way she [Anne Gilchrist] personally ticks – things have to work for her personally because who is there above her to say, ‘You know what? I don’t like that’. She’s got to fulfil her remit and the buck stops with

her. So it doesn't matter what I, or Sue [Morgan], or Simon [Parsons] think: it's trying to read what Anne thinks. She doesn't realise how often it comes up, 'Will Anne like this?', or 'Anne won't like this', or 'Anne will think this'. It is all the time. (BBC Children's Producer, interview, 17 March, 2009)

I was at a brainstorm for X [a new high concept apocalyptic game show] and I tried to emphasise the importance of keeping a 'watertight world' but one of the things people discussed was having a funny [enemy] character. It was almost an emphasis on unnecessary humour to satisfy the Anne necessity for the channel to be fun. The current promo montage is all laughing and custard pies because all the current output is fun. (BBC Children's Producer, interview, 23 March, 2009)

I think the execs are a fantastic earpiece for the commissioner and that gets us stuff through that relationship, which is good. And obviously they want the department to be successful, and if Anne likes it then we *are* successful and will be rewarded. But you have to play a careful game: you don't fight your corner or go with suggestions... you can't say, 'You are wrong'. (BBC Children's Producer, interview, 31 March, 2009)

What I believe is significant in these comments is not the criticism of the actual personal taste of the commissioner (who came from an entertainment background and had an exceptional track record of personal expertise in this area), but the criticism of the fact that such power is centralised in a single person to whom every creative decision then becomes accountable and prescriptive (although interestingly the CBeebies commissioner, Michael Carrington, came under no such criticism despite occupying a position of similar power. Whether this is related to individual personality and background, or to the very different constructions made of the CBeebies and CBBC audiences is difficult to say). Nor am I anti-entertainment – children are entitled to entertainment just like adults are – indeed, I believe Anne Gilchrist was both brave and

justified in her efforts to validate humour within a public service ethos at a time when a politically safer route may have been to promote more obviously ‘worthy’ factual or serious (i.e. market failure) content as ‘good for children’. It is just that the emphasis on fun has been taken too far and in too ubiquitous a fashion and so serves neither creativity nor the diverse needs of the diverse audience. There is a somewhat relentless and homogeneous tone, energy and pace to the CBBC brand that, although of itself is designed to appeal to the child audience (and so is notionally ‘child-centred’), actually succeeds – albeit unwittingly – in constructing children as an undifferentiated mass of goons.

### **Risk Aversion Throughout the BBC**

Such issues are not exclusive to children’s production however. Veteran screenwriter, Tony Garnett, launched a scathing attack on BBC drama through the viral circulation of his email article, *How to kill creativity while claiming to help it grow* (2009). The article, sparking huge controversy, and reproduced in the quality broadsheets and media trade press, presents a damning account of commissioning and top heavy executive processes limiting creative autonomy of ground-level programme makers. Like some of my own research participants, Garnett argues:

Senior management still does not understand that detailed supervision by more and more layers, reporting to more and more senior executives, does not result in higher standards... The real motive must be neurotic control borne of fear. Let’s make sure everything is safe with no embarrassing surprises. Better to squeeze the life out of it than run the slightest risk of getting in to trouble. (Garnett 2009)

This claim of risk aversion, in an institution that has moved from scandal to scandal in recent times (competition rigging, ‘Sachsgate’,



furore over top salaries, etc.), is particularly important when thinking about creative freedoms and about what media content we deem appropriate, necessary or worthy of PSB. Both Garnett and some of my own participants suggest a homogeneity in broadcasting indicative, at best, of the ‘least objectionable programming’ strategies of the US (commercial) networks or, at worst, of a dumbed-down mediocracy of content designed as the lowest common denominator. Mark Thompson may well champion BBC content as distinctive for its quality, but several of my research participants, while being proud of what they do within the restricted briefs and powers afforded them, expressed disappointment at the range and variety of programmes and sub-genres on offer to them (as programme makers) and to the audience. Some of that disappointment might be mitigated by financial factors (e.g. ‘I know the commissioners don’t have the money to make everything they want to’ [BBC Children’s Producer, Personal communication, 19 March, 2009]), but most often was seen as an institutional aversion to risk-taking, predicated on fear of commercial competition.

Although writing explicitly of adult drama, it is revealing that Garnett chooses to use parent/child relationships as a metaphor for various facets of broadcasting: far from criticising the BBC as paternalistic, he suggests that the diet of ‘junk’ with which the BBC ‘feeds’ its audience is, ‘perhaps its worst public service dereliction’; and explicitly states the writer/producer to be childlike, and so deserving of positive ‘parenting’ from executives. Thus:

Good parents will erect boundaries, around personal safety for instance, but will leave room for the child’s imagination to flourish. The children, with few material resources will invent elaborate worlds... This creative absorption needs room and time. The parents should not interfere. (Garnett 2009)

Garnett's evocation of the child as creative and the audience as childlike may be consistent with a paternalism that is very much out of fashion in the BBC (and perhaps nowhere more so than in the children's department, where adult producers are wary of being seen as patronising to their child audience), but, nonetheless, such constructions, built on the assumption that audience members might actually choose (or learn to appreciate) something other than bland and banal entertainments, are far more optimistic than the prevailing logically nihilistic discourse that we can only grab attention by running to stand still.

### **The 'Educational' Dimension**

The issues are yet more complicated for the child audience though because there are so many competing voices as to what (if any) makes appropriate content. To quote Casey *et al.*: 'Where children are concerned, everyone (priests, politicians, journalists, parents, teachers, psychologists, sociologists) has something to say' (2002, p.21) (note that children themselves are excluded from the list). In this way issues relating to children's television always seem to have an 'educational' or even quasi-moral dimension, an assumption that the messages of television somehow matter more for an audience still learning and growing, a presumption that television can 'make a difference'. This dimension suggests both creative power and responsibility. Several of my participants articulated this dimension of their perceived role as programme makers. Interestingly, as regards creativity, there was no consensus as to whether the 'educational' function of PSB was a limit or a spur. It should be noted that the term 'education' is used in an informal learning sense prevalent in the UK discourse around children's broadcasting. The US discourse, particularly relating to preschool television, uses 'education' in a

more didactic, pedagogic sense of curricular achievement (Kondo & Steemers 2007).

Sara Harkins, CBeebies Editor, spoke of the creative opportunity offered by the preschool audience:

They are the future. They are enthusiastic. They *want* to watch and learn. They are longing for good quality content. They revel in it. They lap it up and enjoy it. That is a huge privilege, because we've got the best audience ever. (Harkins, interview, 5 June, 2009)

The belief in the preschool child's wonder and delight in dedicated programming (which is borne out by numerous academic studies, e.g. Palmer 1986; Marsh *et al.* 2005) seems to offer producers huge creative freedoms; and some of the most innovative and ground-breaking children's television content – from *The Clangers* to *In the Night Garden* – has been made specifically for a preschool audience conceived of as being especially receptive to televisual forms, including the fantastic and whimsical. Harkins warns, however, that the 'natural' receptivity of the audience must not be used as an excuse for mediocre or formulaic content as, in fact, the vast choice of quality content for preschool children means that creative standards must remain high. Likewise, Simon Parsons believes that we should not be complacent or presume an infinite shelf-life of this content no matter how 'new' it seems to a receptive audience, arguing, 'Whether it is visual aesthetics or crossing the road, if it has changed then we need to update it' (Parsons, interview, 11 July, 2009). Implicit here is that all children's content carries some sort of learning function (for preschool children at least).

Although the notion of especial 'receptivity' is manifest in discourses around the CBeebies audience, in the 6-to-12- year-old (CBBC) audience it is superseded by the notion that children are especially discerning and difficult to please. Interestingly though,

most CBBC producers cite this perceived challenge of captivating their audience as the most rewarding and exciting aspect of their job, and frequently cite their own creativity and personality as ‘childlike’. Frustrations in creative processes and top-heavy management structures are thus frequently attributed to the thwarting of the producers’ instinct for what children actually want, as seen in this selection of producer quotes:

I know what kids think. I’ve always had a pretty good idea of what children want. I’m a big kid myself and I know what excites children. I know what it feels like. I know what is in their heads – I’m pretty in touch with children and what they want, and yet the commissioner always seems to want it to be more complicated and more difficult to achieve. (BBC Children’s Producer, interview, 19 March, 2009)

I put forward an idea about circuses and theme parks and the feedback was that kids today wouldn’t understand it. I mean, come on, they’re kids’ lands – and they all play *Rollercoaster Tycoon* and *Wii Carnival* – so how they can say that? I don’t know. It’s bizarre. (BBC Children’s Producer, interview, 2 June, 2009)

Sometimes you think, “Kids will like that. They just will.” You just *know* that they will. There doesn’t always have to be a big explanation for it. It is gut feeling. It is instinct. When children visit everyone asks them, ‘Tell us why it is funny’ and they say, ‘Because it just is’. But when I say that no one listens! If producers think it is funny then it should be accepted as funny because producers are good at their job. (BBC Children’s Producer, Personal communication, 23 March, 2009)

Further creative frustrations can also be discerned with what are expressed as ‘over-protective’ content and compliance restrictions which were frequently cited as constantly changing. I must stress that this was not articulated as annoyance at the BBC’s ultra-strict child-safety and risk-assessment procedures, or the avoidance of potentially imitative behaviours – indeed producers frequently lauded the BBC’s

desire to produce content that was ‘safe’ for children and ‘trusted’ by their parents – but rather was expressed as bewilderment at certain, seemingly random, decisions that changed the creative thrust of the content. An apposite example of this comes from the stop-motion animation sketch show *OOglies*. The show features inanimate objects that have anthropomorphic googly eyes attached. One character is a lonely Brussels sprout that nobody likes. The producers found themselves unable to show the sprout being picked up by the prongs of a fork onscreen because that constituted “impaling”. One of the producers noted, (albeit with a degree of amusement):

We had to scoop it up instead. But children use forks every day! It is crazy and schizophrenic rules. So no toasted marshmallows or fruit kebabs either. And it blocks creativity because everything you do has to be rewritten so it gets to the stage where you just think, ‘Tell me what to write and I will do it’. And it takes the fun out of it and you start to question your own judgement... And you don’t even know who is responsible for the decisions half the time – all you know is that what you see onscreen isn’t how you wrote it. (BBC Children’s Producer, interview, 2 June, 2009)

Such anecdotes – and there were many others – do suggest a BBC ultra-cautious of what it ‘teaches’ children, but nonetheless this producer was at pains to point out that it was a ‘stereotype’ to suggest that the executives were not themselves creative and talented, noting that all the BBC Scotland executive team came from impressive backgrounds in practical programme making: the implication is that the problems lie further up the institutional structure.

## **Conclusion**

The executives and production staff of BBC Scotland children’s department are unanimous in the value that they place on creativity

as an intrinsic public service value. While that value is prized, the means by which it can best be achieved within the institutional BBC structure is open to question, with those at production level often expressing limits to their creative autonomy. There is a clearly manifest desire and enthusiasm to serve the children's audience with quality television content that marks the best in creative competition, but frequently a prevailing climate of risk-aversion is expressed as a barrier to the fullest use of the individual creative talents of producers. Although this may be true of all departments and genres within the BBC, it is particularly problematic within the children's department because of the construction of childhood as a period of especial 'receptivity' to content.

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