

VLV Conference - A Glimmer of Hope?

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I'm thrilled to address this Conference with its theme - A Glimmer of Hope?

Well after Barack Obama's historic victory last night, we have to believe in Hope, that's if we never give up and are prepared to fight for what we believe in.

So I stand here as a symbol of the celebration of perseverance. Someone who lives with hope in her heart. Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, after things had taken a turn for the worse.

Like Cassandra seeing the future but finding it hard to convince others of catastrophic outcomes.

Well that's how I see Children Television!

The industry has persevered through good times and bad. It has risen to great heights only to crumble because the powers that be, couldn't see the disasters looming ahead.

But I'm an optimist. and I do see a glimmer of hope, a small chink of light that needs to be turned into a ray of hope for the sake of all our futures and the well being of our society, financially, physiologically, emotionally and morally.

I feel deeply passionate about children and I have dedicated more than half my life to them.

For the past 32 years I have worked in children's television, both in front and behind the camera.

I come from an era when children's programmes shone brightly across our land giving hope encouragement, aspiration, love and inspiration. Influencing millions of young minds with knowledge and excitement stimulating their imagination.

Well that's what I am told everywhere I go right across the country. Every day of my life someone, somewhere tells me how much I and the television programmes I appeared in, have positively influenced their life.

Programmes such as Playschool, even though the programme finished 20 years ago and I must say to my great sadness.

I was truly heart broken when it was taken off. To me a light in the children's world was put out! Mind you, that's nothing compared to the crisis we are facing today!

My heart aches so much, when love for children and their well being isn't given top priority.

But I do feel uplifted when every day I am approached by people, teachers, musicians, artists, dancers, designers, who all tell me they have all been inspired by programmes such as Playschool.

I suppose Playschool was a sort of Kids South Bank Show. It had everything poetry, art, music, dance, storytelling, drama, even mind games! Which window was it going to be. Round, Square, Arched! Oh decisions, decisions!

Playschool had all the cultural elements to stimulate the creative minds of future generations, with all its innocence, free from commercialism.

The programme also helped to advance cultural diversity because people tell me, it was the first time they had seen someone like me on television. And since then children's programmes have always practised cultural diversity with ease, both in content and on screen presence.

Because of my presence on Playschool, I persuaded publishers to change their policy and start having, Black, Asian and Chinese faces in picture books. Something which was not present pre - 1980. Which has proven beneficial to our society, by making young children feel included as though they belonged. The way Children's programmes made them feel.

The people involved in Children's programming, understood their craft and responsibilities and knew how to deliver their brief.

My fellow presenters like Johnny Ball made Maths and Science fun and exciting. Brian Cant instilled humour the use of language and word play into young minds. Producers like the legendary Cynthia Felgate, understood then and some producers still understand now the importance of the cultural role television plays in shaping children's minds. Part of this is to accurately reflect the world they live in.

The BBC has always provided us with a solid foundation of outstanding PSB programmes, which is what we would expect from it and it continues to do so.

But the commercial channels have also played their part in the past in making a difference and pushed the BBC continually.

Programmes like Book Tower which stimulated creativity and reading challenged Jackanory. Rainbow challenged Playschool, Magpie challenged Blue Peter. Dramas like Press Gang and Children's Ward which addressed so many difficult issues, challenged Grange Hill and Byker Grove. And more recently, My Parents are Aliens, were it still around, would be giving, Sarah Jane's Adventures, a run for its money.

There is no doubt that the UK has always had a strong tradition in delivering high quality children's programmes. As I've said, not only on the BBC but also in the Commercial sector. Programmes like, My Life As A Popat, it was the only children's programme featuring an Asian family on British television. Michaela's Wild Challenge, which explores nature and the environment. Rooted, where children find out their family's country of origin. How, which stimulated interest in science. Art Attack, which encouraged creativity, were all essential viewing for all children and let's not forget, Thunderbirds, which fired up the imagination.

Because many of these types of programmes have now gone or are disappearing, children have no alternative but to be sucked into watching adult programmes such as, Deal or No Deal and the various Soaps. Many of which are shown early evening, and are being influenced by adult concepts, before they have had a chance to develop and build their own foundations and life skills based on programmes which are geared towards childhood development. The old saying 'you can't run before you can walk' seems appropriate'.

So appropriate children's television is essential to childhood development. It can improve attention, expressive language, comprehension, vocabulary, articulation and music skills.

I am a great believer in selective viewing and encouraging children to use the OFF button - to self regulate.

Having said that, research has shown that for the majority of children television is not passive. They are inspired to do other things while they are watching tv. They see screen characters as close friends, which I can personally vouch for. Because every day of my life people come up to me and say, when they were little they knew I loved them, especially children who were in care, who had no one to love them. Presenters like me were their life line.

Through the screen children also learn to sing dance as well as have discussions and debates in the playground about the programmes they watch.

For children, whose second language is English, there is a positive effect on verbal skills, reading and general knowledge.

Households with lower incomes tend to watch more television suggesting that high quality programming could potentially be more important for children in those type of homes. For whatever reason parents tend to be more protective than ever towards their children these days, because of the society we live in. Therefore television is a way of their kids learning life skills. So it needs to reflect a diverse society, showing people, old and young, of all cultures, playing an important part in society.

I'll give you an example, I've received many letters from children after they have seen a programme I made for BBC Education called, 'Coming to England'.

They tell me quite openly that they hated black people but after seeing the programme and having it explained what it's like to be a different colour or from a different culture they realised that they needed to get to know people before judging them. That is the power of television!

So children's television has a huge responsibility to fulfil these needs in a modern world filled with mistrust, commercialism, celebrity worship and mass exploitation of young people.

There is no doubt that children's television produced responsibly has a beneficial effect on children and young people. You just have to ask child physiologists, teachers and parents.

Also Broadcasters who ignore an audience they hope to engage and retain for life will soon realise that they cannot expect loyalty as they've not earned it. Nor have they shown any consideration for their young viewers.

So why and when did this all change? Why are we where we are today at this crossroads. And down which road is the glimmer of hope?

Well I believe we got to where we are because big business saw children's programming as a way of making millions and sharks who had no real love for children's well being ventured into our once specialised waters, 'our cottage industry' you could call it!

This allowed commercialism to spread like a cancer into this once sacred enclave in broadcasting.

As Children's digital channels sprung up, producers and presenters began to see Children's as a stepping stone to further their careers. Merchandising became the norm and the publicity this generated made people ask, "Well .why should Children's programming be treated sympathetically or given any concessions, when certain programmes are making millions?"

But those high earners were just a tiny proportion of the industry. Yet everyone was tarred with the same brush and it had a huge impact and decimated this once thriving industry, which until recently was the third largest UK media export, behind film and drama. But when advertising revenue all but dried up, so did productions. And the "Death Knell". sounded even louder.

The Cassandra in me saw the writing on the wall years ago but no one would listen.

I've always believed in the importance of putting children and young people's interest first, giving them the best. That's why I have remained in Children's Programming.

Part of this commitment was my 20 year long campaign to create a Minister for Children, which fortunately became a reality in 2004.

Unfortunately, it didn't come in time to create joined-up Government policy when the 2003 Communication Bill was being drawn up.

Like many others I wrote begging the Culture Secretary for strong provisions to be put in place in the Act for two things, Cultural diversity, and for guaranteed Children's output on commercial channels.

Because there were huge obvious loop holes which would have allowed commercial broadcasters off the hook to fulfil their obligations and continue producing PSB Children's Programmes. Having drawn the DCMS's attention to this I was told by them that the Broadcasters would realise their responsibilities to children and act on it. Oh how wrong that was!

During my time on the OFCOM Content Board - "A Guardian for PSB Content for citizens and consumers", I continually tried to keep society's youngest consumers at the forefront of my colleagues minds. And for a while we managed to persuade the Commercial Broadcasters into continuing to produce high quality PSB Children's programmes, partly because there were people at the top of ITV who supported that line and believed in it's importance.

However OFCOM's hands were tied and as regulators we were unable to intervene and force broadcasters not to dump children's productions so that they could increase their Daytime viewing figures and profits for their shareholders.

OFCEM did try to hold back the inevitable but it had few options. Firstly we gave in slightly and reluctantly reduced the hours.

At OFCEM we knew we were pushing our luck demanding that ITV continue to produce programmes.

But then there was a change of command at the top of ITV! And their lawyers stepped in and almost overnight production of Children's PSB programmes on ITV was a thing of the past. And there was nothing we could do legally. Or to force them to do otherwise.

If only the people putting the act together had listened. Well at least if they did, we would have had a few years grace and the opportunity to continue to produce great children's programmes before the digital switchover took place across the country. Even though ITV had reduced their hours, they would have had some obligations to produce a substantial amount of Children's PSB programmes to be shown daily, even if only on one of their digital channels.

Now was that too much to ask?

The failure to foresee this situation I believe, has made OFCOM look powerless in the eyes of the industry. And it has also been costly to the development of our children.

It's shameful that so little is thought of about children who after all are our policy makers and leaders of the future.

We know the importance of this scenario, but the message needs to spread nationwide.

So over the last year or so through working with PACT, through my website and through my speaking appearances around the country, I have campaigned to make the general public aware of the fact that there is so little new UK production taking place or being commissioned at the moment, which always surprises them. Currently just 1% of children's productions is made here in the UK - that's correct just 1%!

They know something is wrong, because everywhere I go up and down the country people are asking me, 'What has happened to the quality of Children's programmes?'

Why are children being exposed to more and more cheap imports which 'stifle' our children's minds rather than stimulating them? And why aren't they given a balanced diet? Which I believe is essential.

The diet of programming they are receiving at the moment is sucking our children's brains.

And children are being exposed to dross coming through the airwaves, even in their bedrooms, watching programmes which are totally unsuitable for them on many levels.

I personally would like to ban all tv's in children's bedrooms. But that's another debate!

Producers of early evening adult programmes which have eaten into the Children's schedule don't consider the impact they have on young viewers who watch their programmes and why should they, that's not their remit.

It's the responsibility of children's broadcasters, to prepare the minds of children with the programmes they produce by giving them a balanced diet of programmes in order for the young viewers to formulate a broad outlook on the world around them.

Children also need consistency not with hyper presentation or low production values, but wholesome British based iconic substance

They need continuity, as I've already described, they like to see the same faces and programmes which make them feel safe and secure. Programmes which evolve like, Blue Peter, now in it's 50th year! Congratulations Blue Peter. It's so great to see a programme like this still on our screen!

This is a perfect example of how a quality PSB programme can span generations and have an affectionate place in the hearts of millions.

I wonder what Playschool would have looked like today if it was allowed to evolve!

Our children are being deprived of more of this type of good PSB programming, helping them to develop into teenagers, then into adults.

There is a school of thought which says, "That we have to give children what they want".

Some say they want to watch adult programmes. Well I personally believe that most children might not be emotionally equipped to take on, fully understand and rationalise what they are viewing on adult programmes.

So my view is that "We have to give children what they need. Not necessarily what they want".

If we give kids burgers and chips every day, they will love it. But it's not good for them in the long run. If we give children creative top quality programmes communicating the content through the eyes of a child. Then we will undoubtedly hold their interest and engage them!

We have to holistically widen the horizons of their world and prepare them for the next stage of their lives by giving them that first time experience.

A dedicated Children's producer can be like a magician that can hypnotise and conjure up excitement on the screen for young viewers. That's what we have got to get back to.

No matter what it takes!

There are over 25 children's channels which sounds great. So what are we going on about?

My research has found that we need, Quality not Quantity. So perhaps these channels should pool their resources and form some super channels to increase finance for quality programmes.

Because along with the sharks who ventured into our waters hoping to make a quick buck, many production companies, who truly care about quality programmes for children are going to the wall. Because the marketplace is shrinking before our very eyes. This is so sad for our future. Yes it might be a case where less is best. But this trend is not discriminating. We are losing good people. People who understand how to communicate with children, writers, producers and directors. who believe. like me 'Childhood last a lifetime' and that everything we do effects young minds and stays with them forever!

So rather than just trying to fill the airwaves with repetitive imports, we should work towards giving them a balanced diet of predominately UK programmes made with that most important ingredient love!

There has been a flashes of hope with Channel Four coming onto the scene to provide programmes for that under served age group, the young teens!

But we want more, because Channel Four's ability to invest in Children's is already severely under pressure and no programmes have been commissioned to date.

Yet the impression has been given that the crisis has been averted.

So what I want is for the Government to open its purse and pour money into our industry.

Not by top slicing the BBC coffers but to find funds for quality PSB programmes to once again challenge and bolster the BBC's excellent output.

Take CBeebies for instance, it's the most popular digital children's service in the UK watched by 2 million per week at a cost of just over one pence an hour.

That's what 'Children programmes specialists' can do with just a small amount of money.

We just need the opportunities to do the same and challenge the BBC.

We don't want to take away funding from them, because even BBC children's programming are suffering from budget cuts and that will undoubtedly affect the type of programmes that children need for their development, into fine decent adults of the future who grow up with morality and integrity!

If I had to compromise on the issue of top slicing to assist the commercial world it would be, to give the money to 'not for profit' companies who recycle the revenue back into programming not into the pockets of shareholders.

I'm hoping that the financial situation the world finds itself in at the moment is going to be a good way of illustrating, how a lack of forward thinking, greed and lack of control, can have disastrous consequences.

So take heed Gordon Brown and your Ministers. Please put measures in place now before it's too late or it could go on to cost the nation much more than we are asking for today, to mend our industry.

I have had correspondence with the Prime Minister who has reassured me that the future of our the Children's television industry is high up on his Government's Agenda. Anna Home and myself have had our names mentioned in a Parliamentary Debate, about our concerns of this crisis. So ministers are listening!.

Ed Balls has been quoted as saying, "Governments take notice of campaigns when people repeatedly keep banging on".

So the cry has got to come not just from us in the industry, but more importantly, from the general public too! It's got to come from all sides.

I'm sure we are going to hear a lot more about the political progress during this conference today, to give us a glimmer of hope!

Our children are said to be the most unloved unhappy depressed children in Europe if not the world. How can we sit back and not do whatever it takes to change all that!

The Government needs to be reminded that their 'Every Child Matters' policy should consider and include what children watch on television in their formative years. Because the media has a great influence on their behaviour and thinking.

Children need positive memories they can lovingly pass on to their children in the future!

There is no going back, to the 'good old days'. So we need a major re-think and a real desire to re-build a solid foundation. An ethos.

Left to it's own devices, I fear a once flourishing industry could become a grave yard!

So I call upon the Government, OFCOM, MP's and the nation not to lose sight of the problem. It has not gone away! Please don't abandon future generations by ignoring this critical situation.

Just like the financial crisis we are experiencing today there were warnings the Children's TV Crisis was coming 'But No' action was taken.

Let's take action now to stop a complete collapse. Let's urge everyone to do something positive and see Children's PSB Programming as a special 'Stand alone' case and join us to find a responsible solution. So that we can repair the damage already taken place.

We can and must make that difference. As Barack Obama says, "Yes we Can!"

We have to do this for the sake of our future - all our children - long term!

END

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