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Abstract:

150 Word Abstract

Moving away from the dominant discourse of US experience, this article looks at how the production of local content for children remains a central issue in many parts of the world, in spite of the growth of transnational media and the apparent abundance of content for children worldwide. Drawing on a pre-summit workshop on Children's Content at the Core of Public Service Media, held at the 2014 World Summit on Media for Children, it considers the lack of academic perspectives on production, before exploring with workshop participants the regulatory and funding frameworks for quality children's content, and the conditions for their successful implementation. There is a continuing problem about producing sustainable children's content, and western models are not always the most appropriate at providing solutions, which need to be nuanced and tailored to different national, regional and local contexts.

Ten Key words

regulation; children's television; localisation; public service media; World Summit on Media for Children; Global South; policy; media economics; production studies; funding

Word length – Text and references – 3995 Words

Looking back across a field of studies that deals broadly with children's screen media, we can observe a longstanding, rich seam of research that deals with the media's impact on children (see Pecora, Murray & Wartella, 2007). Yet this research mostly reflects US concerns about cognitive development and educational achievement. Beyond the US the debates are different, often focused on the impact of large volumes of US-originated children's animation, and its effects on other societies and cultures. The debate about local production is not an issue in the US, but it is deeply significant in the rest of the world, and our understanding of it represents a future challenge as the production landscape alters.

Moving away from US experience, this commentary draws on our participation as facilitators of a pre-summit workshop on Children's Content at the Core of Public Service Media in a Multiplatform Era[1], which took place at the World Summit on Media for Children (WSMC), in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in September 2014. Established in 1995 as a global forum to explore issues and promote dialogue about children's media, the Australia-based WSMC stages a conference every three to four years with representatives from industry, academia, education and activist organisations (www.wsmcf.com).

In a crucial transitional period for television, our workshop focus on the principles, policies and regulatory foundations of public service media, provided a rare opportunity for exchanging insights and ideas with colleagues from both the Global South and the Global North, in order to think more broadly about whether some of the issues that confront children's media production everywhere can be tackled in similar ways in the future. This essay therefore considers the production, policy and industry

contexts that form the essential backdrop to any understanding of how children's media are developing, and the extent to which scholars need to look more deeply at international developments and experiences.

Quality Media Content for Children Worldwide . . .

The challenge for our workshop was how to apply the public service principles of universal access, diversity, independence and distinctiveness in a more deregulated digital landscape, bearing in mind that the benefits of digital media are not readily available in all parts of the world. In parallel to our discussions, the challenge for the World Summit in 2014 was how to update its 1995 Children's Television Charter (WSMC, 1995) to one that still demands high quality, accessible, diverse, non-exploitative, sufficiently funded, culturally appropriate and appropriately regulated content, yet also takes account of new forms of content, distribution and commercial exploitation, that often transcend the national frontiers within which local content is formulated. In her summit welcoming address Patricia Edgar, the founder of WSMC, underlined these transformations, noting how old paradigms were apparently breaking down as power shifted from traditional broadcasters to young people 'who know what they want and where they can get it'. The summit was in her words about welcoming new players and shaking established thinking, but at the time of writing a revised Charter had yet to be formulated. The difficulties in adjusting it in a rapidly transforming media landscape are clearly apparent in a five-page WSMC 2014 declaration, Empowering Children in 21st Century, which was discussed in detail at the summit (WSMC, 2014). This pledges to reframe children's media, but its length and complexity reveal how difficult it is to balance competing discourses about

protecting children as well as empowering them, as it draws on different experiences and expectations of children's media.

. . . In a Changing Media Landscape

These broader geographical, cultural and policy contexts of children's media in different countries are not always readily visible or comprehensible to scholars (see Lustyik & Zanker, 2013a, p. 160), not least because of the complex interweaving of 'micro contexts' of production locations and practices with the 'macro forces' of politics, economics and culture (Mayer, 2009, p. 15). This is especially important in a period of rapid transition in advanced media economies, as industry commentators speculate about children being 'more digital', 'playing Minecraft, watching YouTube and playing with apps' (Dredge, 2014), perceiving these activities as representing challenges to children's entertainment companies as they search for new markets and new business models. Commenting about this future, Dylan Collins, Chief Executive of UK-based children's marketing and research network SuperAwesome recently stated: 'Fundamentally there will be two types of companies over the next three four five years. There will be the big ones, who can consolidate and create economies of scale. And then the niche companies who can make and craft beautiful things and charge a premium price' (Collins, 2014). Collins' assessment of a world dominated by 'big' players and 'niche' companies, is of course centred on industry developments in North America and parts of Western Europe, where there is evidence that older broadcasting models are beginning to be disrupted as younger generations, in particular, start to access content in new ways and increasingly from large global aggregators such as YouTube (Ofcom, 2014). Yet these developments seem quite distant from those parts of the world where the main issues are not about second

screen cultures, "digital natives", video-on-demand, tablets and mobile consumption, but whether children have access to any local children's content at all, regardless of the platform of delivery. As children's media evolve we must not ignore these contexts.

Outside of the US the provision of local content has always been one of the key issues in a global market dominated by large US players. Yet in many countries it is national broadcasters who remain at the forefront of local children's media, with funding mechanisms and public mandates that require them to meet certain benchmarks in terms of origination, innovation and relevance to diverse age groups, even if these conditions are rarely particularly onerous. In all circumstances policy-makers who are supposed to have the public interest at heart, need to decide where resources are best positioned to get the best cultural and financial outcomes in a climate where there is simultaneously both abundant content but often paucity in diversity and range.

Academic Perspectives on Production

A better understanding of the full range of different media landscapes for children is especially important in view of trade press coverage, which has a tendency to focus on what the Global South receives rather than what it produces, and an international community of television executives whose 'industry lore' has been built on 'universal', western-inspired ideas about childhood (Havens, 2007). In the academic field there is greater breadth and depth of coverage. Employing a global perspective, Dafna Lemish (2015), for example, offers a comprehensive typography of the children's media terrain, highlighting important issues and themes ranging from development, literacy and gender to participation, policy and advocacy, as well as a global study (Lemish, 2010) on gender representations in children's television, that

offers rare insight into the views of producers from 65 countries. Recently published handbooks on children's media have also contributed in redressing the imbalance between US scholarship and scholarship from other parts of the world (Drotner & Livingstone, 2008; Lemish, 2013).

However, we know rather less about the production of children's screen media and the organisations and individuals behind different types of production or even the changing policy, institutional and economic circumstances of children's media production in general. In the last decade there have been studies that deal with: production issues in US children's television (Bryant, 2010; McAllister & Giglio, 2005); with local TV production in New Zealand, Hungary and Qatar (Lustyik & Zanker, 2013b; Lustyik & Smith, 2010); as well as television production in Australia (Potter, 2015), the UK (Steemers, 2010) and Canada (Davis et al, 2008). A survey of JOCAM's output over 10 years reveals many important examples of scholarship from around the world, but few articles that deal directly with production issues or production scenarios that move beyond television, because production research is hard to do, requires trusted access, and tends to be dominated by experiences in the Global North. We know little about production communities beyond the US and other English-speaking territories (UK, Canada, Australia), who also happen to be significant producers of children's content. Recent work in the growing field of production studies, with some exceptions (Sakr & Steemers, 2015), has tended to ignore the children's media sector almost entirely in spite of the complexities surrounding production for children and the close affinities with commercial forms of exploitation related to toys, gaming, apps and online products, which are not subject to the same policy and regulatory oversight as broadcasting.

We do know a great deal about the international production of some content, notably the US format *Sesame Street*, which has been widely documented and studied, both in the US and in different international contexts (Fisch & Truglio 2001; Hendershot, 1998). However, *Sesame Street*, because of its genesis in the US and educational goals, is rather exceptional, and involves applying US and *Sesame* practices that are not uncontroversial (see Hendershot, 1998; Lampel & Honig, 2006). We know far less about the production circumstances and motivations for children's content in many other countries and the trade-offs that take place as the number of transnational productions, often led by larger international production entities, has expanded. And we know even less about the assumptions that those who produce, distribute and market content make about their young audiences.

How should we account for this neglect of production outside of the US and other developed media markets? What are the issues affecting local and transnational production of children's media in different environments? How do we even define local content that may involve transnational partnerships and collaborations? And how should we approach questions about the broader institutional settings of production and the tensions that exist between organisational, legal and cultural constraints on the one hand, and the creative autonomy and innovation that drive quality on the other. Can we produce a toolkit or wish list of desirable criteria and regulations that help to deal with market and state pressures that affect choice and diversity in a positive way, even as regulation appears to be a less effective tool for dealing with a deregulated twenty-first century digital media world of transnational providers, like YouTube, who seem unencumbered by national regulations relating to children's content.

Exploring Regulatory and Funding Frameworks for Quality Children's Content

In the WSMC workshop in Kuala Lumpur, an exploration of the efficacy of public service models for maximising effective content creation for children afforded insight into how we might address these issues in very different national contexts in ways that tackled local-glocal-global tensions. It provided an opportunity to explore the degree to which funding is always crucial for producing the best outcomes for children, but it is clearly not the only factor. With 40 participants from 20 different countries including Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Kiribati, Malaysia, the Maldives, Morocco, Myanmar, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Uganda and the UK we were able to explore how different regulatory, institutional and cultural factors impact the creation of innovative and diverse content that is relevant to children. Broadcast provision for children ranged from 30 minutes a week in the newest state, Timor-Leste, to 3 hours a day in Morocco. While some participants referred to locally-run dedicated children's channels (Australia, China, South Korea, UK) and a wide array of online content, including multiplatform extensions and streaming services offered by public service broadcasters, many others were constrained in what they could offer children because of limited slots on mainstream broadcast television, and because the conditions in which children's media could flourish are either weak or not available. All participants underlined the necessity of positive state interventions in the form of financial and regulatory support for local children's media to thrive. Together we pinpointed determinants of success in serving children including the start date of television broadcasts (indicating history and continuity), sources of funding (showing levels of independence), access to a range of delivery platforms, the amount of time dedicated to animation, the presence of a vibrant

production community (evidenced through international competition entries) and relevance through content that catered for different ethnicities, language groups, ages and interests. Other indicators included child-friendly legislation that underpinned funding mechanisms.

When participants were asked to give examples of high quality children's programmes in their countries that were also popular, six representatives from the Maldives, Philippines, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Malaysia and Pakistan mentioned *Sesame Street* rather than local productions. These ranged from the US original to US-government funded official adaptations in Afghanistan (*Baghch-E-Simsim*), Pakistan (*Sim Sim Hamara*) and Bangladesh (*Sisimpur*), and co-productions with Sesame Workshop such as *Batibot* in the Philippines. For all participants, whether from wealthy or less wealthy countries, funding of local children's programmes was a major issue, reinforced by the commonly held industry belief that it was not economically rewarding to make children's content. Yet this seemed more acute in less wealthy countries, where local programming was frequently dropped for budgetary reasons in favour of cheaper animation imports, or where children's programming had to attract advertising before it was even screened (Philippines, Brazil). Sponsorship, product placement and advertising were seen as challenging for all, because promotion of toys, fizzy drinks and salty or sugary snacks risks compromising independence and trust, but is also often the only route to funding children's content.

Those countries that appeared to have a more stable production environment, producing sufficient quantities of quality children's content had a history of positive regulation that included public service broadcasting, licensing regimes with quotas for

certain types of children's content, access to public funding, tax breaks, and systems for monitoring outcomes. This was in addition to negative interventions such as advertising bans, restrictions on violent or offensive content, watershed restrictions and the pre-vetting of content. In South Korea (KBS) public service broadcasters have pursued an educational approach to children's content, with minimal imports, that mark them out from commercial rivals. In Australia ABC has followed a more traditional public service mandate encompassing entertainment, education and information, that is complemented by transmission quotas and proportional spend for commercial television channels. This compares to New Zealand, which has dispensed with public service broadcasting as an institution in favour of a distributed public service system, where a separate body, NZ On Air, funds children's content for a variety of platforms, and where there is no requirement on any broadcaster to commission children's content. Even in these countries, however, there are challenges as the landscape changes, driven by the shift towards multiplatform delivery, changes in children's media consumption and the upsurge in new transnational intermediaries such as YouTube, Netflix and Amazon. Funding shortfalls have placed all broadcasters and producers under pressure just as they are challenged to innovate with multiplatform content to secure their relevance to future generations of children.

Based on the evidence of several workshop participants from the Global South, it was clear that there was a situation of no regulation or virtually no positive regulatory interventions to support children's content. In the absence of government policy or support measures, combined with the lack of distribution outlets for local content, production communities were not in a position to build the development and pre-production capacity necessary for supporting local children's content. Nevertheless local content was clearly seen as a means of forging identities. In a new country such

as Timor- Leste, which only became independent in 2002, origination was seen as a means of reaching out to children through storytelling. In ethnically diverse Malaysia, the animation series *Upin and Ipin* was clearly 'about Malaysian culture' in that it depicted children from Malaysia's different ethnic communities. In Qatar, government-funded children's channels, Jeem TV, (formerly Al Jazeera Children's Channel) and preschool channel, Baraem, projected a pan-Arab identity that reflected Qatar's wider political ambitions (Sakr & Steemers, 2015). However here too, increasing market pressures are a growing challenge. Since a management change in 2011 Jeem has reduced local content in favour of more US imports from Disney and a more commercial strategy involving advertising and licensed merchandise. For some countries with limited financial resources and a lack of in-depth expertise (Timor-Leste, Kiribati, Afghanistan) there is heavy reliance on overseas NGOs for small-scale projects that provide media production training for both adults and children. Some, however, have suggested that NGOs, who focus on training and advice, are prone to offer one-sided partnerships that fail to adequately recognise the skills and story-telling traditions already present in developing countries. Overseas assistance by NGOs was of little help if there were no structures, systems or state support to provide any continuity.

The workshop discussions suggest that we may need to look closer at emerging alternatives to state and commercial broadcasters who have not always catered adequately to young audiences. According to one Hong Kong participant, dissatisfied with local broadcasting provision, "We don't need to do public service, we don't need to run TV stations. All we need is the Internet". This implies that while the ethos of public service linked to distinctiveness, universal access, independence and diversity

is still valid in a more complex media world, there is less confidence in its delivery by existing institutions.

In our discussions about public service values, universality was not just about delivery on widely accessible free platforms, but also about language and content that was relevant and readily understood by children. Diversity was understood as opinions, different genres and approaches that included entertainment and appealed to diverse audiences to promote social cohesion. Achieving diversity in some countries was more challenging because of multiple ethnicities and religious affiliations (Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia). Independence was discussed in terms of independence from the state, corporate and commercial interests and was pivotal in terms of trust. Distinctiveness was seen as closely related to independence and diversity, but in terms of quality was difficult to define. Several made the point that too often local programming emphasised the educationally-dense content that adults think children need at the expense of entertainment, which is what children wanted. Some noted that content ultimately has to appeal to children and that there was little point investing in material that children found too boring to watch. Two participants suggested that the only way to assess and measure 'quality' in local children's content was to measure it against either its educational or entertaining purposes, alongside its attractiveness to children, a task that may become harder in a multiplatform universe where content is harder to locate. In these discussions it was the orientation and objectives of public service that mattered to participants, regardless of the platform. For one regulator an overriding concern was whether children would be able to find quality content online without significant expenditure and effort in online marketing.

Tailoring Solutions

If we acknowledge that there is a continuing problem about producing sustainable local children's content whatever the platform and whatever the location, how can we address it as academics? Of necessity this means thinking not just about collecting data and comparing experiences, but also about theorising the inherent institution-versus-autonomy contradictions, which exist everywhere and working together with colleagues from emerging media economies to pinpoint and explain these contradictions. From our workshop discussions it is clear that there are special aspects of this tension in relation to children's content precisely because of the culture-preservation and identity fixation, and because local production institutions in many countries are close to ruling regimes, thus compromising independence and trust. Second, it may be that western conventions about children's content represent a straitjacket for non-western countries. If children are unconcerned about where and how they access content (platform agnosticism), there may be scope to analyse new formats and storytelling techniques (on mobile platforms for example), that are better suited to cultures where more traditional forms of broadcasting have failed to serve children well. For evidence from diverse national, regional and geo-linguistic contexts suggests that globalisation is far from the only story in the development of children's media, and that we need greater understanding of the regional differences and possibilities for the development of services for young audiences in different parts of the world. This involves more than cultural relativism, where all cultures are worthy in their own right and of equal value, because there are clearly disparities in provision, equality of access and state intervention. As scholars, we also need to think about workable solutions and toolkits that propose rather than simply document. The institution of public service broadcasting might not work for all situations, but the principles underpinning a public service ethos are still valid for a variety of platforms

and content, not least because at their very best they prioritise children as young individuals with their own sense of identity, place and community, which mean different things in different places (Lustyik and Zanker, 2013a). The abiding takeaway from this session was that the combination of positive regulatory interventions and funding could provide the framework for diverse, distinctive productions within a supportive ecology of relevant stakeholders. In the closing words of one participant "The key issues facing people involved in children's screen content are: getting sufficient powers to do what is needed and sufficient funding to make original content that children want to view".

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[1] The workshop was led by Professors Naomi Sakr and Jeanette Steemers and was sponsored by the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, now the Public Media Alliance http://publicmediaalliance.org/