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## CHILDREN'S TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

During the celebrations of the BBC's 50th anniversary, there were occasional references to the social and cultural significance of radio's 'Children's Hour' and nostalgic memories of early television pictures of *'Muffin the Mule'*. Those of us who are caught up in the difficult task of providing a complete television service for the ten million children in this country between two and twelve years old feel that we now live in another world and another climate.

I have just finished planning out programme schedules for the next year from April 1973 to March 1974. The seven hundred hours of television that we hope to provide includes every kind of output – drama, light entertainment, sport and outside broadcasts, news, current affairs, documentaries, arts, science and general features, magazine programmes, music, films, cartoons, puppets, story-telling and pre-school programmes. We make over half of these and buy the rest from many different parts of the world. Every weekday we try to provide a mixture of entertainment, information and imaginative stimulus for children of different ages and tastes.

Since I came to Children's Programmes Department five years ago, I have learnt that it is as useless to generalize about children as it is about people;

children are as diverse in their backgrounds and interests as the adults they will soon become. They also have changing tastes and needs at different stages in their development. I sometimes receive letters from parents complaining because we include American cartoons among our programmes. Certainly there are children who do not like cartoons but many children go through a stage when cartoons are their favourite form of relaxation, just as their parents may have enjoyed comics or school stories for a few years when they were young. I would share this concern about cartoons if they were as large a part of our output as they are in American television, but I think we would be providing too stolid a mixture if we omitted completely an element which many children find exciting and uproariously funny.

One way in which we attempt to cater for a wide range of ages and tastes is through magazine programmes. The most popular of all is the twice weekly *'Blue Peter'*. Although it is aimed straight at the intelligent eight-year-old, it is designed for the whole family to watch together, although each age group may choose different aspects of the programme. The three presenters are always seen in a familiar set with their animals and this gives a feeling of security to the youngest viewers. From that safe haven we can open the door to a world of adventure, entertainment and information: – expeditions to the South Seas – walking the high wire with a circus act, telling the story of the Russian Revolution, or demonstrating the latest techniques in high-speed photography. But everything ends back in the safe familiar surroundings of the *'Blue Peter'* studio.

'Access' is one of the current jargon words in television. *'Blue Peter'* has been giving access to its audience for the past ten years. The programmes are based on information gleaned from the four thousand letters that are received every week. As well as making programme suggestions, children write seeking information about everything under the sun, but some just want to make a personal contact, like the seven year old from Denham who wrote:

"Dear Blue Peter, I hope Jason's leg is better. My pussy has flu, and so have I . . ."



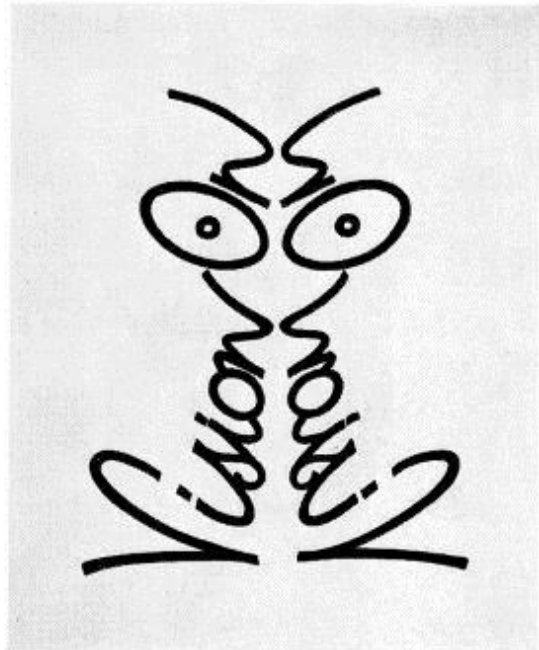
*'Blue Peter'* viewers gave a vast number of unwanted spoons and forks which were melted down and sold. The money obtained helped provide holiday caravans.

\*British Broadcasting Corporation

Their trust is well founded because every letter gets a personal reply.

When children are invited to join in helping others less fortunate than themselves the response is almost overwhelming and shows their capacity for understanding human problems presented to them through the programme: for instance homelessness, the aftermath of civil war or the plight of the aged. When children wrote to ask what they could do to help starving war victims of both sides of the civil war between Biafra and Nigeria whom they had seen on the News, the programme presenters suggested that if children could send in some old worn-out woollen socks or jerseys, these could be turned into money to buy a medical unit. It was estimated that 144,000 packages would pay for the unit but within a month two million packages were received and six medical units equipped with necessary drugs, and, later, agricultural equipment and units to help in rehabilitation and re-planting were provided. The story is, of course, continued every time a filmed report of one of the vehicles in action is included in the programme so that the children who gave their time to collect old clothes can see the results of their labours. It is a sobering realization that *'Blue Peter'* viewers have actually been responsible for saving 176 lives through inshore rescue boats, for giving 60 African children the chance of education, for providing holidays for 3,000 deprived British children, four buses for old people and eight flats for homeless families – all through the energetic collecting of used stamps, old paperback books, old metal objects and woollen or cotton rags.

Television is sometimes accused of stultifying imagination. Our experience of children's participation and response to programmes suggests that it can often be a stimulus to creative thought and activity. Nearly all the programmes we make ourselves include suggestions for making, painting, writing, inventing or follow-up reading. The plays, poems, stories and pictures that arrive by the sackful are not all works of art, but many show enthusiasm, care and enjoyment in the making. They also often show a maturity, good sense and desire for experience that sometimes surprises over-protective adults. For the last three years we have invited children to make and send in their own eight mm films. These indicate that children who have grown up with cinema and television as natural accompaniments to their lives take for granted sophisticated techniques that many of us have painstakingly learnt over years of attempting to make good films. Some of the children's films show a fascination with violence or horror, and critics of television may seek confirmation here that children are reproducing what they have seen too frequently. I think this overlooks the need we all have in growing up to flex our emotional muscles and to experience imaginatively every human feeling of which we are capable. Some of the children's films are just imitative, others truly original and sometimes poetic; many show a facility in the use of moving pictures that suggests



*'Grog' – one of the characters in the award winning programme 'Vision On'.*

that television may have aroused a visual awareness that those of us who grew up with radio tend to undervalue.

One of the most original television programmes in the world is *'Vision On'*. Its uniqueness lies in its concentration on the picture. Although television is a visual medium, most television programmes depend on speech for comprehension, just as foreign films need sub-titles. *'Vision-On'* eschews words and sub-titles because it developed out of a programme for the deaf. It has now broadened this aim to include all children who are interested in the visual arts and visual humour. When adults occasionally see it they are surprised at its subtlety and sophistication. Indeed, adults who are used to depending on words sometimes find it more difficult to follow than their children who are used to the speed of cartoons and to following a comic strip through its pictures only.

*'Vision On'* is an example of a programme that could only have grown out of television. At the other extreme, the daily programme *'Jackanory'* tries to keep alive the oldest form of entertainment in the world – the art of story-telling. One fallacy about the effect of television on children is the belief that it prevents children reading. All our experience suggests the opposite and *'Jackanory'* undoubtedly introduces thousands of children, who might never have opened a book except in school, to a mixture of literature from Greek myths or Indian legends to *'Winnie the Pooh'* or *'The Borrowers'*. It also commissions the best possible artists and designers to illustrate the stories. Pretty or cute decoration is not enough for strong stories and we are fortunate to have distinguished designers within the BBC's Graphics Department, who work exclusively on children's programmes. In the last year, two of them have been concentrating on

the hundreds of pictures needed for a series of twelve Bible stories from the New Testament called *'The New Beginning'*.

All kinds of story telling are essential ingredients in programming for children, whether dramatizations of classic books or contemporary fiction or original film stories. Unfortunately the costs of drama continue to rise alarmingly and our limited annual budget does not stretch to the amount and variety of drama we should like to achieve. In the last three years we have made several contemporary film dramas set in different parts of the country – like *'Fish'*, a serial about two boys and a sheep-dog in Wales. We have also revived a tradition established many years ago of atmospheric period drama like *'The Secret Garden'* with a film version of Noel Streatfield's *'Thursday's Child'*. This production, like many other dramas for children, involves children as performers. The restrictions imposed by the Employment of Children's Act were originally intended to protect children from unscrupulous exploitation; unhappily they also prevent the presence of children in programmes that could extend their educational experience. It is often easier to use children from recognized drama schools than local children but we think it important to include children from every part of Britain in drama as well as in discussion programmes. When I listen to the range of accents and view the social conditions of life illustrated in the programmes, I find it difficult to understand the accusation sometimes made against our programmes that they are too middle class. It is also difficult to reconcile this with complaints from parents or teachers that we do not always set a high enough standard of pronunciation or of behaviour.

All of us who work on programmes for children are aware of our responsibility towards an inexperienced and impressionable audience which may imitate what it sees and hears. We cut out gratuitous violence in films and avoid showing the use of knives or ropes or anything that might harm a child if he tried to copy the television action. Children's



*A scene on a canal narrowboat in 'Thursday's Child' a television serial for children.*



*Contestants in the movie quiz 'Screen Test'.*

presenters are not seen smoking or drinking or swearing. They are polite and considerate to other people and to animals – (virtues that I would not have thought the prerogative of the middle class!). We have no code of do's and don'ts but a long-standing tradition of concern for the audience. As television professionals, we also have a concern for our programme material and we assess any question of violence or permissiveness or danger in the context of its particular situation.

Television for children, as for adults, must reflect life as it is but I have the impression that many adults would like us to provide a cosy fantasy world in which they could safely dump their children and avoid having to face any awkward questions about real life. But to a child real life is fascinating – and difficult. Good television can help to increase his understanding of himself, his surroundings and other people and, as well as providing relaxation and refreshment for children after a busy day at school, I hope that we also produce stretching experiences even if, at times, these give rise to uncomfortable food for thought.

Our news bulletins do not include party politics but otherwise draw on the same material as the adult news. We have more illustration, fewer 'talking heads' and commentary that does not assume background knowledge of the subject.

Throughout the world there has been a general assumption that television programmes for children can be made more cheaply than programmes for adults. In fact, successful children's programmes are often more expensive. Children are often bored by pictures of people talking and demand illustrations, action, and the technical expertise seen in high budget evening programmes. Most of our programmes are viewed between 4.00 p.m and 5.45 p.m when children may be tired or need an opportunity to let off steam. Anxious parents sometimes ask us to supplement their children's education after school and many of our programmes are educational in the truest sense, but it is useless for us to try to give children what we think is good for them unless the children themselves actually choose to watch for enjoyment.

During the day, many children have a chance of watching with their teachers BBC Schools programmes in their classrooms. For young children, who have not yet started school, BBC Television has always provided daily programmes specially



*Arsenal goalkeeper, Bob Wilson, in 'News Extra'.*

designed for two, three and four-year olds. Twenty years ago *'Watch with Mother'* began to widen the experience of young children with different series that encouraged participation with simple songs and movement, gave shape to a child's own fantasy world and imaginary characters, personified relationships in a family, looked at the world of nature and social life and gave ideas for making things. All these principles were extended further when *'Play School'* began as a daily programme that tried to give children some of the experience that good nursery schools provide. In Britain only 10% of pre-school children have the opportunity of attending nursery schools or play groups, so parents and children have welcomed the daily twenty-five minute entertainment programme, which uses music, mime, poetry, stories, films and simple experiments to extend interest and suggest ideas for creative play.

*'Play School'* is now in its ninth year and in more than two thousand programmes has reflected all aspects of a young child's life. We offer to this child a daily television programme that may, by becoming part of his life, enrich his experience. There may not be a caring adult around to bring him to the programme regularly and therefore he is spoken to directly and encouraged to want to watch and participate. There is no directive to learn

but constant encouragement to play – with games, rhymes, songs, stories, movement, sounds, painting and dressing up; to find out, make, build, watch, enquire, listen and help; to experiment with water, shapes, textures, movement and sounds; to wonder, think, imagine.

Formal education cannot start until the foundations have been laid – before writing and reading there must be vocabulary, before maths – an understanding of number, before expression – experience. Nursery rhymes, clapping rhymes and tongue twisters encourage the child to experiment with words and help him to vocalize difficult sounds, so developing his confidence in speech. Movement, songs and finger rhymes develop physical co-ordination. Guessing games stimulate his powers of observation and memory. Counting rhymes give familiarity with the words for numbers but it is the moments such as the sharing of cards or counters before a game of tiddlywinks or snap that help the child to comprehend the meaning of a number. *'Play School'* presenters talk directly to the child, encouraging replies and vocal participation that may be rare in his life. New and perhaps difficult words are introduced and explained to widen vocabulary and so give the child the means of communication.

Among all the controversy about illiteracy and the teaching of reading there is one undisputed conclusion. This is that deficiencies in reading often stem from deficiencies in oracy, which is the ability to listen with understanding and speak. Many children do not live in homes where adults hold conversations with them and we believe that this aspect of our pre-school programmes is more important than attempting actually to teach reading or arithmetic to children under the age of five. We do not think of children as computers to be filled with information, but as individual, developing personalities whom we may sometimes help to discover for themselves that learning is enjoyable and satisfying.

'To educate' literally means 'to bring out'. Those of us who make children's programmes do not regard television as soporific time filling but as a source of enjoyment and information for our young audience and, above all, as a stimulus to further thought, feeling and activity.

## **REMOTE OPERATION OF BROADCASTING TRANSMITTERS**

*Sound and Vision Broadcasting Volume 13 Number 3*

In the above mentioned article a reference is made (page 20) to the operation of FM broadcasting transmitters in Britain. The BBC have pointed out that, since the beginning of FM broadcasting, all stations have been designed to operate in the same automatic manner without the use of remote control, whether installed in extensions to manned

television sites or at remote locations. They included local monitors for detecting the most likely faults and initiating corrective action when required.

We would like to apologize for any misunderstanding which may have arisen as a result of this article.