

# TELEVIZION

International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)

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## **Blurring the Boundaries**

### **"Teletubbies" and Children's Media Today**

Two and half years after its first appearance on British screens, "Teletubbies" continues to arouse an extraordinary level of interest and controversy. It is a media phenomenon, not merely a programme - something that is known to millions who have never seen it, and on which strong opinions have become almost compulsory.

The notoriety of "Teletubbies" is not just a reflection of its success in terms of ratings or overseas sales. It is also, I shall argue, a symptom of the tensions that currently surround children's media culture.<sup>1</sup> "Teletubbies" blurs the boundaries between the public and the private; between education and entertainment; and between child and adult audiences. This blurring of boundaries is, I suggest, characteristic of contemporary media - and particularly of media aimed at children. And yet, far from being just another manifestation of 'postmodernity', the programme also displays significant continuities with the past. In several respects, "Teletubbies" represents something distinctively contemporary; yet paradoxically, a good deal about it is also far from new.

#### **The public and the private**

"Teletubbies" is commissioned and broadcast in Britain by the BBC - that is, by a non-commercial, public service broadcasting company. The controversy it has aroused needs to be understood in the light of contemporary changes at the BBC - and indeed in terms of the broader move away from national public service broadcasting towards a global, market-led, multi-channel environment.

The last decade has seen intensifying pressure on the BBC. Margaret Thatcher, of course, was a powerful advocate of privatisation; and while that did not eventually come to pass, many critics have argued that the Corporation has effectively privatised itself - not least through the 'modernising' policies of its notorious Director General, John Birt. Even under a more sympathetic government, the BBC is caught between the requirement to act as a national public service broadcaster - and hence to justify the retention of the licence fee through which it is funded - and the need to compete in a global commercial market. This tension is reflected across the whole range of its activities, from its screening of major sporting events

to its involvement in digital broadcasting and 24 hour news.

Children's television is in a paradoxical position here. On the one hand, some critics and lobby groups have argued that children's television is particularly at risk from what they regard as the BBC's abandonment of its public service traditions. They point, for example, to the increasing quantity of US animation programmes on British screens, and the decline in factual programming - a phenomenon which they see as symptomatic of 'dumbing down'. Such claims are, it should be emphasised, highly questionable, both in terms of their factual validity and in terms of their implicit assumptions about cultural value.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, however, children have become an increasingly valuable target market in this newly competitive broadcasting environment. There are now no fewer than six specialist children's cable/satellite channels in the UK; and on terrestrial television, children's programmes have begun to spread to hitherto untouched areas of the schedule, such as breakfast times and Sunday mornings. Meanwhile, television is now ever more firmly caught up in global networks of multi-media marketing. Major US-based producers in the field such as Disney, Viacom and Murdoch's News Corporation are increasingly using integrated marketing strategies, in which television, video, movies, computer games, records, toys and a whole range of other merchandise are intimately connected. In this context, some have argued that children are now much better served as an audience - at least in terms of quantity, if not necessarily in terms of diversity or quality; yet these developments have also generated a growing alarm about the commercial 'exploitation' of children. Yet either way, it is in this environment that the BBC now seems compelled to compete.

These developments impact on a programme like "Teletubbies" in several ways. Perhaps the most obvious of these is in the need to generate ancillary revenue - although the extent to which it can be described as ancillary is probably debatable. This revenue comes in two main forms: through merchandising and overseas sales. Both are the responsibility of BBC Worldwide, which is a wholly owned commercial subsidiary of the BBC.

In fact, merchandising has always been a significant aspect of children's television, since its inception in the 1950s. Nevertheless, it has dramatically increased in scale in the past two decades, as children (like teenagers before them) have effectively been 'discovered' as a target market. The market of licensed goods based on TV and media characters is now worth more than £ 2.5 billion per year in the UK alone. The emergence of what were called '30-minute commercials' - that is, cartoons explicitly designed to promote toys, such as "My Little Pony", "Thundercats" and "Transformers", which began in the US in the 1980s - has been the most controversial aspect of this phenomenon. Yet merchandising has become a key imperative in children's television generally - not least at the BBC. Popular shows like the Saturday morning magazine programme "Live and Kicking" have become showcases for new media products, as well as vehicles for selling the BBC's own merchandise: the "Live and Kicking" magazine, for example, is currently the market leader among pre-teens.

Pre-school programmes have long been a key area for merchandising. In the UK and internationally, programmes like "Thomas the Tank Engine" (known in the US as "Shining Time Station") and "Postman Pat" continue to generate an extensive range of toys and other products. Pre-schoolers are also a major market for sell-through video, and for 'educational' books and magazines associated with television; and here again, "Teletubbies" is far from unique.

In the case of "Teletubbies", a major merchandising operation was planned from the very beginning - even if the scale of demand proved initially to be much greater than anticipated.

The list of "Teletubbies" products either licensed by the BBC or marketed directly is ever-growing: it includes a magazine, books, audio and video tapes, computer games, posters, toys, clothing, watches, food and confectionery, mugs and crockery, stationery and games - as well as more unexpected artefacts like computer mouse mats. "Teletubbies" merchandise reportedly earned

£ 23 million for the BBC in 1998; although comparatively little of this money was fed back into the production of children's programmes.

This phenomenon raises several questions. To what extent does the potential for merchandising influence the programme itself? Producers and broadcasting executives routinely insist that it does not; but it is clear that these considerations now enter the process at a much earlier stage than they used to do. Thus, puppets or animated characters create greater opportunities for merchandising than live actors, for example in the form of toys. Teams of characters - four "Teletubbies" rather than one - generate what in the business is termed 'collectability'; and props that are regularly associated with the characters can also be marketed separately - as in the case of 'Tubby custard', recently licensed to St. Ivel. More generally, the unified 'look' of a programme - colours, design features, graphics - is crucial in defining a distinctive presence in shop displays. Ultimately, such considerations are bound to affect production decisions, although of course they may well conveniently coincide with producers' creative instincts.

Can this be seen simply as a way of 'exploiting' vulnerable children? Of course, BBC executives will firmly insist that it is not. There is certainly an element of puritanism about such charges: children's hankering for consumer goods is often seen as a problem - particularly if it is associated with 'low' cultural forms such as television - in a way that adults' similar desires are not.<sup>3</sup> Children, it seems to be implied, should somehow be kept innocent of the contamination of commerce. Nevertheless, the BBC does enjoy a privileged position here: since it does not carry advertising, it is able to promote its goods to what is effectively a captive audience. On the other hand, it also has a brand image for 'quality' products that it must struggle to retain - although whether or not it has overstepped the mark in this instance is certainly debatable.

The second major dimension of BBC Worldwide's operation is overseas sales. Here again, "Teletubbies" has been an unprecedented success, particularly for a British production; although it will be interesting to see whether it can rival the long-term international marketability of a programme like "Sesame Street".

Here again, there are questions about the extent to which such considerations influence the form of the programme itself. Clearly, some kinds of programmes are much more marketable than others. It is generally much harder to sell programmes which are culturally specific than ones which are not. Thus, in the case of children's programmes, it is more difficult to sell non-fiction than fiction; and contemporary drama, particularly if it features non-standard accents, is less marketable than 'children's heritage culture' of the "Chronicles of Narnia" variety. Animation and puppet shows sell better because they can easily be dubbed into other languages, and also tend to be less culturally specific than those featuring real children. In many of these respects, "Teletubbies" would appear to be much more internationally marketable than, for example, the magazine format of a programme like its predecessor "Playdays".

From the perspective of the purchasing countries, however, the dominance of a small number of multinational companies in the global marketplace inevitably raises concerns about cultural

imperialism. Such criticisms apply as much to the BBC as they do, for example, to Disney. Some overseas delegates at the 1998 World Summit on Television for Children, held in London, were critical of "Teletubbies" not only on the 'educational' grounds to be considered below, but also on the grounds of what they perceived as its cultural bias. On the other hand, as in the case of "Sesame Street", the programme is designed to have the potential for local broadcasters to insert documentary-style material that is specific to their national context.

In all these respects, therefore, one can see "Teletubbies" as symptomatic of the 'mixed economy' that increasingly characterises the media environment. It represents a complex interweaving of commercial and public service imperatives, and of national and global considerations, that has become part of the conditions of existence of contemporary television. Where the boundaries should be drawn here is becoming an increasingly complex and difficult issue for broadcasters, policy-makers and critics alike.

### **Education and entertainment**

The amount of press commentary that has surrounded "Teletubbies" has sometimes threatened to rival that of the most popular soap operas. Both in the tabloids and in the so-called 'quality' press, any mention of the series still seems to guarantee headline news. Of course, some of these stories are energetically 'spun' by the BBC Press Office; although in fact much of the response to the programme continues to be negative.

Some of this material is simply light relief. Stories such as the Reverend Jerry Falwell's condemnation of Tinky Winky as a 'role model' for 'degenerate gay lifestyles' are reported by the British press with considerable irony. However, there is a more serious concern here too. Much of the debate has centred on the question that, according to the tabloid *Daily Mirror*, is 'on every parent's lips': 'The Teletubbies - are they harmless fun or bad for our children?' (23rd May 1997). While *Mirror* readers were called upon to give their own views ('calls cost no more than 10 p'), many newspapers have relied on academic 'experts' - mostly psychologists - to pronounce on the value of the programme.

Even as I write, the *Sunday Observer* (12th September 1999) is running a story about the BBC's own research, which apparently suggests that "Teletubbies" is 'better for young children's education than the strict programme of formal learning being proposed by Education Secretary David Blunkett'. And in recent weeks, there have been reports about the German Academy of Paediatrics' condemnation of the programme's 'long-term addictive qualities'; and about British academics' research into its role in encouraging children to read and write.

As this implies, the recurrent concern here is with "Teletubbies"' 'educational' merit. Thus, it has repeatedly been argued that the programme's use of 'baby talk' will undermine children's language development; that it is unnecessarily repetitive; that it takes place in an 'unreal' world; that there is too much play and 'dancing around doing meaningless things', and too little instructional content, for example in teaching letters and numbers. It is frequently alleged - quite inaccurately - that the programme contains no 'real' language at all. And significantly, many critics seem concerned that the programme does not feature sufficient numbers of adults.

To some degree, the reporting of these criticisms can be seen as part of a time-honoured tradition of the press attacking its rival medium. Nevertheless, these responses also reveal a good deal about changing definitions of what counts as 'education' in the era of 'back to basics'. Indeed, it is significant that in July 1997 the incoming government's schools minister

Stephen Byers made a high profile speech in which he singled out "Teletubbies" as an example of the 'dumbing down' of British children - although (needless to say, perhaps) he was then bound to admit that he had never actually seen it.

These criticisms thus reflect a more fundamental anxiety about *education* - and particularly about the relationship between education and children's leisure time, of which television viewing obviously forms a significant part. In recent years, the key site of education has begun to shift. In Britain, as in many other countries, parents are increasingly being urged to participate in their children's education: there is a growing sense, particularly among middle-class parents, that state education is failing, and that they now have to supplement its inadequacies from their own resources. The renewed emphasis on homework and the massive boom in home computers and workbooks reflect the increasing competitiveness that has been created by national testing.

In some respects, of course, this is merely the latest stage in a backlash against what are seen as dangerous liberal-progressive ideas about education. The new government is taking the lead in arguing for a return to traditional methods in the name of 'modernisation'. In this context, television in general is largely defined as anti-educational. If it has a role, it is not to 'dumb down', but to 'brain up'. Television should not be entertaining children: on the contrary, it should be part of the *work* they are expected to be doing when they are not at school.

Insofar as it fails to provide rigorous drilling in letter and number recognition, a programme like "Teletubbies" is thus inevitably seen to be failing in its pedagogic duty. In fact, the philosophy of the show's creator, Anne Wood, is defiantly child-centred. In interviews and press releases, she consistently emphasises the idea that children's programmes should 'take the child's point of view' - an argument that is most overtly reflected in "Teletubbies"' short documentary inserts, which feature children playing or going about their everyday lives without the mediation of adults. Young children, Wood argues, learn not through 'instruction' but through play; and they have a right to 'fun' and 'entertainment' just as much as adult viewers. As the *Observer* story quoted above clearly indicates, "Teletubbies" espouses the child-centred approach that is so at odds with current educational policy; and the fact that it combines this with explicit references to television itself - the Teletubbies even have televisions in their stomachs! - surely compounds the offence.

In fact, I would argue that "Teletubbies" needs to be understood in relation to two parallel traditions in British pre-school programming. On the one hand, it has a great deal in common with the child-centred, educative approach of the BBC's "Playdays" and the ITV series "Rainbow" - an approach characterised by the use of 'real life' documentary inserts, the emphasis on learning through play and the use of songs and rhymes. It is worth recalling here the controversy that surrounded the BBC's refusal to buy the US series "Sesame Street" in the late 1960s. While there were several issues at stake here (not least an implicit rejection of American influences), the BBC refused to buy the series largely because of its explicitly didactic approach: the 'drilling' of letters and numbers in "Sesame Street" was seen to be fundamentally incompatible with the BBC's more 'progressivist', less instructional, approach. To compare "Teletubbies" with, for example, Barney is to be reminded that there is still a remarkable divergence in the dominant educational philosophies on either side of the Atlantic.

At the same time, "Teletubbies" can also be seen as the most recent inheritor of a parallel tradition of entertainment programming for very young children. This tradition, consisting largely of animation and puppet shows, can be traced from "Bill and Ben" in the 1950s and "The Magic Roundabout" in the 1960s, through to the series of the 1970s and 1980s that are

currently being revived as 'cult classics' on cable and satellite channels - shows such as "The Clangers", "Captain Pugwash", "Bagpuss" and "The Wombles". Frequently surrealistic and bizarre, these programmes spoke more directly to the imagination: they featured anthropomorphic characters in fantasy worlds, and traded in nonsense, repetition and absurd humour.

Ultimately, it may be its *combination* of these two traditions - of 'education' and 'entertainment' - that has made Teletubbies so troubling for many of its critics. While it shares the broad pedagogic approach of the educative tradition, it also departs from it in several ways - for example, by its neglect of domestic 'realism' and of the secure mediation provided by adult presenters. And yet, while it shares some of the surrealism and fantasy of the entertainment tradition, Teletubbies is much more explicitly educative in its approach.

Here, as in so many other areas of children's media culture, the relations between 'education' and 'entertainment' may be undergoing a fundamental change. Of course, entertainment is always educational, in the sense that it is bound to teach us *something*; and education has to be entertaining in some way, at least if it is to succeed in engaging learners. Perhaps this distinction can itself be seen as false, or at least as an over-simplification - as generations of educators and media producers have argued. And yet, in the current climate of change both in education and in broadcasting, maintaining this distinction appears to have become a fundamental imperative - at least for those who are most resistant to change.

### **Child and adult audiences**

As the preceding discussion implies, adults' views about children's television are frequently informed by nostalgia for their own childhoods. Here again, the "Teletubbies" phenomenon may reveal a good deal about the changing social meanings of childhood, and the ways in which those meanings are constructed and defined.

All the evidence would suggest that "Teletubbies" has been extraordinarily popular with its main target audience. However, as Anne White's article in this edition of *TelevIZion* suggests, it also acquired a substantial cult status among much older viewers, at least in its early days. For example, the programme was an unavoidable topic of conversation in the North London primary school where I undertook some research a couple of years ago. Children of six and seven were often keen to disavow any interest in the programme, fiercely condemning it as 'babyish'. Yet by the time they reached the safety of nine or ten, they seemed to be able to relate to it with a kind of subversive irony - although there was still often a passionate rejection among those who had younger siblings. As this implies, the children's judgments about the programme were closely tied up with their attempts to project themselves as more or less 'adult'.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, colleagues who teach in secondary schools reported that "Teletubbies" regalia often adorned their students' exercise books and bags, and that there were several scatological or obscene versions of the theme song in circulation. The programme also appeared to have a substantial audience among undergraduates. In the months after it was first screened, several fan web sites emerged, apparently produced by students; and many new sites have appeared following the export of the programme to the US. Perhaps the ultimate seal of youth cultural approval was granted in July 1997, when the leading style magazine *The Face* ran a five-page story on 'Teleclubbers'. Watching "Teletubbies", it asserted, was now the coolest accompaniment to 'post-club comedown', as young ravers unwind from the chemically-induced frenzy of the previous night.

As Anne White indicates, the BBC did its best to discourage this 'cult' audience, for example by threatening to prosecute unofficial web sites and by refusing to license the characters for adult clothing. On one level, this was about defending its pre-school audience; although it was also, of course, about protecting its copyright. In fact, the cult status of "Teletubbies" among older children and young adults is now well past its peak: while not yet completely uncool, an enthusiasm for the programme is now likely to be seen as distinctly passé.

Despite its temporary nature, the cult appeal of "Teletubbies" among older viewers could be seen to reflect a more general sense of irony which increasingly suffuses contemporary popular culture. Thus, in Britain and the United States at least, 'retro TV' has become increasingly popular in the last decade. As channels proliferate, and the need to recycle old material intensifies, irony has become a valuable marketing device for schedulers. What used to be disparaged as mere 'repeats' are now re-packaged with knowing commentaries and 'period' graphics on channels like Nick at Nite in the US and Channel Four in Britain. Meanwhile, programmes like "Mystery Science Theatre 3000" effectively do the 'work' of ironic viewing for you.

Inevitably, children's television has become part of this phenomenon. Some years ago, the BBC enjoyed considerable success with re-runs of Gerry Anderson animation series from the 1960s; and "Thunderbirds" went on to enjoy a brief life as a West End show in London (it is shortly to be released as a live action feature film). There is now a considerable market in repackaged tapes of children's programmes from the fifties, sixties and seventies; and we are beginning to see re-runs of the more bizarre animation and puppet shows of the 1970s.

Several things are going on here. As I have implied, it is partly a commercial strategy - a clever way of recycling programmes for new audiences at minimal cost. Such recycling of popular culture targets multiple audiences. Adults can now enjoy "The Wombles" or "Captain Pugwash" with a mixture of nostalgia and irony; while their children may be taking it 'at face value', first time around. What's more, they can watch these things together, in a way that is unlikely to happen with "Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers" or some of the more impenetrable (for adults) contemporary animation shows. This adult nostalgia may be regressive - a hankering for a simpler time, in which men were men and women knew their place. Yet there is also a sense of superiority to the past - and indeed to our *own* past: a disbelief that we could ever have taken such fake and hokey material seriously.

The instant irony with which "Teletubbies" was first received reflects a similar ambivalence in our relationship with childhood. On the one hand, "Teletubbies" embodies a kind of innocence that adults will typically describe as 'cute' or 'sweet'. And yet there is also, perhaps, a kind of knowingness here. The Teletubbies' fantasies often have a mildly anarchic, absurdist quality that is enhanced by the deadpan delivery of the adult narrator. In terms of its *mise-en-scene*, the programme has a strongly surreal or hyper-real quality, which *The Face* has not been alone in describing as 'psychedelic' and 'hallucinatory'. The most obvious similarity is to "The Magic Roundabout", the 1960s children's programme beloved by hippies for its implicit references to drug culture.

It could be argued that the intensity of our reactions to these programmes reflects the depth and the ambivalence of adult investments in childhood - both in our own childhoods, and in the idea of childhood itself. From one perspective, the success of "Teletubbies" with young people and adults could be seen as a form of regression or infantilisation - or at least, as further evidence of the blurring of boundaries between children and adults. Yet it could also be interpreted as a necessary process of recovering 'childlike' pleasures - in silly noises and games, in anarchy and absurdity - for which irony provides a convenient alibi. This is to imply

that, like childhood, adulthood is also a provisional state, which can be defined and constructed in different ways for different purposes.

In this context, 'childishness' - like 'youth' before it - is becoming a kind of symbolic commodity, that is marketable to consumers whose biological status places them well beyond the obvious target audience. It is not simply children who are buying the idea of childhood, but adults too; and they are doing so, not merely on children's behalf, but also for their own purposes.

## **Conclusion**

Interpreting any children's programme - and perhaps particularly one aimed at a very young audience - is fraught with difficulties. As adults, we are not the intended audience; and as such, there is a significant risk of 'misreading', taking things too literally, or simply lapsing into pretentiousness. It is all too easy to dismiss such programmes as boring or simplistic, or alternatively to find them cute or anarchic or surrealistic - responses which could be seen as characteristic of how adults relate to children generally. The danger here is that we end up simply imposing adult categories, and thereby making unwarranted assumptions about viewers. Spotting the intertextual references and symbolic associations, or alternatively 'hunting the stereotypes', are easy games to play; but they tell us very little about how children themselves interpret and relate to what they watch.

Perhaps it is this inherent instability - and the blurring of boundaries that it seems to entail - that has made "Teletubbies" the ideal vehicle for adults' concerns and fantasies. Yet in the end, our responses to it may tell us much more about ourselves than they do about its intended audience.

## **NOTES:**

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<sup>1</sup>I discuss these issues at much greater length in my forthcoming book 'After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media'. Cambridge: Polity, (in press).

<sup>2</sup>For a critical review of these debates, and of the broader historical and economic context, see David Buckingham, Hannah Davies, Ken Jones and Peter Kelley 'Children's Television in Britain: History, Discourse and Policy'. London: British Film Institute 1999.

<sup>3</sup>For a useful discussion of this issue, see Ellen Seiter 'Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture'. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

<sup>4</sup>For further discussion, see Hannah Davies, David Buckingham and Peter Kelley: 'In the worst possible taste? Children, television and cultural value', European Journal of Cultural Studies, in press 1999.

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