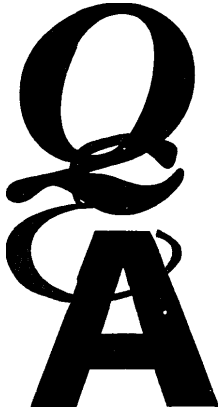


Children's television — a world view

Dr Patricia Edgar, Director of The Australian Children's Television Foundation, gives some background to the Summit, hopes for outcomes and thoughts on children's television around the world.



How did the World Summit evolve?

The idea emerged from a Round Table held in Europe in May 1993, which was a meeting of people from 30 countries. They were discussing the future of Prix Jeunesse, the European awards. Out of that came a general discussion about the future of children's programming.

The concerns expressed stemmed from a number of factors. One was that the public broadcasters in Europe, who have traditionally been the ones concerned about children's programs and spent money on a range and diversity of products, were having their budgets cut. They were also feeling very strong competition from the commercial sectors of the market. The market was fragmenting, in that there were children's channels developing; there was satellite, there was cable. As the market fragmented, there was less and less money being given to areas that were not mainstream and children's material was suffering.

The other influence was in the United States. They had discovered for the first time how profitable children's programming could be. In the US, throughout the Reagan/Bush years and the years of deregulation, the Federal Communications Commission had stopped applying any pressure to the commercial networks to show children's programming. Daytime children's programming, Monday to

Friday, had virtually disappeared. The only programming was the Saturday morning cartoon 'ghetto' areas. Then along came a program called 'Barney'. 'Barney' was put on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) to fill a gaping hole. They'd done very little since 'Sesame Street'.

'Barney' was developed in Texas by a small producer and they decided to give it a try, and it took off in the most phenomenal way. I believe it took off because there was nothing like it.

Has 'Barney' been as successful in Australia?

It has not been the phenomenon that it has been in the US, because we already have characters of that type. When 'Barney' took off in the US the merchandising was just phenomenal. The number of people drawn into the PBS audience was also phenomenal. For the first time the Americans thought, 'My goodness! There is money to be had here'. Children's programming became a priority but the focus was on having a merchandisable character driving the program. Around \$14 billion a year is being spent by children using their pocket money or influencing their parents to buy these products. Most genres of programming for kids are disappearing except for programs which are able to be merchandised.

So there is the commercialisation of children's programming, the decreasing numbers of genres, the threat to public television and the bastions of children's programming around Europe, and the fragmentation of the market. This led to the discussion of what was going to happen to children's programming in the future.

In Australia we have, through regulation, subsidy and the Australian Children's Television Foundation, three ingredients that are unique in the world. We have them because we faced our crisis in children's programming more than ten years ago when our children's programming virtually disappeared from our screens. Strategies were developed in Australia which were not developed elsewhere, so Australia is looked to as something of a model.

Out of all this discussion I said, 'I think that the principles that we addressed in Australia are just the same for the international situation, and so what we should do is have a world summit to look at these issues and at the future of children's programming'.





Q&A Patricia Edgar

▷ page 7

There was immediate acceptance that Australia should host this summit, because of our experience in working out a strategy for children's programs.

What sort of outcomes are you looking for from the Summit?

We're looking for those who are involved with children's programming to find like-minded people around the world that they may work with. That's one objective. Co-productions don't need to compromise the sort of programming that we want to make. We're also looking for the endorsement of a charter,

developing a database on children's television programs from around the world. They are also developing an agora, which will be a marketplace for the exchange of ideas, not only for selling programs.

The Canadians now have an Alliance for Children and Television.

How does Australian children's television compare with the rest of the world?

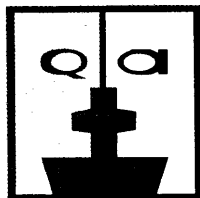
Because of the drama quota and the degree of subsidies that exist through the Film Finance Corporation, Australia is in a unique situation to develop good children's drama. That's what we've developed a name for. Our drama programs are in very high demand around the world where there are fewer and fewer

countries that are actually producing live action children's drama, as opposed to animation. The BBC used to produce and pay for all of its own programming—they no longer can afford to do that, even though they have a budget of £56

million per year for children's programming. They are acquiring a lot of children's programming from Australia, which is rating extremely well for them, both on the BBC and ITV. 'Round the Twist' was the most successful, but 'Half Way Across the Galaxy and Turn Left' and 'Ship To Shore' did very well.

Does this raise the issue of cultural identity if the children are watching large numbers of foreign-made programs?

Well clearly it does. It creates an enormous interest in Australia, and that has happened through both our children's programs and our soaps. 'Neighbours' and 'Home and Away' have huge followings, so the British are used to the Australian accent, the Australian idiom and the Australian sense of humour. Suddenly we begin to look attractive and interesting. It's just the reverse of what happened to us in Australia. People who are now in their thirties thought anything interesting was American when they were children. Our Australian kids are now growing up and seeing Australian programs and that really has a big effect, I think, on their cultural esteem and their self esteem. They don't feel the same cultural cringe we felt when we were growing up. Television has a very profound effect in that respect.



• The Summit will have an emphasis on the new technology and the impact it will have on children's programming. We're looking at ways to protect national and cultural interests in an age of transnational television. •

which will be put forward by Anna Home, Head of Children's Programming at the BBC.

The Summit is giving focus to different groups to develop regional or national initiatives and helping to make those initiatives global.

The Summit is about the sharing of ideas, looking for the things that you will be able to apply in your own home territory. It's getting a network of contacts around the world that we can build on. Producers will be using it as a meeting ground to talk to broadcasters. The Foundation will also be looking at furthering relationships for joint productions, because we can only really recover about a quarter of our costs from Australia.

The Summit will have an emphasis on the new technology and the impact it will have on children's programming. We're looking at ways to protect national and cultural interests in an age of transnational television.

There have also been a number of moves in different parts of the world to protect children's programming. One is the formation of the World Alliance on Television and Children, which had developed out of Prix Jeunesse. They have a newsletter and are in touch with a number of organisations around the world.

The European Centre for Television and Children has been formed in Greece. It takes in predominantly European countries and is



.....

What is happening in children's television progressing in other parts of the world?

A very interesting development is that there are groups now working in post-communist dictatorship countries developing children's programs, and there will be a speaker talking about that at the Summit. There was recently a meeting in Bratislava where they developed a declaration on children's programs.

NHK, which is the big public broadcaster in Japan, has taken a number of initiatives. In addition to their Japan prize festival, where they've given awards for children's programs from around the world, in the last three years they've had 'Children's View'. They invite in broadcasters from around the world to share ideas about the development of programs and develop joint ideas. This is Japan's way of reaching out to work with other groups, because they were similar to America in that they were parochial in the way they worked—most of their programming was 'home grown' Japanese. But now they're looking to do co-productions with other parts of the world. In South East Asia I've been going to the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU)'s meetings over the last three years, where they have set up a program exchange, modelled on the one in Europe.

What is the ABU Program Exchange?

The Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union brings producers to Kuala Lumpur once a year. Producers bring along program segments which are language free, because one of the difficulties in sharing programs is the cost of dubbing and the subtitling within all these countries. They exchange nature programs, documentaries and games kids play, and variety segments for example. They're beginning to develop their children's industry as well but they're beginning to develop it at a time when they're having to deal with satellite technology.

The Foundation went to a market in St Petersburg. The Americans are moving into China and Russia, and they are giving away programming with advertisements as a means of getting a strong foothold.

What do you think children want to see on television?

Firstly, and primarily, they want to be entertained. They want to enjoy what they see. Kids really enjoy comedy, they like to laugh. I think what kids want is not very different from what adults want. Now what the people involved in the programming for children want for children is a little different, in that

they want it to be not only entertaining but also challenging and educational. The best children's programming always is. I suppose all programming is educational in some way—it teaches kids things in various ways, whether it is to do with presenting lifestyles or the food they eat. The Foundation aims to provide a few highlights in their viewing that are going to stand out for them and that they will want to come back to and view repeatedly. That's what kids do with programs they enjoy. They learn a great deal from what they see when they enjoy the program.

What does the Foundation concentrate on?

We mainly concentrate on drama because that's the area that kids like best. It's also the area where you can make programs that have a very long shelf life and your investment, although large, has the best payoff. We're not interested in making programs that are one day wonders, although we did develop a game show based on 'Lift Off'. We are looking at the sort of games which developing skills and a range of different intelligences, but do not focus on prizes and luck.

Are there any final comments you'd like to make about the Summit or about children's television?

Only that I think we have something special in Australia and I don't know how much that is understood and appreciated. I think it is perhaps now taken for granted a little bit. We had to work hard to get it, and I think we've got to work hard to keep it. Because if it goes, we going to be very much under threat from the new technology and being swamped by foreign product, mainly from the US.

Do you think there will be more summits?

The Summit will be a one-off for Australia. Whether there are future summits depends very much on the initiatives being taken, and what comes out of it. Somebody has to pick up the ball and run with it if we are to have another world summit. Maybe it's not the sort of thing you need to do every year, but perhaps very five years, depending on how things are shaping up again. Most people in the children's television field move around the world quite a lot and know one another. They meet at markets and they meet at awards. They meet there with a specific purpose but they don't generally meet to really discuss and reflect on the issues, and take decisions arising from them. Maybe we need a summit every five years. □