

Do the C programming requirements for Australian commercial television offer the child audience quality in programming? Jonathan Shiff, children's television program producer, and Cherrie Bottger, network manager children's television for the Ten network, consider the question.

C programming requirements



a producer's perspective: Jonathan Shiff

What do you think of the C program requirements?

C program requirements have changed in the 20 years. When I started drama programming about ten years ago, the C requirements intruded into many areas, including the creative process. Today, I think it has gone too far the other way—while it mandates for acquisitions by the networks, it isn't really working in terms of succeeding in benchmarking quality, nor is it succeeding in benchmarking innovation.

Generally I think C is a double-edged sword. C is mandating acquisition in the domestic market and so causes a certain amount of children's programming to be made, but it is wrong to extrapolate that into any reflection on quality. C is no longer fostering excellence in children's programming. There is a lot of ordinary stuff being made.

The focus of CTS 2 is quality, but you say the standard has fallen?

I believe so, yes. This is a creative judgment, not an economic judgement—this is a gut feeling I get looking around at other children's programming. What is happening now is that there is a certain banality—maybe that is inevitable when you have standards. I think there is a flattening of the creative element and there is a formulaic approach.

There are some exceptions to that: the work coming out of the

Australian Children's Television Foundation has always been pretty edgy. Because it is not driven by commercial concerns it can afford to take risks.

We are driven by commercial concerns, so we can less afford to take risks—but we have found our risk-taking has been pulled from overseas, not pushed from Australia.

Is this in terms of what the networks will buy?

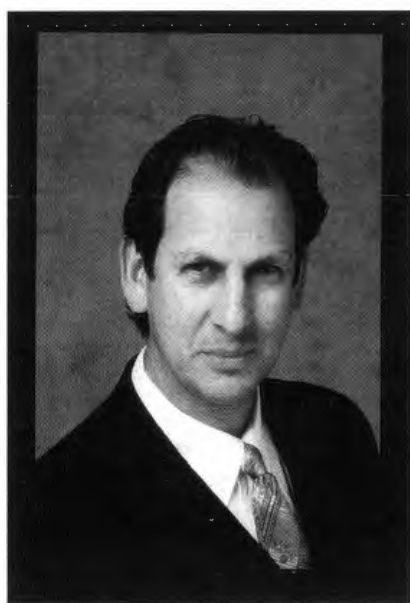
Yes. The networks are really buying children's programming to fill the C quota. Very few stations go out of their way to look for excellence in children's programming.

Would you be making C programs if there were no C requirements?

In an abstract sense yes: we would be making programs for an international market that would be eligible [for C], but we would not be selling them in this country to the networks. There is no equivocation, in my mind, that the networks in this country only buy children's programming because it is mandated.

It has been a difficult year in C: I think commercially, one of the most harmful things in the marketplace has been the ABA's benchmarking of \$45 000—that had a very bad effect on the commercial market place, and has caused networks to pull down the pricing. For some years, we had been selling in accordance with Film Finance Corporation pricing at \$55 000 per half hour.

First of all I can't tell you how much I disagree with the ABA intruding into commercial pricing. Secondly to intrude and not be in step with the FFC has had an unbelievable effect in the marketplace. Even players like us, and I would



Jonathan Shiff
Jonathan M Shiff
Productions

regard us as fairly successful, were affected by that. We had to jump even higher to justify why we were charging more than the ABA benchmarking.

What do you think is the difference between what existed before when you say the standard was higher, and now?

These are observations of someone who has been in the business for 10 years.

Creatively, the fact you have standards, a formulaic train line, inevitably encourages some producers to stay on the train tracks and not to wander too far. When developing children's programming, the producer may not want to take too many risks if it will endanger the C certification. I'm simply saying that the safest way to produce C programming is not necessarily the most innovative. There is an awful lot of mediocrity produced which is still eligible as C but is old and tired.

What effect do you think new media are having on the child audience?

I don't have any empirical evidence, but there is no doubt in my mind that we are losing the child audience. The shift away from television towards the Internet has tremendous social implications.

Children are now one on one with the computer screen. And while they are effectively socialising with chat lines, they are not socialising with real people nor are they sharing the experience. The Internet is not only affecting what they are watching, but also the social structure of how they are watching. That is causing us some concern.

Do you think that has any affect on what they expect from television programs?

Yes I do. I think one of the reasons they are turning away is there is not a lot they want to watch. There is less experimentation, less innovation: for every 'Ocean Girl' or 'Round the Twist' there is a lot of programming that if they put an animal, or a grandparent of a child in, they think it is a child's program. I think some of the standard of scriptwriting is very poor. I think that it is selling and being supported internationally because internationally there is a vacuum cleaner that needs a lot of product. There are so many niche broadcasters now that it will find a home somewhere.

Has the pay TV market made a difference?

It is going to make a big difference when the pay market matures here. Commercially it is an

adjunct but it has given us a wonderful niche audience, and tremendous cross promotion opportunities. I think the pay carriers have given us better promotion.

We live in a country in which the maker of children's television is very much an also-ran, very much behind 'Neighbours' and teen programming.

Why is this?

It is a question of economics and culture. Some countries value the children's market, for example in Japan and Scandinavia the economics are much the same, but they show great care for the next generation. In Australia we have often driven the C programming argument along economic rails, which are just inappropriate.

When we talk about C, we often talk about the economic imperatives and the economic power of the audience. At the end of the day, what we are doing here is trying to enrich the lives of the next generation of Australians. At the moment there is not a lot of shining lights out there that I would say are enriching their lives.

But while there is C, it doesn't necessary follow that what is being produced to fill their quota is necessarily high quality. You can produce a children's half hour that qualifies—it is entertaining, it is relevant to Australian children, but it is not at a high level.

There are some producers in this country who are looking to economies of scale to pump out quota. I see those programs failing in the international market. International buyers are no pushover.

While C is no longer fostering excellence in children's programming it is, however, riding shotgun on standards—violence, sexism, ageism, racism. C has made huge inroads into some of the appalling practices that went on 10 years ago when I started in drama.

Where should C programming go now?

C programming should be quality innovative programming to foster the young minds that are our future. I think that not enough importance is paid to fostering and developing the next generation as an investment in our national future.

We need to be continually vigilant about the quality of C programming. I think it is time to revisit C—not to undermine the level of C that is mandated, but to look at the process of certification. I'm concerned that if we have this system is should work—it should not simply accord with certain standards of violence, sexism and racism. It's got to be more than that and I'm not sure that it is.

Jonathan Schiff is a children's television program producer. Two of his programs have recently won major awards: 'Ocean Girl' series 4 last year won the BAFTA for best children's program in the world, against 33 countries. Two weeks ago 'Thunderstone' series 1 won the ATOM award for the best children's television series.

Jonathan M Schiff Productions has had major success domestically and internationally with 'Ocean Girl'. It has sold to about one hundred and twenty countries, including the US market.



Cherrie Bottger, network manager children's television for the Ten network, has a total of 30 years experience in the industry. The majority of that time has been in children's television.

A network perspective Cherrie Bottger – Ten network

C requirements

Commercial television licensees are required to broadcast at least 390 hours of C television each year, including 130 hours of P programs and 260 hours of C programs.

How does a network approach C programming?

The Ten network has a children's production unit that addresses the quota that the ABA requires.

What do you think of the C requirements?

I think they are very important. As a mother and someone who has seen programs from all over the world, I firmly believe there should be a body that looks after the quality of children's programming, given that we transmit to young viewers.

Do you think the C program requirements support quality?

Yes—we are very mindful of the programs we put to air in our C and P time bands, and that access is given to children with regular timeslots so they know when those programs are going to air, and that they are made specifically for them.

I work with David Mott, Director of Programming for the Ten network and we have weekly meetings on the children's programming requirements.



Cherrie Bottger oversees all of Ten children's programs and ensures that the network addresses the ABA's C requirements.

As for quality: there are budgetary constraints in doing children's programs. I've looked at programs from all over the world and Australians can be very proud of the programming that is aired here for children.

When looking for a program to buy for the network, do you look for quality, or do you just buy anything as long as it has a C classification?

We don't just grab anything to meet the requirements.

We receive, on average, proposals for 15 children's programs each week: some drama, some magazine, some P programs. There are lots of creative children's producers out there, and we look at all the proposals. If we consider that a program has the quality we require for the timeslot, we investigate further and talk to the producers.

Jacqui Culliton, General Manager Network Productions, and I look at all the proposals that come in. We can't afford not to because there just might be a program there that has a 'wow' factor for the kids.

We look for programs that encourage kids to share ideas with each other. We also look at programs to see if they broaden the child's perspective, to see if any are entertaining, and we examine the production values of the proposal.

Would commercial television licensees broadcast children's television if they were not required to?

That's a hard one to answer. It's hard for me to say but I would say yes, they would.

It was the community who drove the development of the standards. They got together many years ago, outraged by the quality of children's programming then showing, and the result was the development of the children's television standards.



How well do you think the CTS have held up?

Working with the standards as long as I have, I really believe there needs to be a body like the ABA that looks after the content and quality of children's programs.

I have a 12 year old and I am concerned about the programming she watches. I think it is up to the parents to censor what their children watch and I think the ABA offers another form of that censorship.

What do you think have been the changes in children's programming in the past 20 years?

The production values of C programs have certainly increased. I think there has been more acknowledgment of the code on violence and the special care that is needed for the young. There are more appropriate warnings now about unsuitable programs for children.

How important is the child audience to the network?

Very important. Children have a voice today, unlike in the past. Parents listen to their children a lot more—and that is in line with the communication process we are trying to develop: to share ideas. Because children have that say, they are also consumers. They watch a lot more television than the average adult does, and they are learning from television all the time.

Ten is strongly committed to children's television: each year all staff in the children's unit assemble in Brisbane for a 2-day workshop. Also invited to the workshop are experts in related disciplines such as child development.

We always invite an ABA representative so that all members of the children's unit are aware of the children's television standards.

The child audience is very responsive: each week we receive, on average, 1200 email, letters and web site requests for information.

What effect is new technology having on the child audience for television?

Obviously we have to share the audience with pay TV, the Internet and other new options, so the audience has decreased. But if you offer quality programs, there is no reason why children are not going to watch programs you put to air.

Will this increased competition encourage the network to place greater emphasis on quality programming?

No—it is network policy to look for and broadcast quality programs. We try to put the best programs in the best time slot. If programs put to

us do not meet our standards in terms of production values and quality, we reject them.

We conduct research into our own programming, to see if we are addressing what children want to watch. As well as P and C programs, we also include G programs in our research.

Are there many differences between these categories of programs?

Yes. P programs are aimed at two to five year olds, so the action in P programs needs to be slower.

Our C programs are aimed at 5 to 12 year olds. 'Totally Wild' is a Ten network C program and is the sort of program that appeals to a broad range of ages. Our research shows that a lot of adults watch the program too.

'Totally Wild' is a success for the network and is now in its seventh year. We follow the science curriculum for years five, six and seven and many teachers use the program as a resource. We have just introduced a new science segment, 'Turn me on science' and we chose a regular day, Tuesday, to make it easier for the primary school science teachers to use it as a resource.

In March, a series of stories on 'Totally Wild', which showed that everyone has a role to play in protecting the environment, was recognised in the National Quarantine Awards.

Where would you like to see C programming going?

Of course, I can only speak for the Ten network, but we are very happy to continue the way we are.

I don't think the requirements need to change. I think there should still be requirements for quality children's television and we are happy with what the ABA's requirements ask us to address. The requirements act almost like a safety net.

We are keeping up with the demands of new technologies and new competition: digital technology, the Internet, interactive television, and we are introducing new items all the time. Our engineers have just started work on a new camera to shoot from a child's perspective.

In conclusion

I really like to hear from the young audience. Although there is a lot of research most of it is directed to prime-time programming.

I think there should be more public awareness of the requirements, I think we need to talk to the specific demographics that C addresses. I think it would be good to let children know that there are organisations out there that have their interests at heart.