Watching With (and Without) Mother: Education and Entertainment in Television for Pre-school Children, 1950-2000

David Buckingham

This essay is part of a larger project, Growing Up Modern: Childhood, Youth and Popular Culture Since 1945. *More information about the project, and illustrated versions of all the essays can be found at: https://davidbuckingham.net/growing-up-modern/.*

In Spring 2018, as I began the research for this essay, there was a brief flurry of media coverage focusing on the unlikely figure of Peppa Pig, the lead character in a popular British children's cartoon. 'Why is Peppa Pig banned in China and Australia?' asked the *Metro* newspaper. As it turned out, the story of a 'ban' in Australia was a little overstated: it related to just one episode in which Peppa had made friends with a spider – not a good idea in some parts of Australia. However, videos relating to Peppa had indeed been removed from the Chinese video-sharing site Douyin, apparently on the orders of the government. According to the *Metro*, there had been over 30,000 clips uploaded to the platform using Peppa Pig hashtags.

In fact, the concern in China was not to do with any potential risks to children. Rather, it seems that Peppa has become a subversive icon for what the government sees as undesirable elements. To some extent, she appears to be following in the footsteps of Disney's Winnie the Pooh, who has also been banned by the Chinese government after images of him were used to ridicule their leader, President Xi. In the case of Peppa, the subversion was a little less direct. According to the website Sixth Tone, which specializes in reports from China, Peppa has become a 'street couture icon' for Chinese celebrities and young people – and for what the state-run newspapers call 'unruly slackers'. Chinese companies have produced a range of unlicensed Peppa Pig merchandise, including toys and clothing, and there are apparently plans to open theme parks in Shanghai and Beijing in time for the Year of the Pig in 2019. However, young people have also taken to sporting Peppa Pig tattoos and haircuts, and there are a great many fan videos, chat stickers and artworks circulating online. At least some of this imagery portrays Peppa as a 'gangsta', wearing 'thug life' shades and apparel, while some of it borders on violence and pornography.

Meanwhile, in the UK and the US, Peppa had also become caught up in a wave of public concern about inappropriate content seemingly targeting young children on YouTube. Late in 2017, a long article on *Medium* by James Bridle described how the platform was being used to circulate material that would 'systematically frighten, traumatize and abuse children'. Bridle drew attention to the massive popularity of channels that feature the 'unboxing' of toys and Kinder Surprise chocolate eggs, along with versions of nursery rhymes and re-edited mash-ups of cartoons – all seemingly targeted at very young children. Such channels feature hundreds of videos, and have millions of subscribers; and the titles of the videos are often long lists of brand names and terms designed to 'game' the search algorithms. More disturbingly, Bridle also pointed to the prevalence of videos featuring characters such as Peppa that include violent and horrific content. Apparently videos in which Peppa is seen (for example) eating her father or drinking bleach, or where the characters are

wielding knives and guns, are widely available, and can easily be accessed via simple search terms.

The material Bridle described was not a new development – the UK tabloid *The Sun* had reported on it more than a year earlier – although the controversy raised by his article seems to have provoked YouTube to address the problem: many of the videos he mentions have since been taken down, although it is still very easy to find similar clips online. A poster for *Peppa Pig, the Movie: Kingdom of Evil* sits alongside a screenshot from a game walk-though entitled *Killing Floor: Evil Peppa*, featuring an image of the character brandishing a knife and splattered with blood. As Bridle describes, the prevalence of such material is partly a consequence of the technology of social media: the people who produce it are exploiting the potential of algorithmic automation in order to generate clicks (and therefore income from advertising).

However, this material also points to some broader questions about children's media, and how adults relate to it. The Peppa Pig gross-out videos are, one assumes, largely parodic: they play with the idea of childhood innocence, undermining and subverting it with obviously 'adult' material. They may also express a kind of adult exasperation with the unrelenting cuteness of such characters, and the cloying pro-social messages they tend to promote. Parents obliged to watch such cartoons with their children – especially when they have to be repeated time after time – might be forgiven for occasionally wanting to massacre Peppa and her family with a chainsaw. As I'll go on to suggest, this kind of politically incorrect or inappropriate response on the part of adults is far from unusual, or even particularly new.

Yet while some of this material is almost certainly intended for adults, the obvious anxiety is that children will encounter it; and this in turn raises the spectre of children's *unsupervised* use of media and technology. Earlier in 2018, BBC News reported on a study by the UK charity Childwise which suggested that television viewing was no longer a family activity – a realisation that seems to have dawned several decades too late. By the early 1990s, if not earlier, the majority of British children already had television sets in their bedrooms. More than ten years ago, researchers were pointing to very young children's growing fluency in using mobile digital devices. Yet even today, organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that children under two should not be spending any time whatsoever with electronic screens. As we shall see, this anxiety that media might be used as an 'electronic babysitter' has a very long history indeed: it can be traced back almost to the beginnings of television itself.

In these respects, the controversy surrounding Peppa Pig reflects a wider debate about very young children's relationship with media. In this essay, I want to offer a different perspective on these issues, by tracking back historically to the very beginnings of television for pre-school children. I will be focusing on three very well-known, long-running programmes, first broadcast between the 1950s and the 1990s: *Watch with Mother*, *Sesame Street* and *Teletubbies*. The latter two are still in production today. I will also refer more briefly to other programmes from the same period, including *Play School*, *Barney and Friends* and *Blue's Clues*.

In some cases, there has been a considerable amount of discussion of the effects – and the educational effectiveness – of such programmes; and more recently, there

have been some useful studies of the changing context of production. While I will say something about these issues, I also want to focus more directly on the programmes themselves. More specifically, I want to look at their formal qualities, as a way of exploring their *pedagogy* – that is, *how* they are attempting to 'teach' their viewers, rather than *what* they are attempting to teach. This involves several further questions. For example, how do such programmes address or speak to the child viewer? What roles do children and adults (or learners and teachers) play in them? How do the programmes define and balance out 'education' and 'entertainment'? What assumptions do they appear to make about children's understanding and knowledge about media themselves – or their 'media literacy'?

As I hope to show, the answers to these questions reflect broader assumptions – about childhood, about pedagogy and about media literacy – that have changed significantly over time. The programmes I will be looking at also come from different cultural contexts (from the US and the UK), where these issues tend to be addressed in quite different ways. And there are further distinctions to be drawn here between the products of public service and commercial systems, not least in terms of 'education' and 'entertainment' – although these distinctions are not necessarily predictable or easy to make. As this implies, my questions about the formal characteristics of such programmes relate in turn to much broader historical, cultural and institutional issues.

Pre-school television is not always easy for adults to watch. Such programmes are not primarily intended for us, and they sometimes make very few concessions to adult viewers – although, as we'll see, there are some interesting exceptions to this. The producers of such programmes rely on a whole set of assumptions about children's development, about what they understand and how they learn: they are constantly making judgments about what viewers will remember, what they will be able to follow, what they need to be told and what they will be able to infer, and so on. There are also assumptions – which were very much at stake in the *Peppa Pig* controversy – about the *context* of viewing: are children any longer 'watching with mother' (or father), or are they watching unsupervised? These assumptions are sometimes based on very detailed research, and sometimes merely on a kind of popular wisdom. They may often be unstated or implicit, a matter of creative intuition rather than explicit formulation.

As such, preschool television is likely to look very different from adult television. To us, it may seem thin, repetitive, contrived, or just plain incomprehensible. Alternatively, we might see it as charming and cute, or as refreshingly bizarre and surrealistic. We may feel a kind of affectionate nostalgia, or a degree of sentimentality – responses that often become apparent when long-running programmes are discontinued or replaced. We may indulge in a degree of smart irony – a response that has long been apparent in the cult appeal of programmes from *The Magic Roundabout* (in the 1960s) through to *Teletubbies* (in the 1990s) and now, it seems, to the likes of *Peppa Pig*. In some instances, this may lead on to a kind of subversive humour, and even (for unwilling viewers) to bitter hatred. And of course, we may veer awkwardly from one response to another, or feel all these things at the same time. I suspect that this ambivalence is inevitable, and I cannot promise that this essay will be entirely devoid of it.

Watch with Mother

Watch with Mother was the first television programme on either side of the Atlantic to be explicitly aimed at very young children. Its title was carried over from a radio series, *Listen with Mother*, which had started life in 1950 (and continued until 1982). The first programmes, featuring a child marionette called Andy Pandy, were broadcast in mid-1950, under the broader heading *For the Very Young*. The overall title *Watch with Mother* was not used until 1953, and it was only in 1955 that all five daily strands of the programme were in place. Apart from *Andy Pandy*, they included: *Picture Book*, featuring a female presenter reading a story or demonstrating simple 'make and do' activities; the *Flower Pot Men*, with two nonsense-talking marionettes living in flower pots at the bottom of a garden; *Rag, Tag and Bobtail*, fairytales featuring glove puppets of a dormouse, a hedgehog and a rabbit; and *The Woodentops*, another marionette show about the everyday life of a farming family.

The programme was produced by the BBC: commercial television did not begin in the UK until 1955. Nominally intended for a target audience of three-year-olds, the first series were typically made in runs of 26 episodes of fifteen minutes each. These original programmes were regularly repeated throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in some instances twice daily, in daytime slots not accessible to older children; although the umbrella title *Watch with Mother* was dropped in 1973 as it was believed to be outdated, and the strand was re-named *See-Saw*. A new, shorter series of *Andy Pandy*, in colour, was made in 1970, because the original films were decomposing; and in 2001, the BBC produced an animated re-boot of the *Flower Pot Men*, now re-named *Bill and Ben*. Five programmes from the original series were released on a best-selling video compilation in 1987, clearly catering to the heritage-nostalgia market.

The title *Watch with Mother* obviously reflects an assumption that mothers would be watching television with their children. Even at the time, however, there was not much evidence that this was the case. From the very earliest days of television, executives in the BBC's children's department were expressing concern about the dangers of unsupervised viewing. As David Oswell has shown, concerns about the harmful effects of television on children were widespread right from the start; and working-class children were often seen to be particularly vulnerable. As he suggests, broadcasters were expected to make middle-class parents conscious of their responsibilities, while compensating for the alleged irresponsibility of working-class parents. In this sense, the title *Watch with Mother* may well have reflected a wished-for ideal rather than a reality. According to Alistair McGowan, the title was intended 'to deflect fears that television might become a nursemaid to children and encourage "bad mothering"'.

Created by Freda Lingstrom, the formidable head of the children's department, along with her friend the producer Maria Bird, *Watch with Mother* needs to be understood in relation to the broader ethos of BBC children's broadcasting at the time. In some respects, this can be seen as a variety of the paternalistic approach of the BBC's first Director General Lord Reith, who had left the Corporation only shortly before the War – although when it came to children, the approach might more aptly be termed 'maternalistic'. According to Lindstrom, children's programming should reflect an ethos of love and care: children should be carefully nurtured, in line with

contemporary ideas of child development, and any elements of Reithian 'cultural uplift' or education should be introduced very gently. Like Reith, Lingstrom was extremely resistant towards commercialism and elements of 'mass culture', but she also felt very strongly that children's television should be entertaining. She did not want children's programmes to be confused with those produced explicitly for schools, which came from another BBC department.

As such, programmes like *Watch with Mother* had to achieve a delicate balance between education and entertainment: they should not be *too* entertaining, but not too educational either. BBC programmes needed to be sedate and restrained, and should not contain the 'thrills and stunts' or the rapid pace that broadcasters claimed to find in some American children's programmes. Yet they should also avoid being unduly didactic, moralistic or patronizing. The BBC's earliest presenters of children's radio and television – who were referred to as 'Uncles' and 'Aunties' – were key to achieving the correct balance between intimacy and authority. For Lingstrom and her colleagues, it was vital that programmes should not promote passive or indiscriminate viewing: 'the force of television,' she argued, had to be 'carefully controlled'. This uneasy equilibrium was already under pressure in the early 1950s, but it faced a much more direct challenge with the coming of commercial television in 1955, whose schedules came to be dominated by American-made family entertainment shows. The child audience quickly began to desert the BBC, precipitating a crisis that eventually led to the closure of the children's department (in 1964, it was finally merged with a new family department, and only re-emerged in 1967, with a rather different ethos).

The daily strands of *Watch with Mother* were diverse in some respects, but there are several shared characteristics. While *Rag, Tag and Bobtail* generally features a simple fairy tale, and while *Picture Book* always includes the adult presenter reading a short story from a book, the other programmes are much less concerned with narrative. Each episode of *Andy Pandy*, *The Flower Pot Men* and *The Woodentops* takes us back to the worlds of familiar characters, who are re-introduced in turn, and shown doing the familiar things they invariably do. Andy performs a little dance with his friends Looby Loo and Teddy; Bill and Ben pop up from their flowerpots and then hide when they hear the gardener approaching; the twin Woodentop children do the same actions, both together. Everyday events are repeated in a form of ritual. The pace is extraordinarily slow, there is little movement, and the narrator's voice is calm and quiet.

The original episodes were obviously made on film (videotape was not widely used until the late 1960s), but there is hardly any editing or even much camera movement. Events typically unfold on a tableau, mostly in long or medium shot. In some ways, the format is similar to that of early cinema, before the director D.W. Griffith famously instructed his camera operator Billy Bitzer to move the camera for a close-up. Indeed, the off-screen adult narrator (who is female in all the programmes except *Rag, Tag and Bobtail*) plays a role similar to that of the 'explainer' who was employed in nickelodeon cinemas in the 1900s and 1910s. She explains the camera movements and infrequent edits, warning us before they occur: 'let's look around the garden, shall we, children?' or 'let's see what's happening in the kitchen'. It is as if the producers are afraid that children might become disoriented or confused if there

were to be a sudden cut to a close-up or a different scene, or if the camera were to pan around or zoom too quickly.

Watch with Mother locates childhood in a secure and familiar domestic setting, in the garden or the nursery rather than the street, or even a more natural outdoor location. The gardener occasionally threatens to encroach on the world of the Flower Pot Men, although he is never actually seen; but Andy Pandy never leaves the play room and the garden. Yet this is hardly a child-centred world. Andy Pandy does not speak, and Bill and Ben speak only in a nonsense language. The comments of Rag, Tag and Bobtail are spoken by the adult narrator. Only Willy and Jenny, the Woodentop children, are heard to say occasional words. The dominant voice throughout is that of the adult narrator, who occasionally 'hears' and re-states, or infers, what the child characters are intending to say. The children occasionally display a will of their own, but they are never remotely naughty or disobedient. By contrast, the narrator addresses the child viewer directly, asking questions or offering invitations to participate (for example, in singing a nursery rhyme, clapping or copying simple movements). The adult narrator remains in authority, both over the children on screen and over those at home; yet her authority is kindly and loving rather than domineering or teacherly. The child at home is gently encouraged to respond or join in, but there is no insistence on doing so.

In some respects, the pedagogy of *Watch with Mother* reflects ideas about child-rearing that were popular at the time – and specifically the emphasis on the attachment between mother and child that was key to the work of post-war psychologists such as John Bowlby and D.W. Winnicott. Meanwhile, very few assumptions are made about these children's understanding of media – or their 'media literacy'. The programmes make very little use of the possibilities of the medium, despite the fact that they were shot on film; and the verbal commentary clearly dominates over the visual elements. This might be seen to reflect the limited technical possibilities of television at the time, but it also reflects different assumptions about the audience: most children of this age would have been quite familiar with the much more sophisticated visual language of Disney cartoons, for example.

Sesame Street

Sesame Street is about as different from *Watch with Mother* as it would be possible for a preschool programme to be. First broadcast in 1969, it is produced by an independent non-profit company, Sesame Workshop, formerly known as Children's Television Workshop. For decades, it was screened in the US on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), but in 2016 it moved across to the commercial cable channel Home Box Office (HBO). *Sesame Street* has won countless awards and accolades, and is still in production: it will be celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 2019, which is extraordinary even in a sector that is notable for long-running programmes.

Sesame Street needs to be understood, firstly, in the historical context in which it was initially created. Towards the end of the 1960s, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, educational policy-makers in the US began to turn their attention to

disadvantaged African-American children. It was found that these 'ghetto children' were arriving in school with reading ages often two years below those of their white, middle-class counterparts. *Sesame Street* was part of a wider set of initiatives that sought to compensate for this: it was initially funded by the government, and by a range of charitable foundations. In the words of its originator, Joan Ganz Cooney, the programme was designed 'to help children whose intellectual and cultural preparation might otherwise be less than adequate'. As this implies, *Sesame Street*'s founding aims were based on what educators call a 'deficit view' of black, working-class children and their families, as in some ways inadequate: its aim was to accommodate them to the imperatives of the formal school system, rather than address any wider causes of educational disadvantage.

However, the programme could not survive on government and charitable funding for long. Although its main 'home' location remains a multicultural urban street rather than a more upscale suburban neighbourhood, it has inevitably had to address a more general audience; and its ability to narrow the gaps in educational achievement was therefore bound to be limited. Its subsequent survival has been largely dependent upon additional commercial activities, in the form of licensed merchandising (toys, media, theme parks) and international sales. It has generated several highly lucrative commercial spin-offs, most notably of course in the form of Jim Henson's Muppet characters. The programme is aggressively marketed overseas, and is reportedly screened in over 150 countries: in many cases it is 'localised' by inserting new original content made by national broadcasters, although this has not prevented it being accused by some of a kind of cultural imperialism. Since the 1970s, the programme has used a range of corporate sponsors, who are featured in short announcements; and it runs on numerous commercial networks overseas (in the UK, for example, it was shown on the main terrestrial commercial channel, ITV). In all these respects, as Helle Jensen and Katalin Lustyik have argued, the market strategies of Sesame Workshop have become increasingly difficult to distinguish from those of its commercial rivals such as Disney and Nickelodeon. While some critics regarded *Sesame Street*'s recent move to HBO as a final sell-out of its public remit (HBO is only available to subscribers), it can be seen as a logical extension of this struggle for survival.

Nevertheless, *Sesame Street* has worked hard to retain its image as an educational, non-profit brand. From the outset, the programme was produced according to a detailed curriculum, complete with batteries of pre-defined behavioural objectives. While this curriculum has evolved over time, it contains a variety of 'hard' and 'softer' outcomes. In its early years, much of the focus was on basic letter and number recognition – a form of 'drilling and skilling', or rote learning, that was seen by some as highly mechanical. Children were also expected to learn about geometric shapes, the functions of parts of the body, matching, classifying and sorting objects, and so on. In many instances, these things were taught in very 'hard' and repetitive ways, in isolation from the social contexts in which they might occur, or indeed have meaning. In addition, however, the programme has always set out to teach about social differences, mainly through providing 'positive images' and modelling tolerant behaviour. The cast is consistently diverse, in all sorts of ways: most recently, for example, the producers have introduced a new Muppet character who has autism.

As Heather Hendershot has argued, *Sesame Street*'s ability to legitimate itself as an educational programme – rather than merely as commercial entertainment – has also depended on research. It is without doubt the most extensively evaluated programme in the history of children's television, although this research relies almost exclusively on narrow forms of psychometric testing – and as Hendershot suggests, its findings do not always reinforce the company's claims about its effectiveness. Yet while the programme has attracted criticism, it enjoys a remarkable reputation as a safe, educational brand: its guests have included Barack and Michelle Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Barbara and Laura Bush, although the current occupants of the White House have yet to schedule an appearance.

The pedagogic style of *Sesame Street* has obviously evolved over time, but early episodes and extracts are still available online. Each one-hour programme typically contains up to forty disparate items. From the point of view of broadcasters, this means that they can be easily re-edited and adapted to local markets, and frequently repeated; while from the perspective of viewers, it means that their attention can wander, and they can be distracted by other things going on in the room, without losing their engagement. Items may include short sketches involving the Muppets, sometimes interacting with regular human characters or with visiting celebrities; animated sequences, in a variety of styles (drawn, stop-frame, pixellated); documentary montages, typically featuring children in outdoor settings; and musical performances. Some of these items, such as the animations, are no more than fragments or 'stings', lasting as little as half a minute.

Sesame Street is intensely 'multi-modal': it is visually rich and diverse, but it also uses sounds and music in sometimes unexpected ways. There is no 'master narrator' to interpret for us, as there is in *Watch with Mother*. Each episode is 'brought to you by' a particular letter and number, which tend to recur though several of the items; but otherwise these early episodes have little thematic unity, and there is no running narrative. (More recent programmes seem to have a more linear storyline in this respect, although this is still 'interrupted' by a diverse range of other material.)

Sesame Street also provides models of teaching and learning through its human and puppet characters. Adult characters are occasionally shown teaching or demonstrating, either to live children or (more frequently) to the Muppet characters; but the style here is typically gentle rather than authoritarian. In these sequences, the programme shares the benevolent tone of *Mister Rogers' Neighbourhood*, a much more low-key, studio-based preschool programme that slightly preceded it. Early critics of the programme, such as the radical educationalist John Holt, argued that *Sesame Street* showed teaching as a one-way process of transmission from adults to children: 'learning on *Sesame Street*, as in school, means learning Right Answers, and as in school, Right Answers come from grown-ups'. By contrast, the sociologist Stuart Hall argued that, despite its didactic approach, *Sesame Street* showed children to be fairly active, and adults were regarded more as friends and helpers than as parent figures. In my view, both observations have some validity, albeit in relation to different aspects of the programme.

Early research on *Sesame Street* suggested that the programme's educational effectiveness was likely to be increased if parents and older siblings could be encouraged to watch together with their children. Partly as a result, there is much

here that is designed to appeal to an adult viewer – and indeed a certain amount that is likely to pass over the heads of young children. The programme only occasionally depends upon irony, but there are frequent jokes and cultural references that would only be accessible to adults. The appeal of the visiting celebrities – who are trailed in programme listings and on screen – also seems designed for older viewers who would know them from other contexts. Here again, *Sesame Street* assumes that it is addressing an audience that watches TV, and is able to interpret a wide range of genres. Its target viewer is easily distracted, but also highly media literate.

Sesame Street versus *Play School*

Even from this brief account, the differences between *Sesame Street* and *Watch with Mother* are obvious. In terms of pedagogy, the approach is significantly more didactic, although it is not necessarily more dominated by adults or teachers. The programme assumes or requires a much more developed form of media literacy; and its references to other media forms, and to specific media texts, are much more diverse. It also makes a much more direct attempt to entertain adult viewers, rather than merely appealing to their desire to be 'good parents'.

For the BBC itself, however, the more significant comparison was with its subsequent 'flagship' preschool series *Play School*, which had begun in 1964. The BBC refused to buy *Sesame Street* when it was offered to them in 1969, prompting (inaccurate) headlines that it had been 'banned'. There were several overlapping reasons for this decision, which were detailed at the time by Monica Sims, the head of the Children's Department, and later by one of her successors, Anna Home. It was partly that *Sesame Street* was seen as 'too American', especially in its language. There were also financial issues: according to Sims, buying *Sesame Street* would have eaten up the bulk of her department's budget. Perhaps more significantly, the BBC was keen to sell its own competing show (or at least the format) in similar markets – something it gradually achieved in at least a dozen countries, although without ever approaching the phenomenal success of its rival.

However, the bulk of the criticism was to do with the programme's pedagogy. Sims professed to admire *Sesame Street*, but she saw it as more suitable for older children (five- and six-year-olds). She was more directly critical of what she saw as its use of 'advertising methods': she argued that this approach was 'by implication authoritarian', however entertaining it might be. As Anna Home later wrote, there were seen to be 'educational dangers in the constant use of repetition and fast pace'. According to Sims, the BBC's pedagogical aims were much more child-centred: she wanted children to 'think for themselves', and to ask their own questions. Recognising letters and numbers was less important than arousing 'the desire to learn and find out, wonder, think, imagine, build, watch, listen, feel and help, and to experiment with water, textures, shapes, colours, movements and sounds'.

This controversy reveals much about the competing educational aims, not just of these two programmes, but of pre-school television much more broadly. Sims's aims are not to prepare children for school learning, but to cultivate much more general human attributes: these are not just cognitive, but also to do with emotion and imagination, and with sensory experience. Her arguments clearly echo 'progressivist'

ideas about education, influenced by thinkers such as Piaget, Froebel and Montessori, which were becoming popular at the time; and they directly oppose the behaviourist approach that is implicit in *Sesame Street*. Interestingly, media (including television) seem strangely absent from her characterisation of the world of young children.

I won't spend much time on *Play School* here, but it's worth asking how far it actually delivered on these values. Like *Sesame Street*, the programme had its origins in a concern about the poor provision of nursery education, and it also employed educational advisers, although it rarely set out to teach in the direct manner of its rival. (Its successor, *Playdays*, which appeared in 1988, and its ITV competitor *Rainbow* were both more didactic in this respect.) It used a studio-based magazine format, with two presenters who would model various forms of play, music and movement, and craft activities. The presenters also read stories, and would occasionally teach specific skills such as telling the time or good hygiene habits (washing your hands, blowing your nose).

As Su Holmes describes, many of the concerns that were evident in the early days of *Watch with Mother* were still apparent in the development of *Play School*: the programme should be educational, but not *too* educational (as its title seemed to imply); it could not assume that children were necessarily watching with their parents; and children should be gently encouraged to participate using everyday domestic materials (for example in 'make and do' activities). There were some differences: the programme famously took the viewer out 'through the window' to documentary sequences in real locations; and the presenters were less gratingly middle-class than the narrators of *Watch with Mother*.

However, the programme can hardly be called child-centred. While the documentary sequences occasionally feature children, there are no children in the studio. Even the stuffed toys are used merely as props: they are not animated or given voices. The presenters speak intimately, as though engaging the child in a one-to-one conversation, but they are also decidedly parental. The setting is implicitly middle-class and semi-rural or suburban, quite unlike that of *Sesame Street*. Despite Monica Sims's emphasis on the senses, the programme is dominated by the verbal language of the adult presenters; and unlike its rival, *Play School* makes very limited assumptions about its viewers' media literacy. Several of these contrasts and comparisons will be further developed in the examples that follow.

Teletubbies

First broadcast in 1997, the BBC's *Teletubbies* has been one of the most successful preschool programmes of all time. It was commissioned from a well-established independent company, Ragdoll Productions. The programme represented a major investment, with 260 episodes being produced in the first commission between 1997 and 2001. These have been endlessly repeated ever since, both on the BBC's main channel and its dedicated young children's channel, CBeebies: in the US, they are shown on the commercial cable channel, Nick Jr. In 2014, the BBC commissioned a further 60 episodes, featuring a collection of baby Teletubbies alongside the original four main characters.

Like *Sesame Street*, *Teletubbies* involves a complex relationship between commercial and public service imperatives. While Ragdoll is a commercial company, the BBC is a public broadcaster; although BBC Worldwide, which licenses its branded merchandise and overseas sales, is a wholly owned commercial subsidiary of the Corporation. The large initial investment was only possible by virtue of the possibilities for commercial spin-offs. In its early years, there was an extensive range of Teletubby merchandise, including 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 some less predictable items (I still possess a decaying Teletubbies mouse mat). The programme has been screened in more than 120 countries worldwide; and, like *Sesame Street*, it is localized for different national markets, not only through dubbing but also through the addition of locally-produced content (primarily documentary sequences).

Like its BBC predecessors *Watch with Mother* and *Playdays*, the programme itself is highly ritualistic. Each edition contains a relatively inflexible sequence of items, with fixed moments or intervals in the structure. Following an introductory sequence, there is generally a short playful sketch or dance. The Teletubbies are then 'summoned' by a transmitter that beams a short documentary sequence into the TV screens in their stomachs. To cries of 'again! again!' from the Teletubbies, this sequence is immediately repeated; and there is then a longer sketch or story featuring the Teletubbies, followed by a closing 'bedtime' sequence. As in several of the *Watch with Mother* strands, introductory, linking and closing sequences are repeated in each programme, with the same accompanying music, providing familiar, fixed landmarks. There is also much emphasis on 'hellos' and 'good-byes', addressed to the viewer, to the other Teletubbies and to the children in the documentary sequences. The Teletubbies frequently appear in a fixed sequence, from the tallest (Tinky Winky) to the smallest (Po), or vice-versa; and the arrival of each Teletubby is generally 'announced' in the voice-over. Each of them is also associated with a favourite object, a particular song (often heard before they appear), and with certain characteristic dance movements. Of each 26 minute edition, only about half of the material is new. In addition, some sequences are repeated between programmes - notably some of the more expensively-made computer animations - and whole programmes themselves will of course be repeated in the normal run of the television schedule.

It's tempting, if a little predictable, to identify *Teletubbies* with 'postmodernism'. The setting might loosely be described as 'hyper-real': the Teletubbies live in kind of high-tech bunker, buried beneath artificially landscaped bright green hills, and their costumes are in bright artificial colours. In postmodernist terms, this is a world of 'simulacra', of superficial appearances; although there is a more recognizable documentary realism in the documentary sequences. As Jonathan Bignell argues, the Teletubbies themselves are somehow both alien and child-like: they are a kind of cross between astronauts and toddlers (or soft toys) in outsized nappies. Likewise, the sketches play with familiar distinctions, for example between reality and fantasy, or between the human and the non-human: what the Teletubbies imagine will often appear, and there are sometimes unexplained, bizarre intrusions into Teletubby-land, for instance in one case by a passing fleet of ships. Significantly, the programme moves from the fantasy space of the Teletubbies into the real world of children, via

the documentary sequences, rather than the other way round: 'home' is more a space of imaginative play than of everyday domestic realism.

Although, like its BBC predecessors, the programme frequently employs elements of traditional children's culture (such as songs and nursery rhymes), media and technology also play a central role in the Teletubbies' lives. Again, this does have a partly 'post-modern' feel, which combines the ultra-modern (a robot vacuum cleaner, for example) with the retro: announcements are delivered through old-fashioned Bakelite trumpet speakers, and the Teletubbies are summoned through a transmitter that resembles a windmill. Significantly, the Teletubbies have aerials on their heads and screens embedded in their stomachs; and it is through these (as compared with the windows of *Play School*) that we gain access to the real world outside Teletubby-land. However, the Teletubbies also live in a quiet, pastoral idyll, with real flowers and rabbits, and the documentary sequences are often set in rural, outdoor locations rather than in urban streets.

Teletubbies does have elements of postmodernism, then – although from the vantage point of the late 2010s, these might well appear almost dated. Yet as I've argued elsewhere, the programme also draws upon more well-established traditions in British children's television that date back well before the 1990s. Many of the characteristics I've identified above were apparent in the more surrealistic animation shows of the 1970s, such as *The Clangers* and *The Moomins* – and indeed in *The Flower Pot Men* in the 1950s. In terms of pedagogy, Teletubbies also inherits the long tradition of child-centredness (or educational 'progressivism') that can be traced back to *Play School* and *Watch with Mother*, or at least to the pronouncements of its producers.

Significantly, *Teletubbies* was a joint venture between the BBC's Children's Department and its Schools Department, and the first of its kind. Yet in many respects, it is even less instructional, and much more child-centred, than its BBC predecessors; although of course it is aimed at a somewhat younger audience than *Playdays*, for example. The philosophy of Ragdoll's founder, Anne Wood, is defiantly child-centred. In interviews and articles, she has consistently emphasised that children's programmes should 'take the child's point of view'. Young children, Wood argues, learn through play; and they have a right to 'fun' and 'entertainment' just as much as adult viewers. Wood vehemently refuses to apologise for television as a medium, and refutes the suggestion that it is inherently inferior to more 'educational' media such as books.

In line with child-centred educational philosophy, the emphasis here is on meeting what are seen as children's emotional and developmental needs. However, these are defined not in terms of preparation for school learning, but in much 'softer' terms. According to the BBC's official statements, the programme aims to build confidence and self-esteem; to celebrate individuality; to build children's imagination and sense of humour; and to encourage participation and movement. In this respect, *Teletubbies* makes a strong stand against the emphasis on target-setting and academic standards that was becoming apparent in UK government policy at the time (and has increased ever since).

This pedagogical approach is reflected in the form of the programme, in several ways. Within each episode, there is a considerable amount of repetition, which seems designed to induce a feeling of self-confidence. Aside from the instant repeat of the documentary sequence, this is also apparent in the longer sketches. For example, each of the Teletubbies might encounter a particular situation or problem, and respond in similar ways. Many of the shorter sketches involve variants of Freud's 'fort/da' game (or 'peekaboo'), or a 'lost and found' storyline. The viewer often knows more than the individual Teletubbies, and can see the solution to a problem ahead of time (especially if, as is likely, they have seen the episode before). For example, when the Teletubbies play a hide-and-seek game, we are shown where they are hiding; and when a rain cloud comes to Teletubby land, Po discovers what an umbrella is for, long after viewers will have worked this out for themselves.

The longer sketches frequently involve forms of learning or problem-solving. While there is occasional frustration and a degree of 'naughtiness' (notably on the part of Noo-Noo, the Teletubbies' self-propelled vacuum cleaner), there is generally very little overt conflict. While two of the Teletubbies are male (and larger in size) and two female, and while one of them is darker-skinned, these differences are never remarked upon, let alone used as the basis for disputes between them. Of course, potential conflicts do occasionally arise. But even when the other Teletubbies run away from Laa-Laa's 'delightful' song, she gets to perform a duet with Noo-Noo; and when, in one sequence, Laa-Laa and Po argue about the use of Po's scooter, they quickly decide to share and take turns. While conflicts are quickly resolved, overt moral messages are very rare.

The documentary sequences often feature children undertaking activities independently, or with minimal guidance from adults. For instance, we see children going on a country walk, making carnival costumes or picking strawberries. In other instances, children are seen helping adults, for instance with digging potatoes, hay-making or looking for butterflies. Adults occasionally act as instructors, explaining what the children should do, but they are more frequently seen as facilitators. In the large majority of cases, we see adults and children doing things together, rather than adults performing and children watching. The voice-over in these sequences is generally spoken by the children; and the images are often shot from the child's height and point-of-view.

At the same time, there is a great deal in the programme that invites response. At some points, viewers are implicitly invited to guess which Teletubby will appear or be chosen - for example when the documentary is transmitted into one of their tummy-screens, or when one of them waves good-bye at the very end of the programme. Particular play routines are modelled and repeated, implicitly inviting viewers to join in. The use of nonsense language, music, dance and movement, noises and comical sound effects, and the general anarchy that occasionally erupts, all implicitly invite viewers to mimic and participate. The Teletubbies themselves are highly physical: they are perpetually falling over, waving their legs in the air, sticking out their stomachs, bumping into each other, marching, running, dancing and clapping; and the sketches often culminate in a collective 'big hug'. Yet while the pace is occasionally frenetic, there are also moments of stasis: the programme's use of silence as a marker of transition from one sequence to another is particularly striking.

As this implies, the programme is far from traditionally didactic. There are no adults in the world of the Teletubbies themselves. A kind of quasi-adult authority is represented by the old-fashioned trumpet-speakers, but this is not always accepted. The voice-over narrator is also a representative of adult authority - for example in announcing 'time for Tubby bye-byes' in the bedtime ritual that ends the programme; although here too, the Teletubbies often appear as naughty children, refusing to go to bed at the first attempt.

Unlike its BBC predecessors, *Teletubbies* implicitly regards its audience as quite sophisticated 'readers' of television. As Jonathan Bignell suggests, conventional wisdom among children's television producers would suggest that the 'grammar' of programmes for young children should be kept very simple and straightforward. As in the 'early cinema' approach of *Watch with Mother*, there should be an absolute minimum of editing or camera movement: change (for example from one scene to another, or from a long shot to a close-up) should be signposted and explained. In some respects, *Teletubbies* follows this approach, for example in its use of repetition and in how the camera orients the viewer in the visual space; yet, as Bignell suggests, it also plays with these conventions, for example through unexpected juxtapositions, camera 'tricks' and a playful use of sound.

Nevertheless, *Teletubbies* makes few concessions to any adult viewer who might be watching. Unlike in *Sesame Street*, there are very few jokes or references that only adults would understand; and while the programme revels in absurdity, irony is rare. As I have described elsewhere, *Teletubbies* had its share of adult critics when it first appeared. Among other things, it was condemned for being insufficiently 'educational' (that is, *instructional*, in the mode of *Sesame Street*); and for its use of nonsense language (a quality it shares with *The Flower Pot Men*). Its portrayal of a technologically-saturated childhood, and its relative exclusion of adults, may also have been unsettling for some. Yet in its early years, *Teletubbies* also acquired a cult following among adults: while many parents found it 'cute', it also briefly became the coolest accompaniment to 'post-club comedown', as young ravers unwound from the chemically-induced frenzy of the previous night. It is perhaps in this adult appropriation, rather than in the programme itself, that some of its most definitively postmodern characteristics might be found.

Contrasting approaches: *Barney and Friends* and *Blue's Clues*

Before concluding, I'd like to make a brief comparison between *Teletubbies* and two American shows from around the same period, *Barney and Friends* and *Blue's Clues*. The differences between these three programmes throw into sharp relief some of the broader pedagogic assumptions I have been discussing.

Barney and Friends was first screened on PBS in the United States in 1992, and was quickly purchased by one of the largest commercial companies in the children's sector, HIT Entertainment (now itself owned by the leading toy company Mattel). It has been shown in around fifteen countries worldwide, and ran for thirteen seasons until 2009: plans for further series have been mooted, although at present they appear to be on hold. *Barney* arrived at a point where the preschool market was

significantly expanding, and it has generated a great deal of spin-off merchandising, as well as versions in other media formats such as DVDs and games.

The TV episodes of *Barney and Friends* take place in a studio set designed to resemble a school classroom. Unlike any of the other programmes I've considered (aside from *Sesame Street*), the show features a group of real children, who seem to be aged around seven or eight. Each episode typically begins when the children magically bring the 'real' Barney to life from a small plush toy. Barney is a large purple dinosaur (an adult in costume), who is assisted by a small cast of dinosaur friends, as well as occasional puppet characters. Each episode has a defined educational theme (for example, safety, the five senses, good manners), and Barney teaches the children various lessons, craft activities and songs in line with this. In addition to formal teaching, the programme makes extensive use of nursery rhymes, fairy tales, and traditional children's songs. New lyrics conveying positive educational and pro-social messages are set to well-known melodies, and accompanied by carefully choreographed dance routines. The children deliver their scripted dialogue in highly artificial, stilted voices. In all these respects, the programme resembles a live theatrical stage show, with a cast of budding child stars.

Barney and Friends has been massively popular with children, but it has also attracted what can only be described as virulent hatred on the part of adults. While this has died down in recent years, there are still several websites that circulate parodies and anti-Barney humour, some of which is blatantly violent, scatological and obscene. The *Barney* theme song ('I love you, you love me…') was reportedly used by American soldiers in the torture of Iraqi prisoners-of-war and by the interrogators at Guantanamo Bay. In some respects, Peppa Pig would seem to have inherited Barney's mantle here, although in this case, the response seems easier to understand. The programme's sentimentality and its moralistic messages are hard to take; and Barney himself is quite repulsive, as he giggles and gurgles his way with relentless enthusiasm from one activity to the next. The online 'Jihad to Destroy Barney', as one of the websites calls itself, makes perfect sense to me. And yet, like most of the other programmes I have discussed, *Barney and Friends* is clearly not aimed at adults: the thirty or forty million children who appear to have watched clips of the show on YouTube almost certainly take a different view.

*Blue's Clue*s, which began life a year ahead of *Teletubbies* in 1996, is different again. The programme is produced by Nickelodeon (owned by the giant media company Viacom), and screened on its dedicated channel for young children, Nick Jr. Six original seasons were created, through to the mid-2000s, and currently (as of 2018) there are plans for a reboot. The success of *Blue's Clues* has come to rival that of *Sesame Street*: it has been screened in more than 120 countries, has won countless awards, and for many years was the highest-rated preschool show on US television. As with *Sesame Street*, a great deal of work has gone into creating a trusted educational brand; and there has been extensive formative research on the programme's educational effectiveness. However, this is also a for-profit enterprise, and there is an extensive range of licensed merchandise and other media spin-offs, including computer games.

*Blue's Clue*s follows a very tightly structured format. Early in each episode, a puzzle or problem is presented to the presenter Steve (later succeeded by Joe). He has to

search for treasure, or find out what Blue (his animated pet dog) would like to make, or buy, or do on a rainy day. Steve and Blue go off around the house in search of a solution, encountering various familiar animated characters (a set of condiments, a side-table drawer, a mailbox). He assembles three clues that are identified by blue paw-prints, noting them down in his notebook, and finally sits down in his 'thinking chair' in the living room to solve the puzzle. Along the way, he often encounters several smaller puzzles or tasks, which typically involve non-verbal reasoning processes such as sorting, sequencing, matching or counting. Occasionally, Steve or the animated characters will demonstrate a simple 'make and do' activity (craft, cooking or dressing up, for example), but it is the search for clues that drives the overall narrative. Steve frequently asks the audience for help, looking direct to camera ('where's Blue? Can you see her?'): after a pause for the viewer, a chorus of off-screen children generally responds – and, on occasion, they also point out clues that Steve seems to have missed.

There is a considerable amount of repetition, both within the episodes, and between them. The overall narrative structure, the domestic setting, the props and characters, the music and the familiar verbal catch-phrases (like Steve's 'handy-dandy notebook') never vary from one episode to the next. Each episode is also repeated five times, Monday through Friday, allowing children the opportunity to predict the solution to the puzzle – and thus, according to the series' producers, to gain a sense of 'self-esteem'. Viewers are congratulated on how 'smart' they are for 'figuring out Blue's clues'.

In terms of its 'media language', *Blue's Clues* is very straightforward and self-explanatory. Although Steve is in three dimensions, the set is two-dimensional, and the props and objects are created from paper and other materials, which are animated by simple computer programs. Shot transitions are clearly signalled ('let's go and look in the kitchen!'), and sound effects associated with particular objects or characters are familiar and predictable. Only once in each episode do we leave the studio, when Steve receives a message in his mailbox from some real-life children who are shown in a very short documentary sequence. When Steve encounters a new problem, and when he puts together the clues at the end of the show, various alternative options are presented in floating bubbles above his head. In many respects, the visual style is that of a simple 2D computer game, or an early 'edutainment' CD-Rom like *Arthur's Teacher Trouble* (one of the first 'living books' for young children, released in 1992). The programme is very explicitly designed to focus and direct the viewer's attention, and to invite specific responses at particular points. While Steve occasionally adopts an ironic, knowing expression, there are hardly any jokes or cultural references here that children would be unlikely to understand.

In all these respects, the comparison with *Sesame Street* is striking. Unlike the diverse, fragmented magazine format of *Sesame Street*, *Blue's Clues* has a strong and consistent narrative structure, in which the same elements always recur. The events are predictable and everything is clearly explained: even the animated props are called by their literal names, and not by nicknames ('mailbox', 'side-table drawer', 'bowl and spatula'). The pace is slow, and viewers are given a considerable amount of time to think things through in silence before they respond to Steve's questions. Although its focus is on problem-solving rather than drilling letters and numbers, the

approach is equally didactic. Yet unlike *Sesame Street*, it makes few concessions to any potential adult viewer, and few demands on children's 'media literacy' – and in this respect at least, it almost seems like a modernized version of *Watch with Mother*.

On the other hand, if we compare *Blue's Clues* with *Teletubbies*, there are some striking differences. While the slow pace, the familiarity of the setting and the use of repetition are similar, the content and format of *Teletubbies* is much more diverse and unpredictable. It is also much more playful, and less driven by clear educational imperatives: it focuses much more on emotional and sensory experiences, and less on cognitive reasoning. Through its documentary sequences, *Teletubbies* also gives much more space to real children, and indeed to elements of the real world beyond the home. While Steve is far from authoritarian, and his successor Joe is even more child-like, they are nevertheless dominant adult figures, who often seem to be inviting viewers to guess the correct answers (which they already know). They have no real equivalent in *Teletubbies*, beyond the fairly minimal voice-over narration. Pedagogically, *Teletubbies* seems significantly more child-centred.

Conclusion: change and continuity

In many respects, the broader landscape of children's media has been massively transformed in the twenty years since the debut of *Teletubbies*. Preschool children are, by definition, a small fraction of the overall viewing audience; and the more that broadcasters seek to cater for distinctions *within* that audience, the smaller it becomes. To acknowledge the considerable differences between two-year-olds and five-year-olds is, in these terms, a very costly move. Yet the proportion of household income being spent on children - not least on catering to their tastes in media - has increased exponentially in recent years. Very young children – or at least their parents – now constitute a massively lucrative global market.

Inevitably, this market has also become more competitive. In her comprehensive account of the production of preschool television, Jeanette Steemers has described the increasingly complex ways in which programmes now have to be funded. Merchandising is crucial. Behind Peppa Pig, Bob the Builder and Postman Pat stand legions of other licensed characters, all with their own lines of merchandise: these are effectively the *brands* of young children's media worlds. Meanwhile, companies have to spread their work across multiple platforms. Broadcast (or at least cable and satellite) television remains important, particularly for this age group: countries like the US and the UK now have several competing specialist channels specifically targeting the youngest age groups. Yet DVDs, games and other software are also increasingly vital to success; and specialist 'channels' for preschoolers can also be found on online platforms such as YouTube. Meanwhile, producers are increasingly looking to co-production in their efforts to maximize funding, and to reach markets around the world. All these new forms of funding and distribution present risks as well as the promise of profit. In this more uncertain environment, traditional distinctions between commercial and public service providers have blurred to the point where they are almost meaningless – although, as we've seen in the case of *Sesame Street* and *Teletubbies*, this has been apparent for many years.

Indeed, as I've suggested at various points in this essay, several of these developments are far from new. The success – and indeed the very existence – of long-running shows like *Sesame Street* and *Teletubbies* has depended upon their use of a range of media, as well as on merchandising and global sales. There are also striking (and sometimes unexpected) continuities in both the form and the content of the programmes themselves. Traditional aspects of 'children's culture' (fairy tales, nursery rhymes) have by no means disappeared, even as they have been translated across different media; and while the various forms of presentation (the use of puppets and animation, the roles of adult presenters) may vary greatly between programmes, the combination of elements has not massively changed over time. If one looks at contemporary successes – from *Peppa Pig* or *Charlie and Lola* through to Ragdoll's *In the Night Garden* or *The Adventures of Abney and Teal* – one can recognize several continuing traditions still in play. And as I've noted, it is striking to see how many of these shows have lasted so long, and how many are being re-made several decades after they first appeared.

At the same time, there have been some significant shifts in at least two of the areas I have considered in this essay: education and entertainment, and media literacy. Marshall McLuhan once famously said that anyone who talks about the relationship between education and entertainment doesn't know the first thing about either of them. Even so, I would argue that this relationship has increasingly become a focus of debate, and indeed of tension, in recent years. As educational systems have become ever more competitive, parents are coming under growing pressure to ensure the future success of their children; and this pressure is now starting at an ever-younger age. Education has become an increasingly lucrative market opportunity: the market in 'fun learning' or 'edutainment' videotapes, magazines and toys for pre-schoolers is currently booming. 'Watching with mother' may be a thing of the past – if indeed it was ever more than a set of good intentions; but *learning* with mother – or at least the expectation that parents will act as teachers of their pre-school children – may increasingly be a thing of the future.

Here again, this is not a new development, although it is one that seems to be somewhat more advanced in the US than in the UK. Historically, as we've seen, British broadcasters have been more inclined to espouse 'child-centred' theories, while US programmes have been much more explicitly instructional. At least in principle, British broadcasters have also been more insistent on children's need for 'pure' entertainment, although that's not to say that children necessarily find British programmes any more entertaining than their American counterparts. Meanwhile, this distinction cannot simply be mapped on to a distinction between commercial and public service programming. For instance, *Barney and Friends* is one of the most unabashedly 'commercial' programmes I have considered here, yet it is also without doubt the most explicitly didactic. If anything, it is the public service programmes like *Teletubbies* and its successor *In the Night Garden* that seem to provide a much 'softer' form of pedagogy, and greater opportunities for play.

To some extent, we need to distinguish between these programmes in terms of their target audience. For example, *Teletubbies* was one of the first programmes ever intended for very young children (aged roughly between one and three), not least because one of its immediate predecessors, *Playdays*, had 'aged up' and was seen to be addressing those aged four and five. Meanwhile, *Barney and Friends* claims to be

targeted at a much wider age range (between one and eight) than most of these other programmes. However, such claims are not necessarily to be taken at face value; and in any case, there is bound to be a difference between the target audience and the actual audience, which will be much broader. Nevertheless, as the curriculum for younger children (for example in nursery schools) becomes steadily more formalized, programme makers in this age group are being much more directly called upon to justify themselves in educational terms. Preschool television and other media have to present themselves as a form of preparation for school learning: the insistence on child-centredness, on learning through play, let alone on young children's right to entertainment, now seems increasingly like a rearguard action.

Meanwhile, the massive growth of the pre-school market and the proliferation of media and technology have also had significant implications for our assumptions about young children's media literacy. Young children are undoubtedly growing up in a much richer and more complex media environment: there is a much greater amount of media content directed at them, and they are able to access it through a much wider range of technological devices. However, it's important to avoid a simple linear narrative of technological progress in this respect.

Looking back, one can partly trace the formal limitations of *Watch with Mother* to the technological constraints of television production at the time; and one might see the creative innovations of contemporary programmes – for example, in their use of animation and interactive narrative – as a consequence of technological change. Yet newer media are not necessarily more aesthetically or formally complex – or more demanding in terms of media literacy – than their earlier counterparts. The kinds of interaction or participation in which today's children are invited to engage are not necessarily any less restricted or superficial than they have been in the past. In some respects, the original *Sesame Street* seems more formally adventurous than the more recent programmes I have described. A series like *Blue's Clues* makes use of digital technology (albeit of a fairly basic kind), yet in some ways it seems more 'conservative' than shows that preceded it, at least in its assumptions about children's media literacy. The differences here are rather more to do with the educational aims of these different programmes, and the pedagogical assumptions on which they are based.

Equally, we need to beware of assuming that young children today are necessarily more media literate as a result of such changes. The virtual spaces of online play do create new possibilities in terms of children's learning: children can interact with each other at a distance, they can participate and to some extent generate their own content, and they can do so in real time or at their own pace. Yet as Jackie Marsh and Julia Bishop have shown, there are also some striking continuities in terms of how children play, and in what they are doing with media. Marsh and Bishop compare their own research on children's play from the 2010s (admittedly with somewhat older children) with the famous British studies by Iona and Peter Opie from the 1950s and 1960s. According to them, media today have a greater influence on play, both in terms of content, and in terms of the potential for digital interaction. Yet even if the contexts and some of the practices of play have changed, many of its themes, forms and functions have remained remarkably similar.

Over the period I have considered here – between the 1950s and the 1990s – one can certainly identify some very different assumptions, both about pedagogy and about children's media literacy. Yet as I have attempted to show, these differences are as much to do with broader social and cultural differences, and especially with different ideas about childhood and about education, as they are to do with changes in the medium of television itself.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

On the *Peppa Pig* controversy:

'Why is Peppa Pig banned in China and Australia?': *Metro*
https://metro.co.uk/2018/05/07/peppa-pig-banned-china-australia-7525994/

'Peppa Pig banned from Chinese video site': *Guardian*
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/01/peppa-pig-banned-from-chinese-video-site

'Why China censors banned Winnie the Pooh': *BBC News*
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-china-blog-40627855

'In China, Peppa Pig is a street couture icon', Kenrick David, *Sixth Tone*
http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002160/in-china%2C-peppa-pig-is-a-street-couture-icon

'Something is wrong on the internet': James Bridle, *Medium*
https://medium.com/@jamesbridle/something-is-wrong-on-the-internet-c39c471271d2

'Assault 'n' Peppa: Kids left traumatized after sick YouTube clips showing Peppa Pig with knives and guns appear on app for children': *Sun*
https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1418668/kids-left-traumatised-after-sick-youtube-clips-showing-peppa-pig-characters-with-knifes-and-guns-appear-on-app-for-children/

YouTube's crackdown on 'disturbing' kids' content was reported by *Variety* less than two weeks after Bridle's original article:
http://variety.com/2017/digital/news/youtube-toy-freaks-channel-terminated-1202617834/

'The end of watching TV as a family': Sean Coughlan, *BBC News*
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-42887044

Research from 2004-5 showing very young children using digital devices can be found in a report by Jackie Marsh et al., *Digital Beginnings*:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265183910_Digital_beginnings_Young_children%27s_use_of_popular_culture_media_and_new_technologies

On *Watch with Mother*:

Buckingham, David, Davies, Hannah, Jones, Ken, and Kelley, Peter (1999) *Children's Television in Britain: History, Discourse and Policy* London: British Film Institute

Home, Anna (1993) *Into the Box of Delights: A History of Children's* Television London: BBC Books

McGowan, Alistair, 'Watch with Mother", *BFI Screen Online*: http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/445994/index.html

Oswell, David (1995) 'Watching with Mother in the early 1950s', in Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham (eds.) *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences* London: British Film Institute

Oswell, David (2002) *Television, Childhood and the Home: A History of the Making of the Child Television Audience in Britain* Oxford: Oxford University Press

On *Sesame Street*:

The quote from Joan Ganz Cooney comes from R.M. Polsky's account of the programme's early years, *Getting to Sesame Street* (New York: Praeger, 1974).

Examples and summaries of CTW's research on *Sesame Street* can be found in:

Fisch, Shalom and Truglio, Rosemary (eds.) (2001) *"G" is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum)

Fisch, Shalom (2004) *Children's Learning from Educational Television: Sesame Street and Beyond* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum)

Among the many critiques of *Sesame Street*, the sharpest is probably Heather Hendershot's piece '*Sesame Street*: Cognition and communications imperialism', in Marsha Kinder (ed.) *Kids' Media Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999)

John Holt's early criticisms of *Sesame Street* were contained in an article entitled 'Big Bird, meet Dick and Jane' (*Atlantic Monthly*, 227(5): 72-78). Stuart Hall's observations (which also include a comparison with *Play School*) were in an Open University TV programme *Social Integration 1: Children's Television*, made in 1982. This is available on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AQ6BzxURX0 and is also summarized in Anthony Bates's book *Broadcasting in Education* (London: Constable, 1984).

Helle Strandgaard Jensen is currently conducting research on the international marketing of *Sesame Street*. Her work can be found in:

Jensen, Helle and Lustyik, Katalin (2017) 'Negotiating non-profit: the survival strategies of the Sesame Workshop', *Media International Australia* 163(1): 97-106

Jensen, Helle (2018) 'Like it or not: how *Sesame Street* influenced European television', in Adrian Schober and Debbie Olson (eds.) *Children, Youth, and American Television* (London: Routledge)

The BBC's refusal to buy *Sesame Street* is discussed in the publications by Buckingham et al., Home, and Jensen above. A further comparison between *Sesame Street* and *Play School* (and its successor *Playday*s) can be found in:

Davies, Maire (1995) 'Babes 'n' the hood: preschool television and its audiences in the United States and Britain', in Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham (eds.) *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audience*s London: British Film Institute.

On *Play School*, I have also drawn on:

Holmes, Su (2016) 'Revisiting *Play School*: a historical case study of the BBC's address to the pre-school audience', *Journal of Popular Television* 4(1): 29-47

On *Teletubbies:*

Some of the material here is taken from a much longer essay 'Child-centred television? *Teletubbies* and the educational imperative', which I wrote for my edited book *Small Screens: Television for Children* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2002). It can also be found here: https://www.academia.edu/12082674/Child_centred_television_Teletubbies_and_the_educational_imperative

I have also made some use here of Jonathan Bignell's article 'Familiar aliens: *Teletubbies* and postmodern childhood', *Screen* 46(3): 373-388 (2005).

On *Barney and* Friends and *Blue's Clues*:

Links to a range of anti-Barney 'humour' can be found via this Wikipedia page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Barney_humor

Karen Lury has a brief section on *Blue's Clues* in her essay 'A time and place for everything: children's channels', in *Small Screens: Television for Children.*

There is an extensive body of psychological research on *Blue's Clues*, mostly seeking to demonstrate its 'cognitive impact'. See, for example, Daniel Anderson et al. (2000) 'Researching *Blue's Clues*: viewing behavior and impact', *Journal of Media Psychology* 2(2): 179-194.

Conclusion

For a useful study of the changing market, see Jeanette Steemers (2010) *Creating Preschool Television: A Story of Commerce, Creativity and Curriculum* London: Palgrave MacMillan.

I wrote about the rise of 'edutainment' for children some years ago in the book *Education, Entertainment and Learning in the Hom*e, co-authored with Margaret Scanlon (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003).

Marsh and Bishop's research is in:
Marsh, Jackie and Bishop, Julia (2014) *Changing Play: Play, Media And Commercial Culture From The 1950s To The Present Day*, Buckingham: Open University Press