

FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 09 | Autumn 2009

Title	“Child’s Own Voice”: Representing the Child Audience
Author	Lynn Whitaker
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	09
Issue Date	Autumn 2009
Publication Date	12/12/2009
Editors	Lena Wanggren & Ally Crockford

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“Child’s Own Voice”: Representing the Child Audience

Lynn Whitaker, University of Glasgow

This article, drawn from my doctoral research into children’s public service broadcasting (PSB) in the UK in the 21st century, examines the role that the child’s voice plays in the construction of the child audience made by producers of children’s television in their texts, production practices and discourse. It is argued that both the literal and figurative concept of the “child’s own voice” is a doctrine frequently deployed by producers to claim an authenticity or transparency to their representations. Through this doctrine, producers stress the relevance and appeal of representations of the child audience and thus foreground television’s probity as a beneficial cultural artefact under the aegis of public service broadcasting. By analysis of a specific case study, drawn from my role as participant-observer in the BBC Scotland Children’s department under the AHRC’s collaborative doctoral award scheme, I illustrate and discuss the key elements of the doctrine of child’s own voice that producers of public service children’s media frequently invoke.

Children’s television is frequently reported to be in a current state of “crisis”, as confirmed by the 2007 Ofcom Research Report on the Future of Children’s Television. The headline-grabbing finding of the report was that less than 1% of UK children’s programming was new “locally produced” (i.e. UK-originated) content,¹ with the BBC being forced into a monopsonistic role as commissioner, producer and broadcaster of such content. As such, the main task of representing the UK children’s audience unto itself (and others) falls to the BBC. A further finding of Ofcom’s research, however, is that many parents believe that the BBC is failing in central aspects of that representation, particularly the reflection of the full range of UK cultural diversity: 78% of parents thought it important that PSB should show “different kinds of cultures and opinions from around the UK” but only 43% thought this was being achieved satisfactorily (112).

¹ The 1% statistic, although widely adopted in quality press coverage, is arrived at only by interpolating the data of Figures 11 (25) and 13 (28) of the Ofcom report: it is not stated directly.

Issues relating to media representation are especially problematic in relation to the child audience, because, almost exclusively, media made *for* children is produced *by* adults; “children’s media”, therefore, is a genre defined solely by its intended audience and so something of a misnomer — an adult conception of what might or should appeal to a child audience, with adult constructions of child and childhood therein. As a leading UK children’s media academic writes:

...children’s television is not produced *by* children but *for* them. As such, it should be read as a reflection not so much of children’s interests or fantasies or desires but of adults’. The texts which adults produce for children represent adult constructions both of childhood and (by implication) of adulthood itself.

(Buckingham 47)

Recognition of the gap between producer and audience has led to the problematising of the producer/audience relationship by producers from the earliest days of children’s broadcasting (Oswell 47), and I would argue that BBC staff currently foster a culture of participation and an illusion of lack of adult constraint (and therefore of child freedom) in the cultural space of children’s television in order to mitigate the adult control. In addition to production and the ideology thereof, the *consumption* of children’s media is also a site of adult control and stricture, at a structural level (e.g. the recent advertising ban on high fat, salt and sugar [HFSS] foodstuffs in children’s airtime) and a domestic one (e.g. parental limits on when and what TV their children watch). I do not wish to argue that these strictures are mistaken, I merely wish to point out that children’s media – and perhaps especially children’s television – is one of the most highly “mediated” forms of media imaginable, having passed through many adult filters before it reaches its intended child audience. In this way too, children’s television can be considered as potentially one of the least “representative” forms of television (as children have little input or autonomy in either its production or consumption) and we must therefore question the authenticity of the representations therein, as indeed we must question any media which claims

to “give a voice to” or “speak for” *any* group disenfranchised from the mode of their media production.

In analysis of these issues, I have chosen to discuss here the production of a BBC Scotland children’s programme from the preschool CBeebies brand, produced for a network (i.e. UK wide) audience under the banner of a public service remit. The example is chosen to illustrate what is considered to be ‘best practice’ in the industry; nonetheless, it raises questions as to how producers of children’s PSB can best ensure that the doctrine of “child’s own voice” genuinely contributes to the authenticity of the representation of the child audience and provides meaning and substance to the BBC core value that “audiences are at the heart of everything we do” (BBC).

LazyTown Extra, the 2008 BBC Scotland co-production with the Iceland-originated LazyTown Entertainment (a globally successful brand), was developed as a spin-off from the original *LazyTown* comedy/drama show broadcast in the CBeebies programming strand. The spin-off takes the original brand ethos – of promoting healthy lifestyle choices for children — to its logical conclusion by featuring *real* children engaged in *real* healthy lifestyle choices within a factual/entertainment format. The original drama featured no actual members of the target audience (4-6 year old children) but instead used proxies such as the puppet characters Ziggy, Trixie, Pixel and Stingy, and (perhaps problematically) a young teenage actress (Julianna Rose Mauriello) to play the nine year old, pink-haired Stephanie. The spin off co-production broke open the closed fantasy world of *LazyTown* on the premise that puppet character Ziggy was a roving reporter amongst children in the real world. BBC Scotland was responsible for providing live-action footage of children, from all over the UK, engaging in a range of healthy activities along with Ziggy. This live-action UK footage was intercut with new scenes (largely factual and learning based) of the other original *LazyTown* characters, all structured into a quasi-documentary or news reportage style narrative around the episode’s healthy theme (e.g. swimming).

The marriage of live-action location footage to the fantastical, almost surreal, studio and CGI footage from Iceland, presented an enormous challenge for the UK production team (and their budget), so it was clear from the co-production set-up that what the Iceland creators sought most in their BBC Scotland co-producers, was a specialist knowledge and skill in representing UK children: a skill which the Icelandic originators did not possess. Built into the fabric of the show's *raison d'être*, therefore, was that *LazyTown Extra* would, metaphorically at least, give children from the UK audience a voice within the text (in that they would represent themselves), a significant evolution of the original show's didactic ethos.

The BBC Scotland team took this still further, and where the original Icelandic ideas (and some of the final Icelandic footage) had involved celebrities and other adults talking to and instructing children, producer Angela Galvin and executive producer Sara Harkins reworked the brief so that the voice of the child was literally heard and given authority within the text, as it was decided to shift the focus on to the participating children — in the role of experts — talking to puppet character Ziggy. It was hoped that this notion of a young child's voice having authority and agency (part of a dominant discourse of child empowerment within the campaign for quality children's television) would transcend the text, as illustrated by the producer's statement at a development meeting: "If kids don't come away from the show nagging their parents to take them swimming or ice-skating or asking about basketball then we have failed" (Angela Galvin, personal communication, 27.2.08). Implicit in her statement is an understanding of the inherent tension of both children's PSB and the *LazyTown* brand — how can beneficial activity be encouraged through a static domestic medium?

Galvin sought to resolve these tensions chiefly by placing especial emphasis on the selection of child participants: castings took place across the breadth of the UK in order to find children who had interest in the featured activity plus the ability to communicate and appear natural on camera. Producers of children's television will often state that choosing child participants is a critical process in any show that features children centrally within the text, and I would argue that this process is all the more critical when, as in *LazyTown Extra*, children are

asked to be “themselves” (rather than perform as actors), in a medium which, although heavily structured, scheduled and *produced*, maintains a simulacra of liveness and spontaneity and of “ordinariness”.

The traditional characterisation of television as “radio with pictures” and a “literary” or “predominantly verbal” medium reinforces the privileging of the spoken word and the power of “voice” within television (Perry 119). Theorist John Ellis argues:

Broadcast TV has a particular regime of representation that stresses the immediacy and co-presence of the TV representation. Its particular physical and social characteristics have created a very particular mode of representation that includes the image centred upon the significant at the cost of detail, and sound as carrier of continuity. It gives its audience a particular sense of intimacy with the events it portrays. (137)

Although Ellis’s argument has lost some of its potency in the digital age of “media convergence”, there is still much truth in his assertion that sound often gives meaning and greater context to the televisual image and that television’s characteristic mode of address to the audience is intimate or familiar. Applied to *LazyTown Extra*, it could be argued that the inclusion of children’s voices, as well as literally and metaphorically representing children, also operates at a structural level, by directly addressing the child at home at the level of the intimate or familiar. In children’s television, this familiar mode of address is problematic in regard to adult voices, particularly in the preschool context wherein the children have few adult contacts outside their immediate domestic sphere. David Oswell, in charting the construction of the children’s television audience in the UK, points to broadcasting’s roots in radio as establishing the problematic relationship between the broadcaster’s (adult) voice and the child listener at home:

Radio talk, to both children and adults, was formed as a way of speaking within the public space of the home and a familiarised public space... Nevertheless, the form of intimate and individual address to the child presented problems for the

BBC... and debates about the construction of children's broadcasters as "Aunts" and "Uncles" provide evidence of the difficulty of this form of address. (28)

Oswell outlines various strategies employed by the BBC to resolve the issue of this relationship — the allying of the broadcaster's voice with the maternal, the (doomed) attempt to involve children in production and writing, the use of child announcers etc (52-53) — positing that these efforts, however imperfect and problematic in respect of the child audience, do constitute a more pragmatic approach to the genuine engagement and address of that audience than the influential "impossibility" arguments of Jacqueline Rose in relation to the ability of adult-produced "children's" media (specifically literature) to effectively speak to or for children. Likewise, David Buckingham has responded to Rose's theoretical framework, through a robust practical defence of children's television, pointedly entitled, "On the impossibility of children's television".

Despite the desired ideological use of children's voices within the text, there are other, practical, considerations that may limit their inclusion, particularly in preschool shows. These considerations may be procedural (e.g. the hours in which children can work; the need for a local authority licence etc); or they may be related to the child's individual development or personality (Is their voice clear enough? Do they have sufficient vocabulary and understanding of the situation? Are they happy to be there?). The old showbiz adage of "never work with children and animals" imports something of the perceived problem of working with children in a performance medium: that they are unpredictable and difficult to direct or control. I would argue, however, that, rather than struggle against the difficulties of moulding and directing a child's onscreen performance, a more reactive style of programme-making would capture a more authentic representation of the child. Two preschool programmes which do this particularly well in relation to voice are *Peppa Pig* and *Charlie and Lola*, both of which put the voices of real children to their animated "child" protagonists. In informal conversation with me, the producer of *Peppa Pig* scoffed at any notion of a script for the child voice artists, saying that the naturalism and spontaneity of their performances was achieved mainly through audio-recording imaginative role

play of the textual narrative — and a judicious amount of tickling by the parental chaperones (Phil Davies, personal communication, 12.09.08). While this might seem an obvious thing to do, the widespread use of real children’s voices in animation is a fairly recent phenomenon (from 2000 onwards), with child characters still frequently voiced by adult women. Further explanation of the industry’s reluctance to use real children in key roles, could be that – rightly or wrongly – we don’t like to place children in positions where they are open to (adult) criticism of their talent and performance abilities – especially where lots of money is at stake (consider the furore over the child finalist in the 2009 *Britain’s Got Talent*).

LazyTown Extra can be considered better than many contemporary preschool shows (*Waybuloo* routinely redubs its toddler participants with the voices of children who are older or of different ethnicity; *Carrie and David’s Popshop* is dominated by saccharine, fixed-grin, over-directed “stage school” performances; and Chorion’s otherwise exemplary CGI remake of *Noddy*, is, for me, blighted by the stilted vocal performance of the child voice artist in the title role), yet still *LazyTown Extra* did not always succeed in capturing the spontaneity of the child participants. Some of the children’s dialogue seemed overly scripted or rehearsed, despite the best efforts of the director to film everything with a minimum of rehearsal and at first ‘take’. Director Mike Prince acknowledged this in interview with me, explaining, however, that time and circumstance were the chief limitations on the participants, rather than the innate “performance” ability of the children:

It was frustrating because of the lack of time... you didn’t always get to do what you wanted because the kids leave at 4pm and that is that. One episode we had to get a group of disabled children and their parents and chaperones up to the top floor of a building. It took ages and there are 50 or 60 people there and you are trying to get a one to one performance from the child. But getting a great performance was really rewarding. We did it mostly. (Personal communication, 26.03.09)

On the whole, the performances of the children in *LazyTown Extra* were engaging, with a clear effort to represent every child participant as knowledgeable and having agency: when this sometimes erred on the side of scripted responses, it was greatly mitigated by the giggling reactions of the children to the immediacy of the Ziggy character (which was voiced by the puppeteer on site, rather than added in post-production, in order to facilitate this engagement). However, I am very aware that this judgment is an *adult* reading of the text and that what I consider to be a stilted or natural delivery may not actually register with, or concern, the child audience. Creative director of CBBC Scotland, Sue Morgan, was emphatic about this point in personal interview, yet she also placed responsibility for child performances squarely on the adult programme-makers:

It's not about what I like: we are not our audience. What I think about children on TV is not what our audience think, and what I find cute or endearing our audience might think "So what?" or worse. You have to be very careful. A while back there was an explosion of shows made for children presented by children – but those kids on *Why Don't You* used to get hate mail from other children. I think children's perspective on it is changing because we are getting better at it. You need a lot of caution. (Personal Communication, 25.06.09)

Taken along with Prince's comments, it would seem that Morgan's "caution" must be most effectively exercised regarding the practical considerations of filming children. Programme-makers work to extremely tight shooting schedules which rely on a carefully structured sequence of events and set-ups with lots of "waiting around": young children may easily get bored or fractious in this environment, or they may need the toilet at a critical time. And, as the standard shooting procedure, even for unscripted elements, is to rehearse and then perform an action or dialogue, perhaps several times over, it is very difficult to capture an authentic or spontaneous response from a child. Programme-makers will often plump for consistency rather than spontaneity, and factors other than the child's performance, such as lighting and camera angle, may influence the decision of which "take" makes it in the final edit,

leading to some grossly “wooden” representations of children. Voice plays a particularly important role here, as vocal energy and inflection are often considered the chief indices of what makes a television performance seem wooden or spontaneous. This is perhaps more marked with those voices which have a natural “flatness” or lack of modulation (e.g. Northern Irish and Scottish central belt accents, as exemplified in the children in *Why Don't You*).

Analysis of all 26 episodes of *LazyTown Extra* reveals an incredible diversity of voices and accents, perhaps reflective of its strange global, Icelandic, Scottish hybridity and the driving commitment of the programme makers to show UK cultural diversity. The Iceland-produced elements feature mainly American accents (provided by American, British and Icelandic voice artists), with adults voicing both adult and child puppet characters. Notable exceptions to this are the superhero “Sportacus” played by *LazyTown* creator Magnus Scheving using his own Icelandic accent, and the baddie “Robbie Rotten”, played by Icelandic actor Stefan Karl using an Anglicised pantomime villain voice that evokes an archetypal Manichaean duality fitting of his status of arch-nemesis (and reinforced by his big false chin). Although Scheving’s Teutonic inflection is considered as yet another of his devastating attractions by fans all over the globe (*LazyTown* enjoys a huge cult following), it is, when considered along with the brand’s emphasis on child health and hygiene and the making of model citizens etc, an easy target for parodying the brand as a 21st century version of Hitler Youth. When the original *LazyTown* was dubbed for UK broadcast, CBeebies commissioner Michael Carrington did not object to the Icelandic accents but insisted that the American accents (except the “natural” young American voice of Mauriello) be replaced by British ones to enhance the show’s appeal to a UK audience. This redubbing was not considered necessary for *LazyTown Extra* presumably because the commissioner felt that the use of UK voices throughout all the BBC Scotland-produced segments balanced out the somewhat homogenizing effect of the transatlantic accents.

The BBC Scotland-produced segments of *LazyTown Extra*, filmed on location throughout the UK, reveal the producers’ emphasis on trying to represent UK cultural diversity in terms of region, race, ethnicity, disability and class, and this is therefore reflected in the huge variety of

accents and voices of the child participants, a massive strength of the show. Although, again, this seems an obvious strategy, and now almost taken for granted by those under 40, it must be remembered that regional accents only started appearing (other than for comedy effect) in broadcasting from the 1960s onwards, and children's television didn't fully move away from "BBC English" and "received pronunciation" until the 1970s. In addition to the ideological reasons for this change, the practical benefits of hearing a variety of accents plays an important role in physically attuning the ear to that diversity, and there is now less subtitling of regional accents in network transmission (though it would seem to remain perennially moot for programmes from the Glasgow-based Comedy Unit). The benefits for the preschool audience in hearing a diversity of UK accents may even stretch to formal language acquisition and so be pedagogic, although, unlike US preschool content, UK preschool content has always adopted a non didactic approach to learning (Kondo and Steemers).

In an easy practical measure of trying to secure a diversity of accents, many BBC Scotland children's productions – *LazyTown Extra* included – stick a map of the UK to the wall and place pins on it to mark where the participants and locations are situated. The drive to film and use participants from all over the UK fits well with the department's core brief to be an alternative voice to the main production centre in London: Head of department, Simon Parsons, told me, "This unit was set up to try and increase the representation of kids from across the UK" (Personal communication, 26.02.08). There is another, competitive, advantage in depicting more than just local Scottish kids, as it prevents the department from being pigeonholed as only a maker of overtly "Scottish" content (such as *Balamory*). CBeebies executive editor, Sara Harkins, explained the strategy in relation to another BBC Scotland preschool show, *Nina and the Neurons*:

We are keen to involve Wales and Northern Ireland too because CBeebies can still be quite London/ Metropolitan looking. In Scotland we try to be inclusive but we've never been told [to do] that. I've wanted to do that: I've wanted not to be parochial and make ourselves look like a wee Scottish show. We are a network

production. And it is about using the best locations and the best people possible and not just having them for the sake of it. (Personal communication, 05.06.09)

Harkins' implicit caution against tokenism in representation was echoed by *LazyTown Extra* producer Angela Galvin with the added proviso that, from a viewer perspective, it doesn't necessarily matter where the production base is:

I don't think it was a rule but years ago London would cover the South and as far as Newcastle and we would split the country that way. But the thing is that, for the viewer, it has nothing to do with them. I just know that, as a kid, I wanted to hear Scottish accents. If you really believe in BBC values – and I do – and want to reflect full diversity, then you've got to cover the UK. As long as you stay true to the content. I would never go to a particular corner of Britain just to say, "I was there," if it was not the best location or best kids for the show. You've got to pick the best – but you can do both. (Personal communication, 05.05.09)

In addition to vocal diversity, Galvin discussed with me what she felt to be sometimes difficult choices in how to depict the varying skill levels of children, acknowledging that a child with little skill might foster an "I can do that" attitude in audience members that was just as important as the "aspirational" attitude fostered through featuring especially talented participants. Galvin strove to represent a spectrum of ability and carefully edited the sequences to ensure that no child was made to look foolish or inept; indeed, the puppet character Ziggy often took the role of hopeless but enthusiastic beginner thus giving even the least skilled of the child participants an air of mastery, and reinforcing the notion that "having a go" or "taking part", can be fun. The representation of varying skill levels and the inflection of Sportacus's quest "to be the best" as "to be *one's* best", meant that *LazyTown Extra* could more easily counter the parody or charge of body fascism that might be levelled at the original brand. Galvin also thought that it was particularly important that the show celebrated the achievements of the audience *at the stage they are at*, rather than referenced against future potential or success:

Preschool kids are constantly reminded of what they can't do because they are too small or too young or not physically able to or whatever, and I think it is important for us, as programme-makers, to focus on what they *can* do, all the amazing things. And the original *LazyTown* brand hadn't done that because it didn't feature kids, but I thought, "Let's celebrate what kids can do now".

(Personal communication, 05.05.09)

Importantly, Galvin's "celebration" of children's achievements is not an over-idealised one in which preschool children are fully autonomous: *LazyTown Extra* clearly shows the gatekeeper functions of the adults in a preschool child's life. Primacy is given to the child's voice and experience within the text, but parents, carers, educators and other adult roles are present onscreen and clearly shown as helping the child and facilitating the healthy activity. This is important because the doctrine of child's own voice could easily become a misleading representation of children's limited agency recast as full autonomy and emancipation from the world of adult stricture. It is doubly important in the context of PSB because UK-produced content must act as a market corrective to commercial content in both its production and its ideology, and although some theorists (notably Seiter) will argue that child empowerment need not be at odds with commercial aspiration, there is a considerable weight of academic opinion (typified by Kline; Schor) that discourses and representations of child empowerment have been "hijacked" into a form of "anti-adultism" by commercial concerns:

Marketers defend against charges of anti-adultism by arguing that they are promoting kid empowerment... it's important to recognise the nature of the corporate message: kids and products are aligned together in a really great, fun place, while parents, teachers and other adults inhabit an oppressive, drab, and joyless world. The lesson to kids is that it's the product, not your parent, who's really on your side. (Schor qtd. in Brooks 153)

Interestingly, clearly defined adult roles were new for the *LazyTown* brand as the adult characters of the original show – Sportacus, Robbie Rotten, Mayor Meanswell and Bessie

Busybody – each exhibit some aspect of what could be termed “least-adult role”. The phrase is borrowed from ethnographic researcher Nancy Mandell, who characterised that the successful researcher of preschool experience was one who could achieve “least-adult” status and so align more readily with the child. Mitchell and Walsh endorse this further (while stopping short of ethically sanctioning the researcher “passing” as child) by noting its particular application in reception studies of children’s media (because of the private and domestic nature of the site of consumption). I would argue that the concept is equally useful in production as well as reception studies of children’s media because the implicitly liminal status of “least-adult” is frequently deployed by producers in their onscreen representations and offscreen production practices, again revealing the problematised relationship between adult producer and child audience.

In an age where the future of PSB looks increasingly uncertain there is especial need for its institutions and texts to be scrutinised in terms of their societal value. Children’s broadcasting should be subject to particular scrutiny because of the fundamental difficulty of its position as an adult-produced artefact occupying a unique public/private site within the child’s home. The doctrine of “child’s own voice” has been adopted as a means of mitigating both these problematic elements: the metaphorical use of children’s voices is seen as narrowing the “gap” between the representer and the represented (thus increasing the authenticity and validity of the representation for both parties) and the literal use of children’s voices goes some way to legitimising the intimacy and familiarity of the broadcast mode of address. It is clear that *LazyTown Extra* made conscious use of child’s own voice as an effective means to communicate a specific message of healthy lifestyle choices to its audience, in a way that was not possible for the original brand (which excluded children): it placed children’s own experience and voice at the heart of the text. Although *LazyTown Extra* can be read as an example of best practice in utilising the child’s own voice, the doctrine is not without practical and ideological difficulty – particularly when divorced from public service objectives — and producers must continue to proceed with caution whenever they seek to give a voice to the child audience.

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