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1

Understanding Preschool Television as a Production Ecology

Around the world small children are regularly captivated by television programmes produced especially for them by adults who inhabit a distinctive production community. Alongside long-running series such as *Sesame Street*, more recent arrivals such as *Bob the Builder*, *Teletubbies* and *Dora the Explorer* have become enduring favourites with children and their parents. The international presence of these series alone underlines the phenomenal changes experienced by preschool television in recent years with the emergence of globally branded channels and blocks and the discovery of young children as a valuable target audience.

However, while there is a longstanding and rich seam of research devoted to the impact of television on young children, especially in terms of their cognitive development and educational achievement (see Berry and Asamen, 1993; Pecora et al., 2007), we know rather less about the professionals behind these productions or even the changing institutional and economic circumstances of children's television production in general. This stands in marked contrast to the vast literature on the effects of television on children, some of which has been critical of television's impact on children's attention, imagination and intellect (see Christakis et al., 2004; Kline, 1993; Postman, 1982; Winn, 1977).

We do know a great deal about the production of some preschool programmes. For example the history and development of US series *Sesame Street* has been widely documented since the late 1960s, because when it began it was unique in integrating educational content and research into production in ways that could be tested and publicised (see Fisch and Truglio, 2001; Lesser, 1975; Morrow, 2006). Similarly more recent productions like US series *Blue's Clues* have attracted attention because they incorporate different ways of addressing children and enhancing learning (Anderson, 2004). Yet we know much less about the production

circumstances behind many other preschool shows and also about the assumptions that those who produce, broadcast and market preschool television make about their audiences. This is particularly the case for British shows, which, unlike *Sesame Street*, have often been driven less by pedagogical goals as by a desire to entertain children or simply to generate revenues for a series' investors.

Industry accounts of children's television tend to emphasise the special care taken by the industry in the best interests of children over and above any financial gain to themselves with claims about the educational and other benefits of their productions (see Laybourne, 1993). Anna Home, for example, former Head of BBC Children's, writes, 'Throughout the world it is apparent that the people who work in children's television do not do so for money or glory or power' (1993: 166). This may well have been true in the years of broadcast scarcity when most British children's television producers worked in the small self-contained world of BBC in-house production, which had its own programme-making philosophy and its own sense of continuity (*ibid.*). It may also have been true until the mid-1990s when the non-profit Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) dominated preschool broadcasting in the United States. Yet it is far less true of today's more disintegrated and globalised production environment where many production companies and freelancers exist alongside the in-house production units of large broadcasters and multimedia corporations, competing for scarce commissions and even scarcer funding in a highly competitive marketplace where the dynamics of production have changed considerably.

This in itself opens up some interesting questions about the broader institutional settings of production and the tensions that exist between creativity and commerce, between artistry and industry, between innovation and convention, between structure (organisational constraints) and agency (creative autonomy) (see for example Becker, 1982; Corner, 1999; Davis and Scase, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Messenger Davies, 2006; Tunstall, 1993; Turov, 1984). Of course preschool television is not particularly different in this respect from other forms of television or cultural production which also have to cope with the institutional constraints of corporate intentions and conventions, limited resources and time and the inherent risks of production (Corner, 1999: 70; Kubey, 2004: 4). Like all productions preschool television is not simply 'producer-driven' (Tunstall, 1993), but subject to negotiation and compromise at all levels because it usually involves collective authorship and collaboration (see Becker, 1982: 24–5) around shared conventions, and increasingly diverse ownership and funding arrangements,

which curtail individual creative autonomy to a considerable degree (Corner, 1999: 77; Cottle, 1995: 160–1). What makes children’s television, including preschool television, different is the identification of children as ‘a special audience with distinctive characteristics and needs’ (Buckingham, 2005: 468), who require protection from commercial exploitation and ‘from the consequences of their own vulnerability and ignorance’ (Davies et al., 2004: 479). This suggests that different priorities, relating to commercial, creative or audience considerations may prevail at any one time.

Bearing these considerations in mind, and drawing primarily on interviews and observations from Britain combined with further evidence from US experience, this book constitutes an attempt to provide systematic analysis of one small part of children’s television, preschool television, a section of the children’s market that has changed radically since the mid-1990s, and is arguably quite distinctive from other forms of children’s television in respect of how its audience is conceived, its economic underpinning and aesthetics. The book draws heavily on British examples, because the research underpinning it was funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Grant. However, preschool is also an area of content creation where Britain has a long tradition, and where it enjoys a strong international reputation (Stemers, 2004). It is also an area where US production has grown since the mid-1990s, reinforcing America’s position as both a key exporter of and key destination for preschool brands. Focusing on these two countries as major originators of preschool content, this book considers the range of forces that shape the development and production of contemporary preschool television by examining how those involved in its creation and distribution negotiate the wider commercial, creative and cultural forces that impact production. It focuses on how programmes are made and why they are made in particular ways, revealing how a combination of external forces and internal strategies inform and shape the nature of what is produced.

What do we mean by preschool television?

If children are indeed a special audience, and preschoolers constitute one small section of this special audience, what exactly do we mean by preschool television, a constructed term, much like the definition of childhood itself (Ariès, 1962; Buckingham, 2000: 6; Kline, 1993: 47–8). What distinguishes it from television targeted at older children and where exactly are boundaries drawn, if at all?

First, it clearly relates to an 'age and stage-related organisation of television' (Messenger Davies, 2001a: 79) rather than a genre-specific classification, although the two are often conflated in official reports (see Atwal et al., 2003; Blumler, 1992: 37; Messenger Davies and Corbett, 1997; Ofcom, 2007a), with preschool television output analysed alongside children's factual, drama, animation and entertainment programming when preschool television contains these same sub-categories of genre and form. Indeed preschool programming encompasses a very diverse range of genres including storytelling, music, entertainment, drama and a wide range of factual content (make and do, science, natural history, cookery) and hybrid forms. Programmes can be animated or live action or a mixture of both. As a form animation can range from complex 3D stop-frame model animation, 3D CGI, motion capture and digital puppetry as well as simpler 2D flash and CelAction techniques (Wells, 2006, 2007). Live action programmes sometimes do not contain any humans at all, consisting almost entirely of costumed characters and/or puppets.

However, in terms of age it is not always clear where preschool television begins and where it ends. Most channels and blocks (CBeebies, Nick Jr., Playhouse Disney) target children under six, with the upper end of the age-range (4–6) already having started formal schooling. Indeed CBeebies is labelled not as a service for preschoolers but as a service for 'the BBC's youngest audience' under six (BBC, 2008a: 28), and some practitioners prefer to use the term 'early years' rather than preschool because it prioritises children's 'own specific needs, interests and amusements' rather than school-readiness (see CPBF, 2007). In Scandinavia, preschool extends to the under-sevens, because children start school later (Cederborg, 2002). Where preschool programming was once hardly differentiated at all, nowadays within the two-to-six age-range, programming may be targeted at younger (2–3) or older children (4–6), but the majority of programming targets three- to five-year-olds. Most mainstream broadcast outlets do not commission programming for the under-tuos. This is because the market is assumed to be too small to be economically viable, but also because of concerns about infant viewing (Carrington, 2007a; Klasen, 2008; Skala, 2007) including a recommendation by the American Academy of Paediatrics Committee on Public Education (1999) that advises no screen time before the age of two, because it might negatively impact infant development.

These concerns have not prevented the more recent arrival of channels targeting infants under two and their parents (BabyFirst, BabyTV) and a range of DVDs (*Baby Einstein*, *Brainy Baby*, *Baby Genius*) that

encourage beliefs in infant learning in spite of little evidence to support this (Anderson and Pempek, 2005; Garrison and Christakis, 2005; Kirkorian and Anderson, 2008: 192–3). For the purposes of this study emphasis has been placed on programming commissioned by broadcasters for channels or slots that are targeted at young children between the ages of two and six, because most productions are created for this age group.

In terms of the market, preschoolers, even more so than older children whose own viewing boundaries have become increasingly blurred with adult viewing (Kapur, 1999: 124), are identifiable as a market niche with their own age-specific programmes. They may of course watch a variety of shows, often in the company of older children, and including those not specifically targeted at them such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Kinder, 1991: 125). However, programmes designed specifically for a preschool audience are usually of little interest to adults, except as cult viewing (see Buckingham, 2002: 56). Like all niches linked to consumption the segment is a marketing construction which allows some form of categorisation of an otherwise un-categorisable group in terms of pricing, demand and audience availability (Buckingham, 2007a: 19–20; Kapur, 1999: 126; Pecora, 1998: 98).

Yet as a marketing category preschoolers are not consumers in the same way as older children. They do not usually receive pocket money, and their ability to pester their parents for products linked to television programmes is more limited. They are not just emotionally and financially dependent on parents, but also much more dependent on parents for choosing what they watch, eat, wear or do. As a consequence producers, broadcasters and those interested in extending preschool brands into other product areas are also targeting parents, who exercise considerable control over their children's media consumption at this age, and are much more likely to accept shows that meet their parental expectations. Parental approval is therefore an important aspect of preschool television (Eryl-Jones, 2003) marking it out from programming aimed at older children, where parental approval is often not an objective at all (see Banet-Weiser, 2007).

Away from market categorisations, there is a different concept of preschool television based on children's emotional and cognitive development, drawn largely from psychology (see Buckingham, 2005: 472–3). As a group perceived to 'lack experience and thus need to be gently introduced to basic information about the world' (Messenger Davies, 2001b: 102), there is recognition that programming for preschoolers should meet their developmental needs and cognitive abilities by being

age-appropriate in respect of pacing, language, storytelling, sound, editing and visual representations. Many producers of preschool television therefore invariably 'see it as part of their job to be thoroughly well-informed about their audience' (Messenger Davies, 1995: 16) and many, yet not all, are specialists in making programming for young children.

This acknowledgement of preschoolers' lack of life experience underpins the underlying educational slant of much preschool programming which in turn is closely linked to an ethos of public service – that this is content that should not be entirely driven by commercial imperatives (see Messenger-Davies, 1995: 18). For example CBeebies in the United Kingdom has a service licence which requires it to promote education and learning with 'a very high level of educational output' that supports the school and preschool curricula (BBC Trust, 2008a: 3), and in the United States most preschool shows, either on commercial or public channels, are expected to satisfy educational goals (Dudko, 2008a).

In summary, preschool television is defined by different perceptions of its audience. At one level it is clearly marked by programming designed to meet the developmental needs of this particular age group. However, as Pecora points out (1998: 98–9; also Linn, 2004: 24), the provision of age-specific programming in niches is also connected to commercial demand and corporate strategies, where the child audience is segmented in ways that appeal to commercial interests and advertisers.

Organisation and production in preschool television

So where does preschool television fit within the organisational contexts and production practices of television and children's television in general? To understand the decisions taken by preschool programme-makers we need to understand the contexts in which they work, the internal workings of organisations and the relationships that exist between individuals and organisations (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003: 23). Yet studies of media production, essentially 'research about people who make television programmes and how these people work' (Messenger Davies, 2006: 21) are rather rare (Caldwell, 1995: 74; Davis and Scase, 2000: 13), possibly because access can be difficult (Corner, 1999: 70). There are plenty of studies about the economic and institutional structures of the communications marketplace, including its global manifestations (Herman and McChesney, 1997; Schiller, 1989), and equally many that concern themselves with media representations, but not that many that deal with production processes (see Caldwell, 2008; Ettema

and Whitney, 1982; Gitlin, 2000; Newcomb and Alley, 1983; Turow, 1984) and how market structures impact production practices at an everyday level (see Corner, 1999: 70; Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 36). While production studies are rather scant, studies that tackle issues connected with the production of children's programming (Bryant, 2007a; Buckingham et al., 1999; Hendershot, 2004; Palmer, 1987, 1988; Turow, 1981) are even rarer.

Nevertheless the growing commercialisation of children's television and the extent to which it is linked to the broader business of children's entertainment and consumer products do open up avenues for a wider-ranging analytical perspective of the context in which production takes place. Looking beyond the 'marketplace determinations' of political economy and 'the play of cultural discourses' represented by cultural studies, Cottle puts forward the case for exploring the 'relatively unexplored and under-theorised "middle ground" of organisational structures and workplace practices' and how media professionals manage the range of forces that enable or constrain what they do (Cottle, 2003a: 4-5; also Cunningham and Jacka, 1996: 22). Taking this further we can draw on Cottle's work on natural history programming, to demonstrate how the creation of preschool television takes place within a complex production ecology comprising 'competitive institutional relationships and co-operative dependencies' (2003b: 170), that shape the organisation, production practices and content of preschool television, extending beyond broadcasters and producers to include a number of other players.

The term ecology derives from Bourdieu's notion of a 'cultural field', a series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions and categories that constitute the sites of cultural practice, interaction and conflict between different players over resources (Bourdieu, 1993; Webb et al., 2002: 21-2). According to Cottle, the concept is helpful for examining not just those dynamics which operate 'inside individual media organisations' but also the 'organisational relationships and dynamics that exist *within* a particular field of media production' (2003b: 170-1) such as internationalising markets, fragmenting audiences and the particular conventions that dominate production. By examining the broader field of production including institutional relationships, dependencies, key players and professional practices, we can gain a better understanding of how media outputs change and the internal and external factors that influence them. Essentially it is the idea that production functions like an eco-system involving relationships between individuals and organisations, so that a change somewhere in that eco-system will have an

impact on everything else that inhabits the system, altering interactions in the process.

Focusing on the production ecology of preschool television therefore means looking beyond the immediate sphere of any one organisation such as the BBC or PBS or Nickelodeon. Nor is it just about examining the minutiae of the production process within one organisation. It extends to the development of initial ideas right through to the extension of a programme concept to other forms of media consumption. It means examining the wider economic, technological, regulatory, commercial and cultural dynamics of production and how these forces are 'managed and creatively negotiated' by broadcasters, producers, distributors, rights-owners, co-producers and others in the broader ecology (Cottle, 2003b: 172). It entails looking at how players co-exist, co-operate and compete in a complex changing field and the impact of their decisions and actions on what children are offered as media content (Cottle, 2004: 82). It also involves looking at how those in the broader production community balance creative and commercial considerations and how they manage risk in an unpredictable business, where success is never assured because of the unpredictability of the audience and the production process itself (Casey et al., 2002: 175; Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 18–19). It also suggests taking into consideration the constraints, which are specific to preschool television in respect of funding and the audience's perceived needs (Bryant, 2007b: 39).

For the production ecology of preschool television, the period since the mid-1990s is particularly interesting because it not only coincides with the international success of preschool series such as *Teletubbies* and *Blue's Clues* which marked the importance of global distribution and noticeably different funding models. It also coincides with the launch of several dedicated preschool blocks or channels including Nick Jr. and Playhouse Disney in both the United States and Britain and CBeebies in Britain. Preschool television therefore provides a good example of a production ecology governed by a rapidly changing and complex set of industry relationships and dependencies, focused on content, which needs to satisfy a wide range of domestic and international circumstances as well as public service and commercial prerogatives. In this sense preschool television, as one particular type of production ecology, provides a fascinating point of departure because it represents a microcosm of the broader changes in television – including the shift from scarcity to plenty to digital abundance (Ellis, 2000), and from local to global patterns of production, distribution and consumption. It is these complex and changing relationships

between broadcasters, programme-makers, financiers and regulators that constitute the production ecology of preschool television.

Key players in the preschool television production ecology

Who then are the actors in this ecology? Preschool television involves a spectrum of players who may be pulling in the same or opposing directions according to their own shifting economic, ideological or creative priorities at any one time. This is a close-knit, but complex community comprising individuals and corporations with 'multiple intentions, corporate and individual' (Corner, 1999: 70), who are engaged both in business and creativity. Individual relationships and networks are crucially important, both locally and internationally. Individuals meet at the same conferences, international trade conventions and broadcaster presentations, and read the same trade publications and online bulletins. Focusing on these different players and their relationships allows us to examine their different levels of interaction, interdependence, co-operation and competition, and how they position themselves in relation to changing national and international circumstances and to each other. For the purposes of this study I use the concept of production ecology to reflect both the community of players involved and the different levels of analysis within preschool television (see 'Levels of analysis within the production process') which affect relationships within the ecology.

Concentrating on the US Bryant describes the children's television sector *as a whole* as a community, a system or network of different players or populations that has evolved over time, 'based on internal dynamics and external pressures' (2007b: 36). The 'internal dynamics' referred to in Bryant's account allude to the ways in which the different player populations within the community interact with each other and respond to external challenges, altering the make-up of the community over time. This definition has the advantage of explaining not just how children's television is created, broadcast and distributed by those directly involved, but also how production and relationships are impacted more broadly by regulatory, political, economic, technological and marketing considerations.

As a sub-set of children's television it is possible to identify a preschool production ecology with its own distinctive players and relationships. Sometimes these overlap with television production for children in general – as is the case with regulatory bodies, advocacy groups, professional bodies and those organisations that produce or broadcast for

a range of ages. However, with the emergence of preschool channels and blocks, specialist preschool producers and merchandise licensing activities that focus on this age group, it is possible to distinguish a production ecology that characterises this particular field of cultural production.

Within this ecology the relationships are not all equal and some players have more influence or impact than others. Members may have different interests and goals, and at different times relationships may be mutually beneficial, predatory or competitive depending on the production climate (see Bryant, 2007b: 38). For example the relationship would be mutually beneficial in a co-production or when creative and commercial interests collaborate to build a preschool brand or if the community as a whole is co-ordinating a response in the face of some threat to its existence (see Chapter 10). It would be competitive during a pitch for a broadcast slot or predatory in battles for ownership and control of companies or properties.

In Britain and the United States the preschool production ecology comprises the following players involved in broadcasting, content creation, ancillary rights exploitation, regulation and advocacy. The categories are not exclusive or static. There is a certain amount of overlap and fluidity in the relationships with some players located in one or more categories, particularly if they form part of a vertically integrated organisation such as Disney or Viacom or the BBC, who are involved in different media and different aspects of production, distribution and marketing.

Broadcasters comprise mainly the broadcast and cable networks that transmit preschool television as commissioned content, as co-productions or acquisitions. In the United States the range of broadcasters includes the preschool block of the non-profit-making broadcast network, PBS, and its digital preschool co-venture with commercial partners, PBS Kids Sprout. It also encompasses commercial cable networks that transmit branded blocks of preschool programming (Nick Jr. on Nickelodeon, Playhouse Disney on Disney or the short-lived Tickle U block on Cartoon Network which was withdrawn in 2006 after launching in 2005) and Noggin, a preschool channel, owned by Nickelodeon, which was re-branded as Nick Jr. in 2009. With the exception of PBS, these are not just content programmers, but also significant creators of preschool content and brands, which are marketed globally through parent media conglomerates (Disney, Time Warner, Viacom) well versed in 'repurposing' content across borders and platforms (see Caldwell, 2008: 9).

In Britain broadcast outlets include CBeebies, the preschool brand of the BBC, a publicly funded non-profit-making public service institution, which is both a broadcaster and a significant content creator through the in-house production division of the BBC Children's department. The BBC is also an important co-funder and manager of preschool intellectual property (IP), including third party product, through BBC Worldwide, a separate commercial subsidiary, which operates independently of BBC Children's and CBeebies, channelling profits back to the BBC. Then there are the commercially funded public service generalist channels, ITV1 and Five, who function mainly as broadcasters, subject to limited public service obligations on the quality and range of their children's programming (Communications Act, 2003; Thickett, 2007a). Five's morning preschool block, *Milkshake!*, is a significant competitor to CBeebies. Finally there are commercial preschool channels that comprise the dedicated preschool channel offshoots and time-shifted services of US-owned brands Nick Jr. (1999), Playhouse Disney (2000), Cartoonito (2006, owned by Time Warner) and infant-focused channels BabyFirst! and BabyTV.

In terms of content creation Bryant writing about the United States draws a distinction between content creators who produce explicitly educational programmes and those who make programming that is 'primarily entertaining' (Bryant, 2007b: 41). Significantly the educational examples she cites – *Sesame Street*, *Mr Rogers' Neighborhood* and *Blue's Clues* produced by Sesame Workshop, Family Communications Inc and Nick Jr., respectively – are all preschool programmes, because little educational programming is made for older children. Bryant points out that there is some overlap between the two, but it is worth pointing out that for preschool programming, content creators in the United States nearly always pursue curricular objectives. In the United Kingdom this distinction between educational and entertaining preschool television is not normally made (see Chapter 6).

Further within content creation there are a range of different entities, which vary hugely in the size and scope of their activities. As mentioned, some broadcasters and cable networks are heavily involved in content creation through their own in-house production arms. Larger production companies may be involved in the creation, distribution and ancillary exploitation of their own shows as well as third-party properties, which they then use to build home entertainment, international sales and consumer product divisions. They include British companies, who have made the brand management of preschool content a key focus of their operations in recent years – including HIT Entertainment

and Chorion (see Chapter 5). Some run their own production divisions; others confine their creative activities to development, outsourcing production to others. Some, wishing to secure broadcast access in key markets, particularly the United States, have become involved in programming/broadcasting. For example HIT Entertainment is a partner in the preschool cable network and on-demand service, PBS Kids Sprout in the United States as well as the international preschool channel, JimJam.

Within the hierarchy of content creation there are many smaller production entities, often creatively led and concentrated on one or two individuals with skills as preschool animators, writers, directors or producers, who are dependent on broadcasters and larger producer-distributors to fund their projects through pre-sales, commissions and ancillary exploitation because they lack the resources, skills, infrastructure or inclination to do this themselves. Broadcasters and larger producers in turn are dependent on smaller creative entities to take on some of the risks associated with creative development and to come up with the ideas that underpin and reinforce their status and credibility as a creative force, which they can then exploit commercially on a global scale (see Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 176). In the words of one US preschool producer,

There's a belief that if they [broadcasters] could create this content themselves they would. They know that they can't. They know that they need independents because they have a fresh perspective. They're closer to the ground. They're not part of a very large corporation. They rely on companies like mine and others, to generate fresh new ideas [...] They do it because that's where the interesting works come from. (Interview, 2007)

Beyond broadcasting and the creation of content there are other players and activities within the preschool production ecology that impact content. Licensees such as toy companies create consumer products based on the characters and environments of preschool television programmes, which in turn are dependent on retail distribution. Licensing considerations have a considerable impact on the type of programmes made, because young children are now the primary market for toys, and licensing revenues constitute such an important part of preschool television programme funding (see Chapter 9). Bryant (2007b) identifies advertisers as a further player in US children's television, but their influence has always been less prominent in Britain, particularly since

the advertising of HFSS (high in fat, sugar and salt) foods was banned in 2007 within and around programming targeted at the under-16s.

Legislative and regulatory bodies that enact regulations are also important members of this ecology. In terms of enforcing legislation and regulatory oversight this extends to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States and the Office of Communications (Ofcom) in Britain. Children's advocacy groups that campaign for the public interest responsibilities of children's television have a longer history in the United States because of a tradition of public activism over children's television-related issues, particularly those to do with violence, educational programming and advertising. Starting with Action for Children's Television (ACT) in the late 1960s and until 2003 the Center for Media Education, this campaign work has been continued by a host of other child and public health-focused groups (see Kunkel, 2007: 222–3; Montgomery, 2007). In Britain advocacy came later because for many years children's television was deemed well served by terrestrial broadcasters with public service obligations – foremost the BBC, but including commercially funded broadcaster, ITV. Advocacy for children's television, as we shall see in Chapter 10, has only emerged intermittently in Britain in response to perceived regulatory failings that threaten levels of home-grown transmissions and production.

Levels of analysis within the production process

Having identified the different players within the production ecology of preschool television, it is worth considering the system in which production is situated and organised. Different commentators, writing about media production in general (Cottle, 2003a; Davis and Scase, 2000; Goldsmiths Media Group, 2000; Williams, 2003: 97) or television production in particular (Alvarado and Buscombe, 1978; Corner, 1999) have identified different levels of analysis in the production process, which range from the broadest institutional, political and economic contexts to the most specific creative and business choices. In combination or individually these all have the potential to determine the shape and content of a production.

At the macro-level there are the general political, cultural, regulatory, technological and economic parameters within which television gets made, which can promote or constrain it, and which condition the decision-making process. According to Corner these constitute the 'historical contexts of production' (1999: 71). For example at this level

one fundamental distinction between the United States and the British media is the greater emphasis placed in Britain on publicly funded public service media as opposed to the US system, where commercial media and profit-making have prevailed (Gitlin, 2000). However, within preschool television, this distinction between public service and commercial media is not nearly so clear-cut, with different historical and regulatory traditions translating into different expectations about the goals of preschool television. In the United States, preschool television since the late 1960s has become strongly focused on content that has explicit educational goals that now extend across public television to the programming of commercial outlets like Nick Jr. and Playhouse Disney. In Britain, there is a longer more sustained preschool television tradition dating back to the early 1950s, strongly influenced by the public service ethos of the licence-fee funded BBC, but educational goals have always been less formalised.

At the meso-level there are the institutional, financial and organisational contexts of production focused on what Cottle calls 'impinging organisational cultures, corporate strategy and editorial policies' that inform production choices at a strategic and planning level (2003a: 20). Activities here are focused largely on broadcasters, larger producers and large corporations whose 'creative managers' (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 64) decide what actually gets made in keeping with an organisation's corporate objectives. Combining corporate goals with the creative aspirations of those involved in the day-to-day production of programmes constitutes one of the main challenges of content creation (Casey et al., 2002: 177; Davis and Scase, 2000: 4), requiring management and negotiation by individuals such as broadcast commissioners, executive producers or creative directors who act as 'brokers or mediators' (see Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 64–5) with creative practitioners. Within this organisational context, co-ordination and negotiation also extend to those involved in the marketing and promotion of shows, both to audiences (*ibid.*) and other commercial interests as part of an organisation's other strategic priorities (e.g. in consumer products).

Relationships at this meso-level are determined in large part by the institutional stance of an organisation. For example, CBeebies, the BBC's dedicated channel for preschoolers, has public service obligations and a publicly funded budget, in contrast with its commercial rival Nick Jr., which has commercial responsibilities, underpinned by commercial funding, and a corporate philosophy, which originates in the United States. The different organisational contexts of these broadcasters (stemming in part from history, policy and regulatory contexts at

the macro-level) influence the type of content they are able or willing to support (see Chapters 3 and 4). Yet this is not the whole picture. The increasingly complicated funding structure of preschool television means that the institutional and corporate ambitions of several players may impinge on production choices – including those of overseas broadcasters, co-producers and those involved in ancillary exploitation (e.g. toy manufacturers). This is a fluid and variable process, where no two preschool projects are ever the same in terms of their funding, execution or the staff and resources employed.

At the micro-level where individuals are directly involved in the creation of preschool programmes, production can be viewed as ‘an interlocking network of everyday working practices, artistic and other cultural demands, the beliefs and actions of individuals and social groups’ (Alvarado and Buscombe, 1978: 3). This is where corporate and managerial intentions need to be balanced with creative considerations and where different sets of priorities may emerge in a process which Davis and Scase call ‘mutual adjustment’, where creative contributions and aesthetic criteria are tailored to the demands of the marketplace and each production’s specific budgetary and time constraints (2000: 14–15). At this level Corner makes a distinction between production mentalities and production practices. Production mentalities comprise the different ‘dispositions, values and working “practical consciousness”’ of those involved in the production process, who may have different ‘creative, craft, professional and corporate goals in mind’ (1999: 71). Production practices consist of the actual skills and conventions involved in making a television programme (1999: 71). Production practices involve a greater variety of individuals – animators, musicians, editors and skin artists etcetera – but many of the key decisions have already been made by this stage during development with regard to scripts, characters, style and direction (see Chapter 6). In this sense there is a clear distinction between what Hesmondhalgh (2007: 64) calls ‘primary creative personnel’ (symbol creators) who have a creative role, and ‘technical workers’ whose importance rests on their craft skills rather than a creative contribution to the conception, interpretation or communication of ideas (also Davis and Scase, 2000: 52–3). For it is the production mentalities and assumptions about what works and what doesn’t that inform the practicalities of audio-visual construction and performance.

At the micro-level individuals function within a hierarchy, where their decisions are guided by groups and individuals that exist above or below them, even if they have some degree of autonomy. This leads to co-dependence and co-operation. As well as being aware of what

audiences and broadcasters want, preschool television producers for example, may also need to take account of what product licensees and retailers want, so that their programmes work as brands on shop shelves, and recoup production investment. Their 'practical consciousness' is therefore affected by other professional or financial priorities, which may influence the way a preschool television project is tackled. Creatives involved in the production of preschool television may have doubts about programming becoming too centred on such licensing considerations in respect of character development and settings (see Chapter 10). The resolution of these conflicting priorities involves negotiation between different players including producers, broadcasters, marketers, international distributors, writers and so on who each bring their own professional priorities to the table.

Methods and outline

This chapter has sought to contextualise the production of preschool television, positioning analysis within the analytical framework of production ecology in order to pinpoint how different players co-exist, co-operate and compete across different levels of activity, informing the nature of preschool programming in the process. In keeping with this approach the rest of the book comprises a mid-range analysis of preschool television production, designed to give greater insight into the different facets of production – facets that are determined by broader historical, structural, cultural, technological and regulatory circumstances, as well as activities and relationships within the ecology, which are managed and negotiated on a day-to-day basis. This mid-range approach is focused on how preschool television concepts are generated, developed, commissioned, produced and exploited to meet a complex set of creative, cultural, international and market priorities.

Evidence has largely been drawn from 88 face-to-face interviews between 2006 and 2008 with British players involved variously in aspects of broadcasting, production, international distribution, marketing, regulation and advocacy. This was supplemented by 20 interviews with US and European players involved in production, research, acquisitions, broadcasting and marketing.¹ Interviews were semi-structured to the extent that the same basic themes were introduced, but questions were left open-ended to allow respondents to develop their own line of thought. In addition to background information, information was sought on the commissioning and acquisition process, funding models, creative, educational and commercial considerations and the extent

to which these are implemented, negotiated and managed by different players. The line of questioning was adapted in each interview to reflect the nature of involvement. Although this material is often coloured by personal experience, themes and ideas do emerge which can be followed up in other interviews and in documentary evidence. In order to pinpoint key stages in the production process, observations (14 in total) took place within a range of production environments (live action and animation; studio, location, post-production; focus group research) and at industry events, with each observation lasting variously from a day to a week. This has occurred alongside the examination of primary material (schedules, regulatory and policy documents, company reports, websites, insider accounts), secondary sources (trade publications) and the analysis of select samples of preschool television, produced and broadcast since 1995.

While this chapter has provided an analytical framework for examining preschool television production, Chapter 2 moves onto the historical origins of preschool television, examining how the public service rationale behind preschool television initiatives has been differently inflected in Britain and America. Chapter 3 considers the global dimension of preschool television and its transition from an essentially small localised industry to a more commercially and internationally oriented multiplatform enterprise. It examines the economics of production and provides an overview of international markets drawing on interviews with overseas buyers who function as gatekeepers. Particular attention is focused on the United States, the most important market for international exploitation. Using Britain as a case study, Chapter 4 focuses on the role of broadcasters and the nature and extent of their involvement in funding, scheduling, shaping and promoting programming. Having outlined the broader historical and institutional context of preschool television, Chapter 5 concentrates on those companies who have forged a business by focusing on the production and/or rights management of preschool television content including larger producer-distributors (HIT Entertainment, Entertainment Rights, Chorion) as well as smaller niche operators. Issues surrounding development and research are considered in Chapter 6, before moving to an examination of the assumptions and conventions that guide British programme-makers in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 starts by looking at changes in the organisational structures and forms of preschool television production before focusing on a case study, which illustrates different facets of the production process. Chapter 9 examines the crucial importance of licensed merchandise for the preschool market and how product licensing impacts production

strategies. Chapter 10 moves to regulatory policy. Starting with a comparison of the situation in Britain and America, the United Kingdom is used as a case study to illustrate the role of regulation in ensuring diversity of content and supply. Looking beyond the policy and economic dimensions of preschool television, Chapter 11 examines the aesthetic qualities and motivations that underpin preschool production, qualities through which extraordinary works are recognised and valued. The final chapter provides an overview of the issues, concepts and arguments discussed throughout the book as well as assessing the future of preschool television in the light of technological change and the emergence of new media platforms.

Having outlined what this book is about, it is also useful to establish what it does not cover. Its primary focus is the production of preschool television programmes, and the external forces and internal production practices that inform their development. It is not about the experience of young viewers; nor is it about the effects of programmes on them, although the assumptions that the industry makes about this audience are clearly very important indeed in determining what is made and distributed (see Chapter 6 and 7). Nor does it provide an exhaustive inventory of preschool programmes, although key examples are highlighted to underscore significant features and steps in the production process. It concentrates primarily on programming targeting two- to six-year-olds, which achieves prominence through broadcast distribution. The circulation of content to children under two, including DVDs and infant channels, does raise important issues about the impact of programming and the further segmentation of the marketplace by commercial interests, but for reasons of time and space, lie outside the scope of this book. This study focuses on preschool programming originated for television, and on the ways that those who make and market programmes negotiate the wider commercial, cultural, regulatory and technological forces that impact production. As such it can be seen as a case study and analysis of the state of preschool television, which places the changing relationships and dependencies that constitute the ecology at the heart of the analysis.

Note

1. All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from personal interviews and production observations between 2006 and 2008, some of which have been anonymised.

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