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Children's TV Malta 2015

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Purpose

Emerging media technologies and their impact on children's households may be singled out as one of the key emerging drivers of children's television. The National Broadcasting Authority of Malta initiated this foresight exercise, in order to identify the most important trends in today's children television programmes and how these can be improved. The findings of the exercise highlight a complex set of emerging trends and drivers influencing children's television in 2015, as well as a number of policy levers for improving television for children. Through the "Children's Quality Television" foresight exercise a number of policy insights and levers were identified which are currently leading to qualitative improvements in children's television. .

Emerging Technologies & their Impact on Children

Emerging media technologies and their impact on children's households may be singled out as one of the key emerging drivers of children's television. Indeed this is reflected in the alternative scenarios and visions for quality children's television in 2015, which this exercise seeks to map and explore. Change is a constant factor to contend with in our daily lives and with products, processes and services, which are particularly dependent on consumer demand and ongoing technological improvements, such as media and television, the accelerated rate of change becomes even more evident.

The results of the exercise highlight a complex set of factors which together currently inhibit the improvement of children's television. These include shortcomings in resources, both fi-

nancial and technical, as well as mindsets that are not always open for improvement. The results of the "children's television exercise reveal a number of emerging trends and drivers of quality children's television in 2015, including the attraction of adult television for children, the growing popularity of hybrid television programmes where parents can spend quality time with their children, children's need to feel that they can design and create their own television programmes, and the need for plurality and choice together with professionalism and quality in the television offerings, among others. These trends reflect the fact that children are becoming more mature in their tastes and needs at a younger age and expect to be treated accordingly even in the entertainment that they are offered. Indeed we have to come to terms with the fact that children today are far more selective than we ever were about the quality of television. This is a fact that has to be contended with and taken seriously into account.

Development of a Vision for Quality Children's TV

The aim of this foresight exercise was to complement rather than to replicate previous research. The exercise aimed:

- To explore alternative scenarios and to develop a vision for quality children's television in 2015,



- To motivate participants to identify roles for themselves in this vision,
- To instigate stakeholders to improve the quality of children's television programmes,
- To disseminate the concept of feasible quality television programmes for children,
- To provide criteria for the raising of standards,
- To provide the impetus for higher expectations on the part of both participants and others by means of initiating a dialogue on this topic.

Children's Involvement in the Exercise

This foresight exercise was conducted using simple foresight methodologies and tools such as scenario building, stakeholder mapping, consultation and focus groups.

The initial aim of using this methodology was to create visions of quality television for children in 2015. By proposing 2015 as the long-term time frame for this research, participants were given the opportunity to escape from the limitations of the current situation and, through the use of their imagination, to

take a mental leap towards the future and put forward useful proposals.

Another important tool that was utilised in schools for this exercise was the **Edward De Bono thinking tool**. Edward de Bono is considered as the guru of 'creating thinking' and has developed many tools for teamwork and creative ideas. The main purpose for its use was an attempt to elucidate children's perceptions on popular television programs for children and on their vision for quality children's television. The thinking skills teachers and researchers employed by the Education division in state primary and secondary schools conducted these sessions.

In this exercise different stakeholders were identified so as to suit the different groups, bearing in mind constraints such as time factors and age. The main target group was identified as being children from 9-12 years old, as well as media stakeholders (mainly television) and postgraduate students participating in workshops and envisaging the future of quality children's television.

Children Included in the Formulation of Quality Standards

The researchers focused their efforts on clarifying what quality television for children implied. Their research on the subject exposed some key concepts concerning the quality of television nowadays.

They came to the conclusion that:

- Media could greatly influence young people's notion of a good life building on their values and concepts on how a good life could be understood,
- Television and other media give them the power to cope with all the difficulties in the future and to acquire strategies for acting on their dreams and hopes for the future,
- Pluralism in broadcasting implies a diversity of options and choices not only in products but also in the range of life styles and belief systems,
- Television has become an integral part of everyday life. It is no longer an intrusive force that acts as a threat to family values. It has become an important means of entertainment and saturation,
- Television has become an inseparable component of family life – evidence is its positioning in the living, eating and sleeping areas in our homes (media presence),
- Television is not merely another appliance like a cooker or a fridge. 'Family viewing' involves the operation of social power and influence, both within and beyond the family itself (power relations).

In this framework, quality television is defined as allowing children to participate and to play an active role in the programme and not just as spectators. Furthermore, quality televi-

sion can take on the role of a mediator, meeting the needs and expectations of different child age groups. It also breaks the established rules of television and displays creativity and innovation through the variety of programmes shown. It may initially struggle against unappreciative audiences and may tend towards the controversial.

Foresight at Malta's State Schools

The children made use of the de Bono methods and simple foresight techniques in order to highlight what they considered as the most popular television programmes. This process helped to clarify their perceptions on quality television for children. The key outcomes from the sessions that were conducted in state schools in Malta have shown different insights across the different age groups. More specifically:

- Children see a good TV production as including action, surprises, music and other activities.
- Children demonstrate a real concern over appropriate content (no violence or reduce fighting, no lies, no killings, etc.) and often state that quality children's programmes should contain content suitable for children.
- Children are keen to learn through television and there is a strong preference for arts and crafts and life skills programmes.
- Children enjoy good and interesting stories and they are especially interested in fantasy and entertainment.
- It is likely that a number of children have difficulty in understanding languages other than Maltese and, possibly, also unusual accents, as some respondents said they think good quality programmes are those, which they can easily understand.

- Children recognise and learn from good role models and examples and claim to enjoy programmes where good prevails over evil.
- It is interesting to note strong elements of consistency across age groups regarding programmes that children enjoy watching and what they do not enjoy.

Moreover, a number of issues and concerns emerge from the analysis of the children's feedback. These include children's awareness of:

- The importance of education and learning,
- The ineffectiveness of bad language,
- The importance of programmes being suitable for children,
- Expressions of professionalism,
- Action and adventure as expressions of entertainment,
- Advertisements as being disruptive during interesting programmes,
- Humour and emotions as fun but not always educational,
- Actors, presenters and talent displayed as role models.

Pilot Focus Group - Malta Council for Science and Technology

The Malta Council created a pilot focus group for Science and Technology. This specific exercise provided valuable information about scenarios for quality television for children in 2015 and about the sound coordination of planned future research. The key results after the development of this pilot focus group related mainly to issues raised in the presentations and discussions between all the interested participants.

The ideas that emerged included:

- Integration of today's technology with TV,
- More personalised TV with greater choice,
- TV not as an information provider, but as an interactive instrument that could diffuse knowledge,
- Touch screens for use of DVD, music, games,
- Children's growing power to affect / alter a programme and to participate more directly due to interactive TV,
- Media education within school curriculum provides all the required opportunities for children to produce their own programmes with facilities available in schools such as editing facilities on computers,
- Changes in the way messages are delivered nowadays: live interaction could be achieved even today, e.g. through web cams for live intervention in real time,
- Use of multimedia technologies can allow children to participate, learn and follow lessons from home,
- Children's participation in TV programmes has contributed in increasing the confidence and creativity of children as reflected in their keenness to express their opinions more – at present Maltese children tend to keep back from expressing their opinion,
- TV on demand could result in less quality TV programmes, which may be forced to give way to programmes with mass audiences.,

- 'Extreme' programmes bring out the worst in society – what values do these programmes promote? They raise both content and quality concerns. A leap to the past could provide a good scenario for the future.
- Advertising efforts have already shifted towards Internet.

Media Stakeholder Focus on Scenarios

Three focus groups were developed, composed mainly of media stakeholders. Their main aim was to make use of simple foresight techniques in an attempt to create alternative scenarios for quality children's television in 2015.

Apart from the fact that many limitations have risen during the session procedure, due to difficulties in encouraging certain participants to move into the future as well as the diminished turnout of participants at sessions. However, the whole focus group perception was able to move forward as planned.

Participants who were keen on producing great ideas about the notion of quality television for children in 2015 presented mixed scenarios. In some scenarios children were empowered to produce their own programmes and in other, children were projected as watching less and less television and indulging more in interactive sessions with other media – television being relegated to the background or totally eliminated.

All key stakeholders have stressed the importance of the **Hybrid TV** scenario, combining children's and family television, where both children and adults could enjoy quality television time. A second scenario emerging from these focus groups was the **Ambient TV** where television is embedded in our environment, and will also be more portable and personalised. Television programmes will compete with other digital experiences. For example, it would be possible for someone in Malta to interact with someone from the US or a child in the UK could easily play a game on television with a child in Malta and appear on television while doing so. A third scenario is the **globally interactive TV** where a quiz for children will be shared and enjoyed by several countries simultaneously producing an interesting situation on immediate communication. Last but not least is the **TV powered by children scenario** where children will have the advantage of presenting their own news programme. In this scenario, children will be the journalists and would send reports from their town or city.

The following issues emerge from the four key scenarios:

- Can there be better cooperation between schools and television productions?
- Should children be encouraged to watch more television given that they hardly spend any time outdoors and are already very busy with homework and private lessons?
- Should the public be given what it wants or are we bound to care for and encourage an appreciation of quality in children's minds?
- Language is still a big issue – programmes in Maltese exclude English speaking children and vice-versa.

- Will children's television still exist in 2015 given that children have a number of other more interactive possibilities such as web-chatting, web cams, web surfing etc?
- Should television be inward looking and utilise only professionals or outward looking and involve other media, new blood and international possibilities?
- Would parents or children recognise and appreciate quality children's television?

The University of Malta Develops Guidelines for Quality TV

A group of postgraduate education students of the University of Malta were brought together in a workshop and asked to develop and articulate their visions on quality children's television in 2015, using Edward de Bono methods and techniques. Important insights emerged including:

- Children should learn from television, so learning should be presented as fun.
- Children have a great opportunity of producing their own television programmes through media education.

- Programmes that show situations children can relate to in their own lives – case studies that children can actually live and experience themselves.
- Television programmes should be designed to build self-esteem by celebrating the unique abilities of children.
- Television schedules must dedicate some time to quality television for children.
- TV programmes should respect children's abilities and as they themselves can offer valuable inputs for making television programmes of higher quality.
- New technology could allow children to develop a more interactive experience when watching television.
- Television programmes supplement school education and science and technology education and learning-by-doing need to be featured more strongly, alongside regular education.
- Robotic and electronic characters could take over from traditional cartoon figures.
- Children themselves can present Science and history in a creative and fun way.

Awareness Raising and Follow-up Actions

Possible follow-up actions identified include:

- The results of this research should be disseminated not only among the stakeholders but also among the general public and the media.
- Further research should be conducted on the experience of other countries on this specific issue of quality television for children so as to pinpoint the major differences between different countries aiming to ameliorate the conditions followed in this issue.
- Media education and the use of television in schools for educational purposes together with the training of teachers and children in media literacy and media appreciation should be undertaken.
- The problem of lack of resources needs to be solved and opportunities such as EU funding must be explored for the promotion and exploitation of this issue.

Policy for Quality Required

Competition is healthy for the development of children. It creates challenges that motivate self-growth and a sense of responsibility. Politicians and policy-makers need to be made more aware of the responsibility of ensuring high quality public service television. More use should be made of other media for promoting quality television. The emphasis should not be solely on quality television, but on promoting a certain set of values that children respect and follow. It was generally felt that television lacks direction or coordination and for this reason, the formulation of policy for quality television for children should clearly outline these aims and provide both strategy and direction together with aims and objectives.

The focus of the involvement of the main stakeholders in this foresight exercise was on television as a medium for education through entertainment. A range of opinions were expressed but two dominant aspects emerged, firstly standard patterns of programming such as sing along music programmes, quiz programmes, and secondly more interactive television and a virtual reality show with the participation of children and with educational content presented as part of the show. It is important to note that a number of issues that emerged in this research applied not only to local productions for children but also to productions for adult audiences.

Sources and References

<http://www.eforesee.info/malta>

Dingli, S.M. and Cassingena Harper, J., January 2006, "Quality television for children in 2015", Research Paper commissioned by the Broadcasting Authority

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