

*"Working for quality
and diversity in
British broadcasting"*



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**Director, BBC Children's
Children at the heart of the BBC's Mission
Speech given to the VLV**

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Check against delivery



Good evening – thank you very much to the VLV for inviting me this evening, and thank you for coming along.

A year ago next week, I started as director of BBC Children's. At the time, I was described in some quarters as having been catapulted into the role. But from where I stand it feels it's been a bit slower than that! I've worked exclusively in children's television for nearly 22 years. So I didn't come from outer space – I've spent most of my working life making content for children in the UK – and trying to make it the best it can be!

On day three of my new role, the VLV asked me to come and outline my vision for BBC Children's – which was a wonderful opportunity to give my first public thoughts. The VLV has always championed the cause of high quality television for UK children and this evening is further proof, if any were needed, of just how seriously the VLV and its members think about programming for our most discerning audience. So it's only right that, one year on, the VLV is where I should come to share my thoughts on that first year and to look ahead to the next.

In many ways it's a great time to be Director of BBC Children's – I actually think it's the best job in the world. Children's content does feel like it's at the heart of the BBC, and our responsibility to our children's audience is at the heart of the debate about the BBC.

We have more resources than ever before, two hugely successful and distinctive channels – CBeebies for children under six, and CBBC for children 6-12 – what we do is talked about at the top of the BBC and children's content is bang in the middle of the BBC's recent Strategy Review, Putting Quality First. Even when you add the challenges of next year's move to Salford, and the changes to the BBC's funding announced two weeks ago, we're still in pretty good shape compared to many.

But I know we're fortunate, and that for many outside the BBC, children's feels like a genre in crisis, an industry teetering on the edge of financial ruin, and a market flooded with American content. For others, television today just isn't as good as it used to be, with British children left to the mercies of poor content and brain-rotting multi-channel choice. And perhaps, more worryingly, a small but increasingly vocal minority promotes

the idea that children's new relationship with media is doing terrible damage to them for ever.

I know there are some very serious problems facing the industry, and those problems are well-rehearsed, but, in terms of quality and impact, I genuinely think that children's TV in the UK is as good as it's ever been, and that far from contributing to the challenges today's children face, high quality media is uniquely able to help them make sense of the complex world they live in.

Now, more than ever, we need a credible, informed and robust debate about 21st-century children, their needs and ambitions, about the world they live in and about the role media plays in that world. We should celebrate the past and everything it stood for, but let's look forward to more golden ages, and how we can create them for tomorrow's children, not recreate old, familiar ones, for ourselves.

I have a request of everyone involved in this debate – tonight, and beyond tonight, make sure you know your children's content, make sure you know the technologies children use and how they use them. Ask some children what they do when they get home from school and understand the complex world of media they live in.

And perhaps the academics amongst you could help us all, by producing and identifying compelling research that demonstrates the real potential and positive impact of media. I wouldn't dare stand here if I didn't think good quality media is actually beneficial to children's development – and research is critical to the health, wellbeing and future of our industry.

It's 60 years this year since the BBC created its children's department, under its first head, Frieda Lingstrom, the legendary creator of Andy Pandy and Bill And Ben. The BBC had made radio programmes for children since the Twenties, and TV programmes since the television service resumed after the war.

But 1950 was the moment the BBC realised that the youngest audience were not just shorter than everyone else, but also had their own needs and tastes. The ambition was to create a BBC TV schedule in miniature, with every genre represented, tailored for children. And in that sense nothing much has changed.

BBC Children's today has a very simple mission: to create unforgettable content to inspire all children across the UK – it's not really any different from the vision of the founders of the BBC Children's department 60 years ago – but achieving that vision is made more complicated by radically different economic, competitive and technological landscapes – and audience behaviours.

"Unforgettable content to inspire all children across the UK" – the key words for me are unforgettable, which is about quality; UK, which is because we must try to make every child wherever they are in the UK feel that somewhere on our output is something that reflects a life like theirs; and inspire, because what we do should, at its best, have lasting effects for children and the society they grow up in.

Last Saturday I had the huge thrill of being invited to a reunion of producers and presenters of Playschool. I was born in the same year that Playschool launched. It helped me learn to tell the time, to express myself, to play, and to see the presenters as

role models and inspiring friends. So you can imagine that on Saturday I was like a kid meeting Santa – and even made the wonderful Brian Cant pose for a photo with me.

I'm not telling you all this just to name drop that I met Brian Cant, but because that wonderful event illustrated two key things about BBC children's.

Firstly, the influence and lasting impact that unforgettable, high quality and inspiring programming can have on the ever-curious minds of children – an influence that can stay with them for ever.

And, secondly, the sense of enduring community felt by all of us who create British children's programmes – whether in the past, or in the present. Like many of my colleagues, I learned public service values from and was given opportunities by some of the people who created Playschool. And they themselves had been nurtured by the people who created the BBC Children's department. I look around this room at some of the people I've worked for, and worked with, and it feels more like a family business handed down over generations.

After all, our values are the same, our goals are the same, and even some of us are the same. But our programmes have changed. They had to, and they always will.

I believe in the vital importance of high quality children's content – both to the development and happiness of our child audiences, but also in terms of the longer-term social value and generally positive effects it can have. At its best what we do can shape and change children's lives for the better. But we have to do it in a way that is relevant and meaningful for today's children.

I'd like to talk about what we're doing now to fulfill our mission, and the part we're trying to play in the complex media environment for children.

Over the last few years, the amount spent on original UK production for children has dropped significantly – Ofcom estimated that spending on UK originated children's content fell by £35 million between 2004 and 2009. But, given the huge explosion in choice for children – there are now over 30 children's TV channels in the UK – does this matter?

The amount of choice they have can hide the problem; we need to ask how broad is that choice, and how much of it reflects their lives and their specific needs? Aside from CBBC and CBeebies, S4C and Channel Five, the answer is not an enormous amount.

But please don't confuse my argument with the view that says the international content of our competitors is poor quality or damaging – I don't think that. I think Disney and Nickelodeon make programmes of the highest quality, which children devour in huge numbers – ask children what they think, and they vote with their eyeballs. Rather my concern is about the real degree of choice in their media diets – they need factual programmes that equip them to grow up in the UK, and they need challenging dramas that help them explore their emotional development, and see the lives of their communities.

As someone brought up on Top Cat, Whacky Races and Casey Jones, I know the importance to children of high quality American entertainment and animation. If I may quote a distinguished source on this matter:

American cartoons... always attract a very high proportion of satisfied child viewers, even though their parents may sometimes object to the use of American material or to the fact that the programmes are not informative or uplifting... such comedy cartoons are first-class entertainment and are so expensive to make that we could never afford to make our own.

And that isn't a quote from the President of Disney, or some dastardly commercial exploiter of children, but rather by my esteemed predecessor Monica Sims – in 1969. Which just goes to show that some things never change!

So given this huge choice, and the quality of so much of our competitors content, does it matter that there's less UK originated content?

Of course it matters; if we believe that high quality television and great web content can shape the lives of children, provide role models who can help them develop into useful and active citizens, and help them navigate being a child in 21st-century Britain, through culturally relevant stories and information, then it's clearly not a good thing to have less of.

The children's industry is facing an enormous paradox: an apparent plethora of media choices for kids versus a shrinking economy with limited ability to create indigenous content.

For children, undoubtedly the best of times on TV, whereas if you're a UK producer, the choices and opportunities may feel more limited than ever before. And, as UK origination decreases, we at the BBC have an even greater duty to focus on our public service mission.

If children have more choice than ever, and choose to ignore the BBC, we have no influence, and I believe our influence is essential and good. We're often accused of trying to get ratings – I make no apology for wanting the highest number of children to watch and interact with our content – not to beat the other channels, but because I passionately believe we can enhance their lives, so of course I want the greatest number to watch.

So the answer isn't for us to offer sprouts and a glass of water, when there's a world full of burgers and coke beckoning. To give children the benefit of our content, we have to make it attractive to them. It's another reason as well to stick with the goal of our founding mothers – to create broad multi-genre schedules for children – full of programmes that help children be themselves, to relax and play, and to learn and explore. And by having mixed schedules from comedy and entertainment through to tough factual programming, we increase our chances of someone who feels they're not interested in the latter stumbling across it, and discovering that they do like it.

Dumbing down? Not at all. But it is a really tough creative challenge. And that's why when I read in the paper that a former children's producer or presenter says that children's television today is rubbish – I have to say, I feel for my colleagues – young

people, committed to making good programmes for children and working as hard as anyone ever did – in the most competitive market.

This creative challenge means that our inspiring UK factual content and challenging UK dramas have to compete in terms of quality of storytelling and quality of production with the X Factor and Hannah Montana. And I believe they do.

Who would have thought that one of the most popular and talked about shows on any children's channel in 2010 is about history?

Who could have imagined that the most watched drama on any children's channel is based on British books about a young girl in the care system?

And who would guess that programmes about dealing with bereavement, bullying or protecting yourself online would be getting kids across the UK talking.

Here to illustrate that are some brief clips from recent CBBC successes, including an introduction to Tracy Beaker, which attracted the largest ever audience for CBBC.

[clip]

Horrible Histories, Tracy Beaker and Newsround Specials, to name but three, have managed to be stimulating, deeply thought-provoking, and at the same time hugely watchable and popular. Again, children are voting with their eyeballs – and their mouse clicks – and voting for high-quality British content.

And the same goes for the CBeebies audience.

Our younger viewers are flocking to see James Bolam as every child's dream grandpa, to get their fingers messy in the kitchen whilst learning about nutrition in I Can Cook, and to be enchanted by music and musicians from around the world in ZingZillas. And when everyone's ready for bed, a timeless modern classic in the form of In The Night Garden gently brings the day to a sleepy end.

CBeebies is also home to one of the most important programmes made by any network anywhere – where else would you find Something Special, a daily chance for children with learning disabilities to see children like themselves welcomed into the mainstream of childhood.

[clip]

These are the programmes that today's tiny children will be nostalgic about at VLV gatherings in the year 2050, and if they're lucky, give them their Brian Cant moments!

And we must keep doing this and do more. A year ago, I said that a key ambition for me was to increase the amount of serious factual content on CBBC; our My life series has covered children with parents in prison, facial disfigurement and traveller children, and Newsround specials have dealt with knife crime, bereavement and online grooming.

I also want us to do even more programmes which show children about childhood in other, very different, parts of the world. As we speak one of our teams is in Afghanistan, filming in very difficult and dangerous circumstances, to do just that for the next Newsround Special.

And, in drama, we know as other outlets for UK drama dry up we must try to do more to reflect our children's lives and concerns on screen.

We need to fire the imagination of the next generation and help them make sense of the world around them with powerful storytelling that engages and enthralls them.

All drama and storytelling has the capacity to tackle social issues, to feature a range of characters that reflect the sheer diversity of society, and to help explain complex subjects to children.

So, challenging issues arise in all our dramas: the phenomenally successful Doctor Who spin-off, *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, explores issues around homelessness; *Tracy Beaker Returns* deals with cultural differences around the treatment of children; *Roy*, an animated character, struggles to fit in in a real world, and explores what it means to be different. And *Combat Kids* looks at all aspects of how war affects children and examines the awkwardness of a family divided by military life. And, in *Spirit Warriors 5*, children enter a world of fantasy and empowerment as they explore their own cultural heritage. Take a look.

[Clip]

Drama takes time to get from brain to screen, but I'm pleased to say that we've got lots of new, challenging stuff in the pipeline for later this year and for next year:

Combat Kids – which you saw in the clips, is part of a short season which will examine how children are affected by war – which includes the Newsround Special which we've just shot in Kabul.

In Postcode – acclaimed playwright Tony Marchant writes about a street in transition – a cosmopolitan melting pot where kids from well-heeled families live side-by-side with asylum seekers.

Sparticles starts on the day that all the adults disappear and explores what children do in a world without grown ups, when they're given total freedom to be themselves – and to save the world, without mum and dad.

Young Leonardo follows the adventures of the young Leonardo da Vinci. Together with the most dynamic group of friends history has ever known – Machiavelli, Lorenzo de Medici and Lisa Gheradini – da Vinci paints, invents and goes up against the most powerful secret society in Florence.

And, of course, it's not just dramas that tell stories. The days of drama, entertainment and factual being isolated genres are no more, and programmes like *Horrible Histories*, *Newsround Specials* and our *Serious Explorers* programmes about David Livingstone all mix serious factual content with dramatised storytelling and gripping entertainment.

So I've talked about the past, and had a look at the present. But this is where my crystal ball gets a bit murky.

Even since this evening was conceived the world has turned again. Just when everything was looking rosy, the comprehensive spending review and the BBC's new financial arrangement with the government sprang out of left field.

The licence fee is frozen for six years – which gives us a rare ability to plan our business, but undoubtedly means some difficult choices.

The BBC now has more demands on its income than we thought only a few months ago – an income falling in real terms, with new obligations to pay for the World Service and to support S4C. Where does that leave the desire to give more money to the children's department?

In a world where lots of people are losing their jobs, and essential public services are being squeezed, what should our expectations be?

This year, for the first time I can remember, the BBC publicly stated that Children's was one of the five core priorities for the corporation, with additional resources to match. I am confident that we will still be that priority – but I can't guess what the quantum of that resource may be in the new world of this autumn.

Next year, I shall be leading the children's department on one of its biggest adventures to date, when we move to a new home on the banks of the Manchester ship canal. For us it's a huge opportunity to make programmes and websites in a building built for the internet age, instead of our current creaking home, built before the dawn of colour TV. For the audience, they have the chance to really get close to us and literally press their noses up against the window of CBBC and CBeebies – something you can't do in Wood Lane, unless you can climb over razor wire!

And we also have the chance to create a world centre of excellence for children's production in the North of England – I'd like Salford Quays to be as famous for children's content as Bristol is for natural history programmes – acting as a magnet for talented people with a dream of creating high-quality children's TV and web content, and with all the specialist suppliers, innovative partnerships, conferences and festivals that build up around a centre of excellence.

The challenges of funding and investment faced by independent producers and the wider industry won't be solved by entirely by the BBC, and definitely won't be solved by robbing Peter's channel to fund Paul's. But one opportunity we can seize in Salford is to use new technology to produce innovative, quality programmes for less, and use the money that frees up to make more and invest more in the industry.

So, what will BBC Children's be like in five years time? By the same law that makes policemen appear to get younger, the presenters clothes will change, some of the faces will change, and the English language will move on in ways that will baffle many of us. Some old stalwart TV shows will continue but, as always, constantly evolving and new content we can't yet imagine will excite children.

But so much won't change: there'll still be a broad range of high-quality content, delivered by digital TV and the web, reflecting the lives of British children and shaping the values and ambitions of a new generation of British adults.

The risk is that we are left behind fighting the wrong battles, still arguing whether yesterday was better than today. We all know that children are platform agnostic and take to new technology like ducks to water – they will drive true convergence when it finally arrives with IPTV – where broadcast TV and broadband web meet in a combined set top box – and that really is just around the corner. As I said at the start, we must all ensure we really understand what choices children have, and how they make them.

But whatever the platform or the technology, content in the form of stimulating storytelling and inspiring information will remain king, whether the BBC makes it, independent companies make it – or perhaps not so fancifully, whether children themselves make it with us. And, for us, that content will be distinctive UK content.

I don't have all of the answers – I've tried to identify the challenges and the opportunities. Children's content has always been at the heart of the BBC, and I truly believe it will remain so as long as there is a BBC.

But now, more than ever, is a moment for everyone – broadcasters, producers, academics, licence fee payers, members of the VLV and all those who care about quality children's content – to work together; – to understand the changing media landscape and the complex ways in which children find and consume their media.

We need to have an informed debate about the future of children's content and its purpose, and to speak out to anyone who'll listen about this very special, powerful thing of which we are the current custodians.