

David Kleeman

Sesame Street to SpongeBob

North American humour and children's TV

Interviews with US-American producers reveal what is important for comedy for kids. Part of the discussion deals with the notion of a particular North American humour, and how to negotiate global humour.

An advance warning: this article will not be funny. Writing about television humour is much like dancing about architecture; it really is impossible to capture the essence. Moreover, one thing that virtually everyone interviewed for this article agreed on is that US-American children (and perhaps all young children) like physical comedy, yet typing "a man slipped on a banana peel" just doesn't carry the same impact as the image itself. To understand the challenges and possibilities of producing humorous television for children, I went to the experts – producers, programming executives and researchers involved with current and recent children's shows. I particularly wanted to find out to what extent they rely on instinct versus research in developing, writing and visualising kids' TV series.

Can adults do "funny" for kids?

However much we may feel "in touch with our inner child," most children's media is made by people decades away from pre-adolescence. Is it possible for us to know what's funny for today's young people?

Alice Cahn, the Cartoon Network Vice President responsible for Tickle U (the channel's preschool block, cf. Cahn in this issue), says it is. "It's certainly possible to observe what children laugh at ... and then find ways to translate that material to the screen." *Blue's Clues* research head Alice Wilder agrees, and continues: "That is not to say that the degrees of funny will be the same for every kid, but there are definitely broad categories of humour for preschoolers ... Testing, testing, testing: you have to try it out on them in order to know if you are hitting your mark." – "As an adult," add Chris and Martin Kratt, creators and hosts of *Kratts' Creatures* and *Zoboomafoo*, "the best way to define what's funny is to know the specific audience you're speaking to and spend time with them – joking, laughing and having fun."

Others agree in part, but find it harder to put into words or rules than it is simply to do. "The hard word here is 'define,'" suggests Peter Moss, a Canadian independent producer who has been a top executive for both US and Canadian producers and channels. "It's certainly possible to know what will make children of different ages laugh, [but] can we 'define' what is funny for adults? Humour is so personal it's impossible to come up with a single theory. It is impossible to know exactly what will make an audience laugh in general, but very possible to make an audience laugh specifically – this particular audience at this particular time."

"We really try not to patronise our

audience," concludes Phil Davies of UK production company Astley Baker Davies. His company makes *Peppa Pig*, a popular preschool series on Tickle U. "If we're really good at what we do, then maybe (if we're lucky!), hopefully children will find what we do 'funny.'"

For some, it's easiest to catalogue known sources of laughs. "Kids and teens laugh at different things. Boys and girls laugh at different things," according to Essie Chambers, Vice President of Development for teen network The N. "There are certain things that unite genders, such as physical comedy. But when girls reach a certain age (12?), they don't like comedy that's too over-the-top and silly." Rosemarie Truglio, Vice President of Research and Education for Sesame Workshop, tells how years of work with preschoolers as they react to *Sesame Street* have yielded insights. "We found the following elements to be humorous: any manipulation with



Foto: Tickle U

Tickle U's *Peppa Pig* is snorting through the everyday experiences of childhood

their sense of reality ... playing on children's mastery and a rather naïve or dumb adult ... the unexpected elements of surprise ... and physical humour (this is true Muppet humour)." She defers to her executive producer for the final word on the subject: "[he] assures me that saying 'underpants' to children has universal appeal."

Potential pitfalls

Almost everyone agrees that one of the worst things possible is to tell your audience to expect "funny." Robin Agranoff, Director of Program Planning and Acquisitions for The Disney Channel, says "you need to show the audience that something is funny, not tell the audience that it's funny." It's a matter of faith, echoes PBS Senior Director of Children's Programming Linda Simensky. "If you tell someone something is funny and then they don't think it's funny, you've eroded your trust bond with kids." Independent researcher Pat Tobin suggests special care with older children. "Kids of school age and up can be cynical about accepting claims made. The branding and previews of a show can make it clear that it is comical without making that claim." Another potential pitfall (or banana peel slip) is trying too hard to be funny. Keep it simple, recommends Rosemarie Truglio. "Humour comes out of simple things and it is those simple things (such as a pratfall) that are difficult to write and are often overwritten." Chris and Martin Kratt agree: "It's impossible to 'try too hard' to know your audience, but it is possible to 'try too hard' to be funny – in its final presentation the humour must be natural and effortless." In Alice Wilder's experience "a show concept has to be about more than just funny. Have a concept for what you want to get across to kids, what appeals to them and why, and *then* make it funny. Kids know when they are being talked down to or patronised."



Adventurous creatures: Zoboo (middle), Chris and Martin present the wildlife show *Zoboomafoo* with the Kratt brothers on PBS

Intuition or investigation?

In developing kids' TV, do most producers and writers rely on their intuition, or do they conduct situation-specific research? Most start from instinct, and the jury is divided on the question of what is possible to test. "Dead simple," explains producer Peter Moss about what he studies, "have they laughed?" For Cartoon Network's Alice Cahn, it's more complex going from study to practice. "We know and can observe what makes children laugh and be happy. The challenge is translating what works in a live setting to the more removed screens." Researcher Alice Wilder agrees that the formative research is just the prelude. "If something is funny in the script, I try to ensure that the humour remains by how we show it visually; many a joke is lost if it is not delivered properly visually, particularly for preschoolers. A producer might need to put themselves with their audience for an extended period of time before they ever start writing a script." Sesame Workshop's Rosemarie Truglio says, "we rely more on instinct and talented comedy writers, but formative research does help in defining what works with young children. There's a real balance not to let the comedy get in the way of learning, but we know that if the show isn't appealing, children won't be exposed to the educational content ... we observe preschoolers watching the programme and we record while viewing

behaviours for each segment. Laughter is one of the behaviours we record." Linda Simensky of PBS adds, "if we were testing a show, we'd want to know if kids thought it was funny, and we'd consider being funny a plus ... but I'd always rather know that kids love the character – that bodes better for the show."

"Of course, you can test humour," affirms Pat Tobin. "You can't rely on observing children viewing because they will often laugh when they think it is a response that is expected of them. You can learn the most by encouraging children to retell the story and describe the characters. Humour is important to children and what they find humorous in a show will become clear in their retelling."

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek is a Temple University Professor of Psychology, specialising in human development. She was a consultant with Cartoon Network and its Tickle U block. Hirsh-Pasek stresses the importance of parental co-viewing for young children, and therefore testing for appeal to kids *and* parents. "In young children, you can't really test humour in the same way you might test whether older children grasp learning goals," she proposes, "What we know in our field is that learning occurs by watching with sensitive and responsive adults. It's hard to get parents to co-view; we have to get parents engaged enough to play the games or recognise the value of humour."

Think globally, laugh locally?

Given the amount of US-American programming that is exported internationally, is there a particularly "American" sense of humour or style of funny programming? Has US-American humour become global, simply by virtue of the marketplace? From a research perspective, Tickle U consultant Kathy Hirsh-Pasek proposes that "at the kiddie level, humour

is what violates expectations, and for little kids that's the same everywhere – when a ball doesn't drop. As you get older, a lot changes. British humour, for example, is more sarcastic than American humour. Pacing is also a big part of it; how humour works will be contingent on timing."

Most of those interviewed agreed that there is a uniquely North American sense of humour, and in one way or another, most referred to its physicality. Essie Chambers of *The N*, who is involved in international drama co-productions, says "American humour is definitely specific. I find it more broad and physical, while international humour has more verbal sophistication (irony, satire, etc.). Global humour hasn't worked well for us in the past, but I imagine it's different and easier with animation."

From the other side of the 49th parallel (US/Canada border), Peter Moss addresses animation: "There is a particular style of American cartoon humour, universal and very visual (e. g., *Roadrunner*) but I don't believe that American humour has overtaken the world, not for kids nor adults. In general, I find that U.S. kids' shows rely on visual sight gags more than verbal wit, but of course there are as many exceptions to that as there are examples." Moss goes on to propose that "once you leave English, there is little that translates from culture to culture without serious adapting – usually in the translation. One couldn't say that German or French kids' shows are American in their style of humour, only that American shows are present in their market and usually popular because of marketing pressure, production values and quality. But, most popular US shows are not comedies (Nick excepted) ... before the Nick explosion of comedies ... I don't think there was a huge US contingent of TV kids' comedies that dominated the world's airwaves. I would maintain that Nick is *sui generis* – they make good comedy and good kids' shows but it's

not fair to identify them as 'American' in style, any more than Aardman is 'British' in style. Both companies draw on their own cultural references, but don't exemplify a national style." Chris and Martin Kratt echo the idea of searching for commonalities. "Since humour often happens when a basic context or norm is turned on its head in an unexpected way, any cultural norm that is ingrained in a person is the starting point for humour. If a person isn't aware of a particular norm, chances are the joke won't be funny. In creating the most universally funny humour, stick to the norms that are the most consistent among cultures or age groups."

Here, as with other points, the intent of the programme is as important as the audience it is aimed at. Cartoon Network's Alice Cahn points out that "there are those properties that work well globally as originally developed (*Teletubbies*, for instance, is a classic pre-kindergarten comedy that works across borders) as well as those that need to be re-developed to meet different cultural exigencies (*Sesame Street's* multiple versions come to mind)."

Humour: risk and reward

Creating humorous kids' TV has its risks. In shows designed for learning, sometimes attempts to be funny get in the way of education. Sesame Workshop, in trying to encourage parental co-viewing, often builds in parodies of adult programmes, but "we never want these portrayals to be at the expense of the learning goals," says Rosemarie Truglio. Some shows believe they need to appeal to broad audiences to survive financially, but the attempt to create humour that works on multiple levels may not satisfy anyone. "Some producers believe that as long as it is not distracting or confusing to the target audience, there is no problem. This shortchanges the target audience and

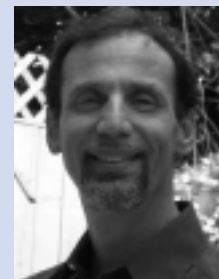
is a waste of time," according to researcher Pat Tobin. "Of course, there are some shows that layer humour and entertain a broad age range ... like *SpongeBob*."

Gross kid humour, a staple of children's TV, can draw adult ire. The Parents Television Council (PTC), an organization that roots out perceived indecency in US-American media, recently published a report on children's TV content. It searched for (and, of course, found) a lengthy list of behaviours it deemed inappropriate for young people, including drooling, flatulence, burping, disobedience, negative portrayals of parents and more. A producer adhering strictly to the PTC guidelines might create a 'tasteful' show, but surely it would also be flavourless.

In an increasingly serious world, the rewards of amusing children far outweigh the challenges. Physiologically (in the release of endorphins), psychologically (in the development of coping and social strategies, and self-esteem) and educationally (in fostering flexibility and creativity), laughter is quite simply good for kids. It's good for producers, as well, since there are few rewards greater than seeing your audience giggling along with your work.

In conclusion ... underpants. ■

THE AUTHOR



David Kleeman is President of the American Center for Children and Media (Chicago, USA), an executive roundtable for the children's media industry, guided and supported by executives from leading media companies.