

# “Thinking BIG for little people”

A conversation with Michael Carrington\*

## What’s your personal interest in working for the preschool audience?

I guess it goes back to my own childhood when I enjoyed TV very much. I enjoyed reading, going to the theatre, going to the movies and television was one of the things I could dip in and out of on a daily basis. I loved this huge variety of storytelling: One day you could be taken on an adventure island journey, or the next day you could be introduced to wild animals and on another day to fairytales, etc. So it had a really big impact on my own life, and when I grew up I decided that I would love to have an impact on other children’s lives in that way.

I have been at the BBC now for the third time, in this role for one year. It came about because the children’s department launched a couple of digital channels, one for young children and one for older children. We split the department and there was the opportunity to do CBeebies and become the first creative director of the brand across TV, radio and online. The opportunity to work tri-medial was really exciting for me.

## What’s the story of CBeebies?

The BBC always had a large commitment to programming for children ever since the early days of radio, and that translated to programming for children on TV. Over the course of the last 20 years there was a block of children’s programming in the af-

ternoon, Monday to Friday, and a block of programming Saturday and Sunday morning, which pretty much reflects public broadcasting around Europe.

Then, about 15 years ago, we recognised the fact that digital or cable television was a new market, so we launched our own children’s digital and satellite services. And because younger children are so different from slightly older children, it made sense to split the channels by age groups.

CBeebies developed its own preschool brand and now is more than television. The content that we produce is targeted at children 2 to 6 years – we don’t make content for under 2 – and CBBC targets 6- to 12-year-olds. For CBeebies, we developed a philosophy around entertainment-driven programmes with implicit underlying learning values, and so the concept of playful learning came out of that. That’s what we base our content development on.

## How do you structure the CBeebies TV programming schedule?

We zone the day to mirror the activity and the availability of the audience. In the morning from 6 a. m. to 9 a. m. there is the “Get set go” zone which is quite upbeat. It represents the home life where mom and dad are getting ready for work, children are getting ready for nursery or school. So the programming is very entertainment-driven and kind of

short-format, no more than 10- to 15-minute-stories to air.

In the next zone between 9 a. m. and 3 p. m. we target the younger among the CBeebies audience, children who are usually at home or in nursery care. This zone called “Discover and do” is about exploring their world and the adult world and it comes much more from a learning point of view with programmes that help personal development, social skills, etc.

After 3 p. m. when the older children come home from nurseries or schools, we become a bit more upbeat. This zone is called “Big fun time” with comedy-led programming. As they are just as tired as we are it’s a bit of sitting back and relaxing.

After this, at 6 p. m., it’s “Bedtime hour” which is wind-down time with gentle storytelling and music – and the children go off to bed.

We close down the station at 7 p. m. Parents in this country are very clear about the fact that they don’t want us to stick on beyond 7, because they almost use it as a reward, like, to say: “Watch CBeebies and then you have to go to bed.”

## How do CBeebies programmes meet the challenge of having to deal with different ages, different gender, different learning approaches and abilities?

The morning and the afternoon are slightly tweaked to 4- to 6-year-old boys and girls, and the day-part is pretty much tweaked to 2- to 4 year-olds.

But bedtime hour is for everybody! It is always on our mind, gender and diversity, different communities, different ethnic groups. We are really fortunate that we are able to bring such a range of programmes, to be able to tweak programmes to either specifically target girls or specifically target boys.

CBeebies actually has a very good gender mix: 49 % of our audience is boys and 51 % is girls, right across the age ranges 2 to 6. We were also

We always have on our mind that there is a big population under 6, about 6 million children, and that we need to reach all of them, in many ways. And that is why we are inspired to give them the content they want: A variety of content in the same way that adults expect a variety of content.

I think if we were in a commercial world it may well be different, that we may have to focus on specific genres or specific types of programmes.

being helped in that we were able to zone our programmes into those blocks of programmes. We are very specific about the types of stories that we can tell in there and they are always from young children's perspective, taking into account the developmental needs and their learning needs. So, it is really that day-part that we are able to explore the developmental needs they have.

#### **Why is it that CBeebies creates an attractive, diverse preschool programme?**

It has to do with the fact that we are a public service broadcaster. Our aim is to provide content to all communities and to all licence fee payers around the UK and that inspires us to deliver a whole range of programmes. And we are a multi-genre brand, so we have everything from factual programming, animation, drama, game shows, comedy shows and such.

#### **I find remarkable that there are so many life-action programmes on the digital CBeebies channel: about half of it is life-action or mixed forms, 35 % is animation and 15 % is puppets.**

Life-action is very important to us. Our audience really responds to real people, and that is one distinction between us and some of our competitors, like Disney, Nickelodeon or Cartoon Network. We are able to represent British culture through the fact that we have live on-air presentations, we have real children in programmes, we have grown-ups in programmes. And our cable audience responds to that – although they love cartoons and fantasy settings like *Teletubbies*, this kind of character-suited people, too. We have up to 49 % share of the viewers each week and the competition comes from Disney Playhouse and they enjoy about 9 % share. CBeebies is the most-loved brand out of

all the BBC brands and we are regularly being praised, in fact by the new prime minister: Gordon Brown was quoted on the weekend that he has got CBeebies running in the background because his children love *Tommy Zoom*. So, we find that a real endorsement!

#### **What is your personal favourite preschool programme at the moment?**

Gosh, that's really difficult. Just one! – Something that touches my heart is a programme called *In the Night Garden*, the new series from the makers of *Teletubbies* which we just launched in March. It's a fantasy world with fantasy characters and it is about inspiring imagination and modelling friendship and citizenship. That's a really beautiful programme, incredibly well crafted, hugely expensive. And the series is incredibly popular; it tripled our audience for that slot, year on year, which I'm totally thrilled about.

That's what I'll say if I'm really pressed, because I love so many, I love *Tommy Zoom*, and *Mama Mirabelle*, but if I had to say it, it's *In the Night Garden*. ■

\*A shortened version of a conversation of Elke Schlote (IZI) with Michael Carrington, Creative Director at CBeebies at BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), London, UK. He is responsible for commissioning the content of CBeebies digital preschool channel, CBeebies content on BBC ONE and BBC TWO, CBeebies Online, and CBeebies Radio on BBC7. He was Head of Animation and Acquisitions for CBBC.

