

Different ways to achieve diversity

TV professional's thoughts about diversity in children's television

Television experts from different parts of the world were asked what diversity means for them and how the diversity of the audience can be represented on the screen. Here are some excerpts of the interviews depicting their perspectives.

Looking for strong stories

Jan-Willem Bult
(KRO, Netherlands)



A successful strategy to bring more diversity into children's TV is working with real children, going to different places, not only urban but also suburban or in the countryside, working with different schools, kids from different backgrounds. We want to tell stories that live in the world of children and inside children. Then it's fun, not a forced strategy like: "Oh, let's look for a Suriname story, or for a Turkish story, or a Dutch story"; we just look for good stories. Since we move around in different parts of the Netherlands, we also represent reality. You have to go out and meet real kids, put them in the focus to get a mix of what is going on.

Another thing which is important to me, being the creative engine of the programming of KRO: in order to make diversity, you have to be diverse yourself. Since I am lucky enough to be travelling a lot in different continents and different circumstances,

working in transition countries and in third world countries, I think my antennae, my senses, for good stories are more open to non-traditional Dutch stories; or, maybe I meet more non-Dutch or non-white traditional kids, stories and circumstances. In a way it happens on the spot; it happens like it is; it happens like it goes.

Showing and accepting variety

Firas Dehni (STV, Syria)



Diversity from my point of view, or in my cultural point of view, means celebrating to be different, and accepting to be different. In order to accept differences, you first have to understand that you are similar. Children are similar in many ways, yet they also have different wishes and dreams. For us people who work in the media I think it is important to know these similarities and differences.

In a country like Syria diversity exists sometimes from one street to another. We have both conservatives, and liberals. That means what a person does on one street, he or she can't do on another. When a girl dresses very modern, it wouldn't be suitable for her to walk on specific streets. The differences are that strong. To understand and accept one another as he or she is – that is the most difficult task. In children's television we

should make sure there is not only one representation, we should strive to represent many different parts of society. In Syria, we have conservatives and liberals, we have different political groups, different religious groups, and different religions.

Cultivating one's roots and sharing one's culture

Hiroko Sakaue (NHK, Japan)



In the hysterical process of economic development, media, especially TV has pushed a trend to reduce diversity. There is, for example, the difference between countryside and city, between genders, dialects, rich and poor ... Nowadays, it is difficult for children to come across diversity in their daily lives compared to the old days. However, difference in command of the language is a dividing factor, a deep river, between Japanese and non-Japanese people, including immigrants.

So, while globalization of economy and media has brought easiness of access, it means on the other hand loss of uniqueness in our culture including language, lifestyle, even religion, especially among the young. One of the responsibilities for broadcasters should be the perpetuation of them. This is why NHK produced the program series on Japanese language for local children in 2003. In recent times, even parents do not know

beautiful Japanese expressions which were popular in the classics!

In the production process we put together cooperative teams consisting of both traditional and modern artists. Our language program has succeeded as fresh entertainment for children. Can we possibly exchange such programs to celebrate diversity?

Telling and sharing different stories

Antoinette Falohun (Nigerian Television Authority, Nigeria)



In Nigeria there are about 250 different ethnic groups with different languages, a wide variety of types of food they are identified with, and varied ways of dressing. Additionally, through globalisation diverse elements from Europe and America have been blended with Nigerian culture. Diversity can enrich lives. It implies a wealth of ideas, of beautiful things mixed together. We try to infuse major cultural practices into our programmes, in order to sublimely breed the understanding of stories and people from other ethnic groups.

This should help in building up our children, letting them appreciate their culture and the culture of others, this can help in the promotion of peace and cooperation in Nigeria, on the African continent and beyond.

It is important to show these different stories on television, because the downside of diversity is lack of understanding each other, a lack of tolerance which can be a major source of conflict. We should bring more knowledge and understanding to our programmes through diverse storytelling – through telling stories from different regions. It's like with some traditional foods: It might look unfamiliar and even strange at first sight, and if you taste it, it's quite yummy!

Feeling diversity – through music!

Alejandro Escobar (Independent Producer and Director, Colombia/Mexico)

For me, diversity also means understanding the diversity of your own country. Colombia is very diverse in its regions: it is divided through geography and the lack of infrastructure. We have very high mountains, and it's a huge country with different areas and different children.

To bring that diversity across in a programme for preschoolers, the first and obvious way to do it was to target the geographical aspects – but it made no sense, 5- or 6-year-olds don't read maps, it's too abstract for them. So we focused on concrete things like different climates, weather – and of course music! Music in Colombia, like in other Latin American countries, is something huge. You start with it in your mother's belly, learn how to dance when you are 1, and you graduate with 5 years! So, this was a good start for our little journey through the different rhythms of Colombia: You begin with just drums from the jungle, and then add some drums from the Caribbean coast, then some guitars from the countryside, the villages and towns. And you end with rock in the city. Every time the animation style changes: From the jungle to the beach, to the countryside, to the city. So, children experience diversity in rhythm, music, pictures and graphics.



Aim for diversity in your department

Linda Simensky (PBS, USA)

I think about diversity every day while I work on shows, and



that may be a function of working for a public broadcaster, but I also think it's a function of living in a very diverse and multicultural area, Washington, DC.

At PBS, we are always looking for better ways to represent our diverse audience on the screen. The best way, I have found, is to start by aiming for diversity in your own department and on the series production team.

Series producers sometimes focus on making sure they have one character from every different background. The right approach to representing diversity is not really that simple. The diversity needs to be organic, it needs to feel natural, and the scenario in question needs to seem as if it could really happen. If something feels too consciously diverse but not organic, kids will pick up on that, and the series will seem less believable. And these characters' backgrounds should be part of the character development and the plots. The benefit is that these differences in cultural diversity make the stories and the characters more interesting. These are often areas that have not been covered in great detail, for the most part, on kids' television, especially in a humorous way.

Producers seem to feel that any attempt at diversity needs to be grand and all-encompassing. I believe that a producer can start small, and if they incorporate some diverse elements into everything they do, soon it will be completely natural.

Organise training and award new ideas

Regla Hilaria Bonora Soto (TVC, Cuba)

Cuba's ethnic boundaries have been largely erased through the mixing of races, but the notion of the multiplicity of several ethnic origins exists nevertheless. That is why ethnic-



ity, together with age and gender, is the most clearly visible dimension of diversity in Cuba. But there are also further dimensions such as different religions and identities, states of health and intellectual abilities, geographical location and access to resources.

There are several promising ways of integrating these various dimensions of diversity into children's TV in Cuba. One line of approach is to further creative and other professionals' understanding of diversity by providing them with research results. Also, dialogue, peace, and tolerance can be promoted through training on content treatment; through the creation of meaningful and constructive scenarios, for example. Programmes could also include different social strata and their cultures, stories, and contemporary conflicts. Real participation spaces allow children to show their backgrounds, problems, and realities. Social institutions dealing with youth issues could be brought together, in order to pool their knowledge and efforts with respect to children's television. Another strategy could also be to give incentives and award outstanding TV ideas on diversity.

Balancing out commercial and public interests

Preben Vridstoft (TV2, Denmark)

There are lots of kinds of diversity, and it depends on the vantage point, on what you focus: We have diversity in the target group and in the age group. I



think diversity means getting around the entire palette of topics around-the-clock within a year. Within a year, we will have programmes that deal with human issues or disasters like Haiti or the Tsunami; we will deal with politics, sexual education, or education: girls versus boys, young versus old, and commercial issues as well. You

also have to make sure you reach your target group at the level where they are. Do not talk down to them, but talk to them.

Diversity means also to reconcile the very commercial with the not so commercial issues, because the not so commercial ones build the image for you. Parents hate commercial; children like commercial. You have to find a balance here. One strategy is to look at what is happening around the world. I try to see if there is a trend and if the trend fits my point of quality. At the end of the day it is a mix of experience, gut feeling and some analysing – then you can take a chance.

TV needs to show kids' diverse worlds

David Kleeman (American Center for Children and Media, USA)

Kids see TV as a window of the world. They don't recognize the flaws of the window. It is our responsibility as children's TV makers to try to make that window look as much like kids' actual world as it is possible. If a child watches television and never sees anyone like him or her – if you never see girls doing certain things; or if you are black and don't see black characters who have really good strong roles; if you don't hear kids who sound like you; if you are disabled and you never see a child who is in a wheelchair – you begin to believe that this is what the world is all about. You don't really have a place in that world.



It is the responsibility of TV professionals not to do "diversity" in a very forced way. We have a new generation of program makers who think about these things, and who always take that moment to think for a second time, "Is there a reason why this character is the way he or she is?" The

young generation of producers grew up in a completely different world – where U.S. kids talk about how at least one of their closest friends is of a background different from theirs, whether it is racial, ethnic. Towns and cities are getting more diverse; part of it is that they are online more where you connect with people across borders much more easily. As that generation is moving into positions of power, they are rejecting some of the old ways of doing things.

Right now, I don't think we do enough. Part of the reason is we don't do a lot of live action programming for kids. You can simulate diversity in an animated program, and for a while we were taking an "easy way out" by making the characters something other than human: one could be blue; one could be purple, and one could be green. Then you don't really have to worry about color. But kids know the world that they grow up in.

I actually think that it is really tough to reflect diversity adequately. There is the debate going on in the U.K. right now, on making sure that British children grow up with British television. For me, the question is always, "Which Britain?" Is it the one that some people fondly remember when there was something like a common culture, or is it the one where kids are growing up in schools where there are 25 languages spoken?

It is very hard, even across a schedule of a fulltime broadcaster, to be honest about the diversity kids grow up in today. I think the opportunities that the digital media gums to let kids express themselves, really helps with that, because then kids can be part of a number of groups and express themselves in those different ways. A kid might identify as being black; they may identify as being a ballet dancer. Or, sometimes they may think of themselves as black and sometimes as a ballet dancer. It is harder to do with a medium like television where all the decisions are made for you. ■