

## **Hansard Transcript - 12 December 2023.**

### **Committee Stage of the Media Bill**

This section relates to an amendment proposed by Stephanie Peacock – shadow Minister for Broadcasting and the Creative Industries (Labour)

#### **New Clause 4**

##### **Review of children’s access to public service broadcast content**

**“Within six months of the passage of this Act, the Secretary of State must prepare and publish a report on how to ensure that children have access to public service broadcast content.” (Stephanie Peacock.)**

*This new clause would require a review of how to ensure children have access to public service content, given their viewing habits which include using smartphones and social media rather than traditional methods of linear and even on-demand television.*

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

#### **Stephanie Peacock**

I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

I am very pleased to speak to this new clause. As the shadow Secretary of State outlined in her speech on Second Reading, the Bill is welcome but misses the opportunity to consider how we can secure the future of UK public service media for school-age children. The issue was brought to my attention by the Children’s Media Foundation, which I have been pleased to meet more than once. It has done a huge amount of work on understanding patterns of media consumption by children, and how those patterns might impact their chances of viewing public service media. I place on record an explicit thank you to the foundation for that work, and I hope that it will be picked up further as a result of the new clause.

If we all agree that public service content is important for adults, as I believe we have done time and again throughout the Bill’s passage, I think we can agree that it is equally, if not more important for children. Certainly, the kind of high-quality public service content that our public service broadcasters can provide for children has powerful potential and has, for the last 75 years, been the envy of the world. It can promote wellbeing, give children an understanding of where they live, teach them British values of tolerance, provide entertaining forms of education that supplement their learning at school, and show a diverse range of role models. Ultimately, public service media can encourage children to value culture and crave knowledge—valuable characteristics for citizens to have when they come of age.

However, due to several connecting factors, this sort of content is under threat. As technology has rapidly evolved, the children’s content landscape has fundamentally changed forever. Children as young as toddlers have access to new devices and platforms. They can navigate apps on tablets and choose content that they would like to watch. That gives them access not only to video on demand services such as Netflix and Disney+, but to platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. The popularity of these forms of content are such that Ofcom estimates that less than half of 3 to 17-year-olds now watch live television. Similarly, there are potentially 9 million school-age viewers, but the top-rated programme on CBBC in any one week may have as few as 50,000 viewers, and similar numbers will request that

programme on iPlayer. That number is a fraction of what we would hope it to be, given the importance of children's public service content, which has been outlined.

As well as declining viewership, there has arguably been a decline in the amount of children's content produced that could genuinely be considered to be public service. When there are budget constraints, UK-focused dramas or documentaries that reflect the unique lives and concerns of British children are often the first to go. The volume of first-run, UK-originated children's programming on PSB channels dropped to its lowest level in 2022; it was down to 518 hours, compared to 640 hours in 2019. Furthermore, producers can save money by localising animated and puppet shows; what might initially appear to be a British programme with wider societal value may in fact be an international production, with personalised snippets to attract a bigger pool of funders.

It is not that the industry is unaware of the problems surrounding children's public service content. Certainly in 2022, when the Government brought the young audiences content fund to an end, more than 750 creatives and executives from the UK children's content industry signed an open letter, and campaigned to extend the fund for another three years. The likes of Channel 5 and Paramount are also working hard to keep up their Milkshake! offering. They are increasing their spend on children's programming year on year, just to keep provision at the same level, but where there is a need to meet commercial demands, valuable children's content will inevitably continue to suffer.

There is almost nothing in the Bill to show that this combination of concerning trends—declining viewership alongside declining content quality—has been identified, and there are no meaningful measures to stop the problem escalating. Children's content is included in the new simplified remit in the very first clause, but that does little to increase accountability or individual channels' contribution to creating children's public service content, or to recognise changing trends in how children consume their media.

It is for all those reasons that the Children's Media Foundation argued that we must urgently accept that children's public service media are under threat and rethink how we can best protect them as part of the passage of the Bill. As a result, I propose that the Government conduct a review to better understand how we can secure children's content long into the future.

Such a review would be an opportunity to ask bigger questions than the Bill currently allows for. For example, do we need to go to where the children are and broaden our concept of public service media for children, encouraging and promoting such content on the likes of Netflix, YouTube and TikTok? Do we need to learn the lessons from the ambition of the Online Safety Act 2023 and consider how algorithms serve content to young people, perhaps adjusting them to ensure that they promote diversity of thought rather than simply more of the same? Should we set targets for PSBs to hit a number of hours consumed rather than a number of hours produced when it comes to public service media for children?

I do not claim to have the answers to all these sorts of questions, but I do believe that they need to be explored. The UK must address the reality of the matter and accept that a new approach will be needed if we are to ensure that valuable content reaches the eyes and ears of young people across the country. I hope that is something that the Minister can acknowledge and I look forward to hearing his response.

## **Kirsty Blackman**

Specifically on this issue, I agree with the points made by the shadow Minister. I think that asking for a report into this issue is the most sensible way forward, rather than saying that we have got all the answers. Looking at this issue in the whole would be very important.

When my children were younger, we relied a lot on CBeebies; the kids spent a lot of time watching CBeebies rather than anything else. Now that they are a bit bigger, they have forayed into the world of YouTube; when we are considering content on these platforms, at least with CBeebies parents know for certain that there will be no swearing and nothing inappropriate on that channel. Not everything on it is necessarily educational, but it is all funny or good, whereas on YouTube there is an absolute load of nonsense at times, and there are a number of shows on Netflix or Disney+ about which I have had to say to my daughter, “No, you can’t watch that. It’s just nonsense.”

There is value in ensuring that children have access, and easy access, to appropriate content and in encouraging parents to ensure that their children are—well, having gone through the Online Safety Bill, I know that we need to ensure that parents are aware of what their children are consuming on the internet and aware of what they are watching, and that they are taking decisions to manage that content and to ensure that children have good access to it. If the public service broadcasters’ shows for children are more easily accessible, parents will have fewer issues in ensuring that those are the shows that their children see.

Lastly, I will give a wee plug for “Newsround”, which a significant number of schools show in school. It is incredibly important and a really key way in which children are able to access news content in an age-appropriate way that explains the background and the information that they are being provided with. Therefore, I agree entirely with the shadow Minister that it would be sensible to have a report on this issue, and that a watching brief definitely needs to be kept on it.

## **Sarah Owen**

(Luton North) (Lab)

Just to add to those points and those made by the shadow Minister, I have often relied on the third parent that is CBeebies, as I imagine many other Members and many of our constituents have as well. I want to talk about the quality of such television and about its educational impact on children, ranging from young children to teenagers.

As has been alluded to, the quality of the BBC’s programmes, particularly on CBeebies, is just a trusted fact. I know as a parent that I could quite happily leave my three-year-old in front of CBeebies. She does not love Peter Rabbit, but I know that it is a safe and secure watch for her. I know that there will be no inappropriate advertising or any inappropriate life lessons or swearing, which I cannot guarantee on other services or channels. There are brilliant CBeebies programmes and characters, such as Mr Tumble, “Bluey”, “Newsround”, which has already been mentioned, and “Dog Squad”, which is a new firm favourite.

As the shadow Minister said, most children now know their way around an iPad, a tablet, a computer or a phone like the back of their hand, and they access all this content in a way that we could not when we were younger, including through Netflix or YouTube. That is a particular concern, because the adverts on YouTube and other online streaming platforms are

not always age appropriate. Particularly during the cost of living crisis and in the run-up to Christmas, that is another burden for parents to deal with. It is a huge annoyance that there is this reliance on advertising, and sometimes product placement, which is not always healthy for children, in movies and TV shows.

On the educational impact, I have concerns about how young children watch these programmes. There will need to be access to repeated viewings for the educational impact to be fully felt when it comes to things such as GCSE “Bitesize” or learning letters. One episode of “Yakka Dee!” or “Sesame Street” will not teach my child the entire alphabet. With that in mind, it is important that we have a review of the impact on young people to protect the quality and standards of children’s television.

3.15pm

### **Sir John Whittingdale**

I suspect that the entire Committee agrees that it is important that children have access to public service broadcast content. The educational value of children’s television is hugely important, and it is indispensable for happy parenthood. It is for that reason that proposed new subsection 264(5)(c) of the Communications Act 2003 puts children’s television front and centre of the public service broadcasting regime. That will ensure that the public service remit can be fulfilled only by the public service broadcasters collectively producing a wide range of children’s content, including original content that reflects the lives and concerns of children and young people in the UK, and helps them to understand the world around them. The inclusion of children’s content as part of the remit will ensure that the needs of children feature prominently in Ofcom’s regular reporting. That will also complement its strengthened powers in respect of under-served content areas.

Although the provision of public service children’s programming is key, children—and especially older children—do of course watch other kinds of public service content as well, whether with their parents or on their own. As the hon. Member for Luton North set out, children access public service content via a wide range of devices. The Government agree that internet access and streaming services have fundamentally changed how audiences access TV, and that certainly applies to younger audiences, perhaps even more so than for any other group. On online advertising, I have recently been chairing a separate initiative—the online advertising taskforce—whose purpose is to ensure that online advertising does not advertise illegal products, and that children do not see advertising of inappropriate products.

The Bill tries to create flexibility by allowing our PSBs to deliver their remits across a wider range of services, including in new on-demand and short formats. We have made it clear that our PSBs must serve all audiences, and that extends not just to the content they make, but to how they choose to distribute it. These changes will ensure that our public service remit stays relevant and continues to reflect how audiences, including children and young people, are accessing PSB content.

We have to remember that PSB content has to be funded. All speakers paid tribute to the BBC’s output in this area, including CBBC and CBeebies, which are a core part of its output. Of course, the BBC receives public funding and is required under the charter to deliver content of that kind. It is more challenging for commercial television, as those broadcasters are dependent on advertising funding. I merely observe that the more we impose restrictions on what can be advertised to children, the more there is a detrimental impact on the amount

of revenue gain by commercial broadcasters, which will influence their decisions about how much they invest in children's programming.

That was one of the reasons why we previously established the young audiences content fund, which was designed to address the fact that almost all the children's content was being produced by the BBC. The fund was there to support the commissioning of children's content on other channels, and it proved very successful. It was a three-year pilot, but the Government continue to remain committed to the principle. I hope that, one day, it might be possible to resurrect something of that kind.

**Stephanie Peacock**

If it was a successful pilot, why did the Government not continue it?

**Sir John Whittingdale**

It was a successful pilot funded by the BBC, because it was licence-fee funded. Personally, I would have liked it to continue, but the BBC obviously was under financial pressure and put up a strong case that it could not continue to fund it. The principle that it was seeking to address remains an important one, and the Government have tried to provide alternative support, through things such as tax relief, for the production of children's content. I share the hon. Lady's sadness that it was brought to an end after three years, but it was always intended to be a pilot, and viewers will still be able to see content produced by the fund for some years to come.

**Kirsty Blackman**

On a point of order, Mr Vickers. I have to leave for a very important meeting, and I know that a number of new clauses in my name are coming up. I want to advise the Chair that I have to leave and am happy for those new clauses not to be pushed to a vote in Committee. Hopefully, making this point of order will mean that the sitting can end slightly earlier.

**The Chair**

Point of order noted. Thank you.

**Sir John Whittingdale**

I hope that the sitting can end very soon in any case; I think we have pretty much concluded the debate, and the remaining clauses are relatively technical.

I think the best people to conduct the review that the hon. Member for Barnsley East has called for are Ofcom. Ofcom has given a commitment in its planning work to take an in-depth look at how the market is best serving the interests of children, which I think will give us the insight that she wants. For that reason, I do not think her new clause is necessary.

**Stephanie Peacock**

I appreciate the Minister's point about it being harder for commercial stations than it perhaps is for the BBC—of course, I made a point of praising Channel 5 and Paramount in my comments. I asked a number of quite broad questions about children's television. I hope that

Ofcom will consider them, but I am not sure that the Bill mandates it to do that. For those reasons, I would like to push the new clause to a vote.

*Question put*, That the clause be read a Second time.

Division 7

The Committee divided:

Ayes. 4

Noes. 8

Question accordingly negatived.

Held on 12 December 2023