



Response to the BBC Trust Review of Children's Services

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AbRacADABra! launched in January 2002 as the world's first digital radio service for younger children and their families. We now broadcast as a non-profit internet service. Have a little listen!

As Founder Director I'm glad of the opportunity to respond to this Review and Consultation.

I also coordinate the **Sound Start Group** and this response will mirror many of the points made in their document. I thank those in our small team who have spent many listening hours to make this response as comprehensive as possible. Susan Stranks, Director.

It is really quite simple. Put the best in front of children - whether radio or literature or art or dance or drama - encourage them to reach for it, and they will grow well. Deny them the light of the arts and they will be stunted. We all know this - government, educators, artists, writers, broadcasters. Yet there is resistance amongst so many to the idea, the old idea that what you sow you reap. How short-sighted folk are.

Give children back their radio. If they were a minority adult group, they'd have it; but they're just children. There's the rub. Give them pap, cheap pap preferably, or nothing at all, because the ratings aren't good.

Self defeating and self destructive, and sad.

Michael Morpurgo May 1999

Introduction:

Radio is essential to children's culture and its value cannot be overestimated. It stimulates listening, talking, imagination, concentration, comprehension, coordination and memory. It can reach beyond family, school and peer-group, not only providing what children think they want but also what they never knew they could have.

A succession of government reports has revealed an increase in language deficit, with children joining reception class unable to express themselves or understand what is asked of them. This can lead to isolation, poor self esteem and even bullying, which hinders their school and social life as well as future employment chances. Radio can help.

Practitioners in childcare and education agree that shared and solo listening to high quality songs, stories, rhymes, word games, music and movement supports children in home and school settings but many parents don't know traditional stories and rhymes and prefer to sing along to the pop charts, which generally have little relevance to young children's lives. Radio can support disabled, sick and home-schooled children and bring balance to the prevailing screen and keyboard activity so often blamed for communication delay, obesity and attention disorders. Radio can also help families who are learning English as an additional Language, particularly those who may be more confined to the home by custom or religion.

UK law protects radio choice and access only for 'adults' aged 15 years and above and it is hoped this will be corrected in the Communications Bill.

BBC Strategy:

In preparation for re-launching R7 as R4Extra the **BBC's Strategy for Children's Audio** made the following significant changes to the R7 Service Licence.

- revise the BBC's mandate to provide a non-commercial radio home *for* children and reword it to provide programmes *that appeal to* children.
- Cut 75% of children's radio time (from 1,400 hrs to 350 hrs a year)
- cut 50% of the children's radio budget (Of £640.1m budget for BBC domestic radio less than £600K is allocated to 'family radio content')
- replace all radio for under-sixes with original content delivered as 20 minute internet downloads. (These average 12 minutes of overwhelmingly TV sourced material)
- reschedule remaining content for children aged six and over in 'family friendly' hours on rebranded R4Extra, which is the designated home of horror, sci-fi, fantasy and stand-up comedy
- prioritise release of BBC children's radio archive to commercial operators.

The Strategy dealt with children's radio ahead of 'Delivering Quality First', which covered children's television and on-line services, thus avoiding questions of comparison with general savings of 16-20%, spread over five years.

For years the BBC struggled to shoehorn children's radio into adult-speech networks, amid constant complaints from planners and listeners. The BBC Trust Review of Services for Children in 2009 stated:

BBC 7 and Radio 4 are primarily stations aimed at a much older audience and it is therefore unlikely that children will develop an affinity with these channels or go looking for content when it is available. The positioning of children's programmes on these channels is also unpopular with some adults who have complained that the content is unsuitable for the stations' core audience.

Parents had also complained that R4 was unsuitable for their children and yet the remaining content for children aged six and above has been re-scheduled on adult speech station R4Extra - the designated home of horror, sci-fi and stand-up comedy.

Adult-speech formats tend to favour a middle aged, middle class audience. Moreover 'speech-based' formats inhibit programming for children, who need a wide variety of listening to open their minds, inspire them and develop their critical faculties. Segregation of music and talk was imposed to free up higher bitrates for music radio, leaving less bandwidth for talk formats. Some of the best radio combines the two: Desert Island Discs; Soul Music; Something Understood; Kenneth Clark's Jazz Greats; Inheritance Tracks, and so on. It is significant that R4 is now featuring more music, R3 is examining the prose of Dickens and R2 has been instructed by the BBC Trust to include more speech content in its daytime schedules. Speech, music and sound are the key components to sound broadcasting and are better left to producers' discretion rather than to quotas imposed by bureaucrats.

Conflicted schedules:

Radio has no watershed and successive regulators have fought against setting one. The remit to provide for children, science-fiction, fantasy, horror and stand-up comedy on the same network is bound to result in conflicted schedules which will be unsuitable for listeners aged six to 10, if not for the 11 to 14 year-olds.

Random sampling of R4Extra demonstrates the conflict. 'The Seventh Dimension' at 6-7pm, prior to bed-time, boasts dark horror stories, drama and tales of the supernatural, including Dracula, Frankenstein and werewolf fiction 'The Quick and the Dead' was a drama about necromancy; 'Man in Black' themes have featured a psychopath who incarcerates a vagrant girl with her murdered parents; the ghost of a child who bribes a bereaved mother to care for her, with promises to lead her to her dead son; an alcoholic who watches his wife's body cremated and tries to cut out his donated liver. 'Blaze' is a poignant but harrowing serialisation of a novel by Stephen King, as is the painful docu-drama, 'Mary Barnes'.

'Lady into Fox' is a story about a man whose wife, Sylvia, metamorphoses into a vixen and 'prostitutes' herself with a dog fox, producing a litter of five cubs.

Consumed with jealousy, her husband considers cutting his throat with a razor but relents. However, 'Sylvia' is eventually mauled to death in his arms by a pack of hounds who also leave him with multiple wounds. All are well told, sophisticated and complex tales but entirely unsuitable for young children.

'Strangers and Brothers' leading up to the 'family hour', ended with a woman's suicide by overdose. A 'Smiley' script, contained the line "*You're a bloody spastic ...*". The 'Help', a drama set in the southern states of America, carried a description of a bloody miscarriage and included the line, "*... some nigger got shot or somethin'*". An announcement warned that the language reflected 1960s Mississippi but this doesn't help listeners who miss the start. In another instance the daily 'family friendly' hour was followed by an amusing but adult story about a strip club, nudity and fetishism. Programmes frequently feature content that would need a watershed or warnings on TV, and children's radio is unlikely to thrive or even survive in this inapt arena.

Today's stand-up comedy tends to favour 'adult' humour and, to fulfil its brief, Radio4Extra reflects this. 'Arthur Smith Sings Leonard Cohen' included the song 'Chelsea Hotel' with the line, "*Giving me head on an unmade bed...*". Panel games, such as 'Heresy,' lean towards an adult take on racy subjects and podcasts for adult shows are posted alongside the family downloads.

In response to complaints the BBC insists R4Extra is an adult network and the number of children listening is minimal. Parents are advised to monitor their children's listening, which would make radio a place of potential family conflict rather than of pleasure and discovery.

Family programming on R4Extra:

An hour of family drama is scheduled at 9am on Sundays with repeats at 4pm and again at 5am on Mondays. The '4 O'Clock Show' is an hour long family magazine on weekdays with an hour's repeat of 'Mel's Mix' on Sundays. This show is made up of repeated clips promoting programmes on other adult networks such as 'Woman's Hour', 'Front Row', 'Inheritance Tracks' and 'Questions Questions', which may or may not interest children. Each hour ends with 10 minutes of a children's story serial.

Popular host Mel Giedroyc links items with friendly chat, jokes and quizzes. Bespoke series have included 'Ask the Family' and 'How Safe ?' with Dick and Dom. In May children's content increased with short-listed stories from '500 Words' - an annual event hosted by Chris Evans on R2. In general the 4'Oclock Show airs approximately 20% children's and 80% adult content, which leaves children with considerably less dedicated PSB radio than 'Children's Hour' provided in the 1940s when the Home Service was the only platform of delivery.

Under sixes:

The podcasts to replace the two remaining hours of daily radio for listeners aged under six were promised as 20 minutes but average 12 minutes in length and are mainly TV sourced.

As such they are not always up to radio sound quality and they rely on children's familiarity with characters on CBeebies TV, which is unashamedly promoted with copious scripted endorsements. "*We love CBeebies...*" chanted by children too young to understand they are endorsing a brand. Parents complain that the downloads need extra equipment, time and skill to access and are a poor substitute for a pre-set, push-button radio that very young children can tune to. Families in homes without the internet are missing out.

To mitigate cuts of 75% of content and 50% of budget, the trade of public archive to commercial rivals was prioritised but has yet to be properly implemented. After more than two years of copyright delay X26 CBeebies stories have been contracted to abracadABra! and many hours of archive still await copyright clearance. To avoid future time wasting and legal expense, new commissions for BBC children's/family radio content should contract for third party use but it is not clear whether this is happening.

Conclusion:

It follows that young listeners are likely to be evicted from yet another PSB radio network as an irrelevant nuisance too problematic to serve alongside the adults, yet, with the wealth of capacity, there's no need for children's and adult's radio to conflict. It would be far more sensible for the BBC to schedule a family friendly network unbridled by news, adult comedy, drama, occult and horror but, if young listeners must be served on an adult network, Radio 2 is preferable with its mixed speech and music format and family friendly tone. However, great care must always be taken where children are exposed to news.

30 July 2008, the BBC Executive Submission to the BBC Trust's Review of Services for Children aged 12 and under promises to:

- Inspire children's imagination and open their minds to new worlds
- Help children understand themselves and their place in the world
- Encourage children to be responsible citizens
- Inspire children to be creative and active
- Provide moments when they can laugh out loud
- Reflect the diverse lives of children
- Provide positive role models of children for children
- Engage and support children in their learning

All these goals can, and should, be fulfilled by public radio but, having failed to do so, the BBC has opted to lease young ears and archive to its commercial rivals. This commercialises children and breaches the Charter.

The way forward:

It's hard to believe the BBC Trust and Executive intentionally licensed the only remaining radio content for children alongside adult comedy, horror, murder, sex and serious crime and this may have arisen from anxiety to make immediate cuts in the least militant quarter.

However, the unique value of radio in children's lives cannot be overstated and must not be overlooked.

The best way forward would be to reserve a network where younger children and their families can listen in a safe and sound environment, leaving parents and carers free from the need to police yet another source of content which is potentially damaging to their children. There's a wealth of family friendly music, song, stories, fun and games that are rarely if ever broadcast on radio and would greatly enhance available choice.

This is not to say that children should be banned from the other networks, which should also cater for them at appropriate times, but very young children need a secure place to discover the joy of radio. They are the future takers and makers after all.

Research commissioned by Children 2000 for the Sound Start Group shows strong public preference for a network for young children and their families and the group has proposed an independent evaluation of children's radio, with published outcomes, to be undertaken in practical partnership with other non profit organisations, to inform BBC policy and the radio industry at large. Research also confirms that families with children listen to radio most in cars, making a Children's Radio Network an intelligent choice in the government's **Digital Radio Action Plan**, and a logical '6th C' in Ed Vaisey's five objectives: Content, Consumers, Coverage, Certainty and Cars. It is time to give the public what they want.

Hyperlinks to documents relied on:

[MORI and Capibus Ipsos MORI surveys](#)

[2001 Research Data](#)

[2010 Research Data](#)

[2011 Research Data](#)

[2013 Research Data](#)

[Broadcasting & Communications Act 2003](#)

[R7 and R4Extra Service Licences](#)

[Ofcom Broadcasting Codes](#)

[BBC Charter](#)

[BBC Editorial Guidelines](#)

[BBC Trust Service Review of the Asian Network](#)

[Delivering Quality First \(DQF\)](#)

[Sound Start Group Response to BBC Trust Consultation on Delivering Quality First](#)

[Sound Start Group Response to BBC Trust Consultation on the Asian Network](#)

[Hart and Risley \(1995\)](#)

[Bercow Review \(July 2008\)](#)

[Frank Field Report on Poverty and Life Chances \(December 2010\)](#)

[Allen Report \(January 2011\)](#)

[Reg Bailey Report - Letting Children be Children \(June 2011\)](#)

[Jean Gross Report \(December 2011\)](#)

[Darren Henley's Report - Music Education in England \(February 2011\)](#)

[Darren Henley's Review of Cultural Education \(April 2012\)](#)

[Speaking Out: Young offenders - RCSLT \(2010\)](#)

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