



Changing Children's TV

NEW LAWS BANNING JUNK FOOD ADVERTISING DURING CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMES HAVE HAD A SURPRISING DETRIMENTAL EFFECT ON THE QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S TV, BUT ONE INDEPENDENT PRODUCTION COMPANY HAS BUCKED THE TREND WITH THE BBC'S FLAGSHIP DRAMA, ROMAN MYSTERIES, SAYS KATE DAVIDSON.

Most of us agree that television output has been 'dumbed down' in recent years, with a proliferation of cheap – in every sense of the word – reality TV shows edging out good quality, but more expensive, home-grown drama, film and documentary.

But with children's TV, a strange paradox has emerged. In 2004, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver famously led a campaign to improve school meals, to eradicate the cheap, mass-produced 'turkey twizzler' from our children's diets and introduce better quality, home-cooked food. Politicians jumped on the bandwagon, resulting in a crackdown on junk food advertising during children's TV programmes. But the resulting loss in advertising revenue for the commercial TV channels meant that children's programming slid even further into crisis, with fewer good quality shows being commissioned in the UK and more cheap imports of foreign-made cartoons. So while children may not be eating so much junk food, they are certainly watching more 'turkey twizzler' TV.

In 2006, the Children's Laureate Jacqueline Wilson expressed her concerns about the decline of children's TV in the *Daily Mail*. In fact, the TV adaptation of the author's hugely popular *Tracy Beaker* books is one of the BBC's better offerings, but Wilson commented that despite the "best intentions" of the legislation against junk food advertising, children's TV is now "in a bit of a worrying state" and "it seems such a shame that we have had children's television programmes to be proud of and yet now various children's drama

departments seem to be being closed down".

But Bristol-based TV producer Martin Haines believes that it's Noel Edmonds, not Jamie Oliver, who has added to the woes of children's TV. "Deal or No Deal has certainly played its part," he says. "The show gets 3-4 million viewers every afternoon, and children's TV could never hope to match this. The result is that ITV has reduced its output of kid's programmes dramatically with the majority of its shows being repeats," says Martin.

"Advertising revenue is down as a result of the changes in the law, but the commercial broadcasters rely on advertising to fund new programming. There is little new children's TV in the pipelines from the major commercial broadcasters, and even the BBC has had its budgets cut."

In fact, BBC children's television is having to reduce its budget by 10% – while other departments must only cut back by 3%. This is more bad news for an already declining industry – a recent Ofcom report revealed that fewer than one in five children's TV programmes originate from the UK, and most are imported repeats. Of course, we've all enjoyed the delights of imports such as *Top Cat*, *Tom & Jerry* and *The Flintstones* in our own childhood, but where are today's equivalents of such memorable and often gritty British-made dramas as *Press Gang*, *Grange Hill* or *Byker Grove*, that will teach our children important lessons about life and the contemporary issues they will face?

Concerned about the effects of the

The four main characters in *Roman Mysteries* – Flavia, Jonathan, Nubia and Lupus.

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downturn in pre-school programming and its impact on the independent TV production industry, Martin and his team at The Little Entertainment Group responded by diversifying into the 8 – 13 age group – and decided to defy the prevailing trend by taking on a major challenge. *Roman Mysteries* became the BBC's flagship children's drama last year – and will be again this year – and the grand scale and even grander budget are currently unprecedented in the children's TV industry.

"Children's drama is rarely shot on location," says Martin, "And the budget for the two series shot so far was £10 million, of which the BBC has contributed around a half."

For those who have never seen *Roman Mysteries*, the drama is based on a series of best-selling books by Caroline Lawrence, focusing on the adventures of four children during the reign of Emperor Titus in Rome. It's a sort of *Famous Five* set in an ancient civilisation and with a backdrop of stunning Roman architecture and the kinds of satisfyingly complex, exciting plots that wouldn't be out of place in an adult drama.

"We felt the epic nature of the show had great potential. It has strong storylines, plus the history and setting of Rome has a universal and international appeal," explains Martin. "We also had a captive audience of children who were already fans of Caroline's books. But the themes are contemporary and relevant to children today – dealing with everything from poverty, class, families, racism, bullying and dysfunctional families."

The show's adaptability for audiences

in other countries has been a major factor in its success. "As producers, it's our job to either generate or acquire new programme ideas and then seek finance. So we have an obligation to our investors to meet their expectations. It's often hard to quantify the value of a project – it's not like buying a property with a defined market value, which makes it a risky business," he admits. "However, it can be immensely rewarding if you have a *Bob the Builder*-type phenomenon on your hands!

"There are so many variables that can affect the success of a programme – competition from other shows, the time slot you are given, the quality of the finished product, the unpredictability of the target audience, and even the prevailing mood or zeitgeist – but with *Roman Mysteries* we knew it would be different because the production values would be so high."

According to Martin, the biggest risk was knowing what the reception would be on an international level, as most countries don't have a dedicated slot for children's drama, so it's harder to sell a more expensive series than a cheap cartoon. "It's selling these rights to overseas TV networks, along with DVD distribution and merchandise, that help us generate the return for our investors."

Roman Mysteries may have been shot on location in Malta and Bulgaria, but it draws heavily on the local skills base here in Bristol. At its height, the show had a crew of 200 on location. "Outside

London, Bristol is the next big thing in independent TV production and media," says Martin. "We've got some national institutions here, such as Aardman and the BBC Natural History Unit, and we've also got lots of skilled industry people and resources that we can draw on."

Just as children deserve a good quality and varied diet, they also deserve a varied menu of good television programmes that will educate, inspire and entertain – and Martin's feedback indicates that children appreciate the high production values. "A lot of the children who love the show are keen readers and fans of the books, so they are bright and interested in history already. But the show does have a wider appeal, even beyond the age 8 – 13 target audience," says Martin.

Sadly, *Roman Mysteries* is something of an anomaly in the current schedule and looks likely to remain that way, so is government intervention the only way to get broadcasters to invest in their younger viewers? "I'm not sure that forcing the channels to meet targets is the answer," says Martin. "But I would like to see the government offering assistance for UK-produced programming, to encourage homegrown talent – especially for the BBC."

As a parent to two pre-schoolers himself, Martin is keen to be a pioneer for better programmes for children, who



stand to benefit the most from this kind of inspirational drama. "We wanted *Roman Mysteries* to be a great example, to be a flag bearer for our beleaguered industry and show what can be achieved," says Martin. "And with talks in progress for a third series – and possible plans for a movie – we think we've set an impressive standard." ■