



THE MOTHERS' UNION

Incorporated by Royal Charter

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Vanessa Brand  
Head of Public Service Broadcasting Policy Branch  
Policy Division  
Department for Culture, Media and Sport  
2-4 Cockspur Street  
London SW1Y 5DH

Dear Ms Brand

***Re: Proposed New Services from the BBC – Additional Information***

I am writing on behalf of the Mothers' Union to express support for the BBC's proposed new digital services currently under consideration from the DCMS and, in particular, for their plans to introduce two new children's channels.

The Mothers' Union is an Anglican organisation of one million members world wide, over 120 thousand of whom live in the UK and Ireland, united by a shared commitment to marriage and family life. This concern is in part manifested in specific voluntary projects and initiatives aimed at supporting and promoting the well being of families. One such project is the Mothers' Union Media Awareness Project (MAP), established in 1988 to encourage families to be aware of the influence of the media on their lives. The project currently takes the form of an interactive internet resource, regularly updated to help families to engage in current media issues. (For further information please see [www.themothersunion.org](http://www.themothersunion.org)). As demonstrated by MAP, we have a long-standing involvement with media issues, and are well placed to represent the interests of families as media consumers.

To this end, with regard to the BBC's proposed new children's services, we welcome the promise of almost 90% original programming, tied into the education curriculum, and free from the distraction of advertising. In addition, we are encouraged by the BBC's assertion of less reliance on repetition than its competitors. Perhaps most importantly, we believe that the media has a crucial role to play in the development and education of children. The designation of channels specifically for children, matched by the BBC's commitment to high quality, should provide an opportunity for creative, innovative developments within children's television.

Although the Mothers' Union's view is predominantly one of sympathy toward the BBC's proposed new children's services, we do wish to take this opportunity to make some comments on the additional information submitted by the corporation.

*Christian concern for families worldwide*

World Wide President *Trish Heywood* Chief Executive *Reg Bailey M.Sc.* Deputy Chief Executive *Tim Girdlestone M.A., F.C.A.*

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- ❖ The Mothers' Union would like to clarify that its support is conditional on the integration and complementation of the digital proposals with the BBC channels on the existing terrestrial network whilst the latter remains available. The new children's services should not be provided at the expense of the existing children's programming, either now or in the future, on the grounds that the consumer's decision to switch to digital should be a genuine and positive one. Not every family will feel digital is appropriate to their situation, the additional cost being perhaps a major but not exclusive factor. We would also stress that existing terrestrial channels need to continue to be self-contained. Where 'spin-offs' are used and existing programmes (such as *Newsround* and *Blue Peter*) developed on the digital channels, care should be taken to ensure that those programmes on the non-digital channels continue to stand alone, with the digital services embellishing the media experience for children. Whilst all new products and services are of course potential objects of pester-power, this risk would be minimised with regard to digital television by following the steps outlined above. This would be of considerable assistance to parents.
  
- ❖ The Mothers' Union warmly embraces the participative nature of the proposed digital programming and online services. We perceive this as an effective way to encourage viewers from an early age into habits of taking control of their media experience; developing their personal discernment; and being responsible and responsive in their roles as media consumers. These are all values underlying our Media Awareness Project. Given the emphasis on encouraging such interaction, it may be beneficial to young people if this was put into context, with some explicit attention paid to helping children to understand the role of the media. To ensure that consumers (be they passive or actively participating) are truly served by the media, it is important that they have an understanding of what it is that they are being encouraged to interact with; why it is important so to do; and where the limitations in doing so lie. The new services present an ideal opportunity to address these issues.
  
- ❖ In terms of encouraging participation, we are pleased to learn that the proposals include the development of the *Newsround Press Pack*. We would be particularly concerned to see children's active involvement at an earlier stage than has previously perhaps been possible: with children determining which (and indeed how) stories are covered and interviews conducted, and being instrumental in setting these up as well as conducting them. This is important in giving children a genuine sense of control or partnership in the services provided for them; as a result of which, young people are more likely to respond by engaging. Broadening the opportunities for participation would ensure that children's involvement is not perceived as too contrived or superficial, and should also serve to provide a deeper insight into both the media and the wider world.
  
- ❖ As one step removed from the previous point, we would be interested to learn of the extent to which children have been directly consulted in formulating the proposals. Obviously, the BBC and wider adult world has considerable expertise regarding programming which would benefit children's development. On the other hand, children know best the sorts of programming and services which would attract them, and a balance must be reached between these two factors. Viewing figures reveal preferences only between the programmes already available. They cannot therefore be solely relied

upon to determine the programmes children want, since children may respond best to a programme style that has not hitherto been thought of or produced. It is not clear from the information submitted that the BBC has asked children directly what sorts of services and programmes would be of greatest appeal to them.

- ❖ Children often have very different needs in terms of the media from those of adults, and we welcome the recognition of this, implicit in the proposals. The Mothers' Union acknowledges the potential value in designating channels for children: in facilitating a focus on the development of programming to meet the specific needs of the younger viewer; and in helping families to easily locate child-friendly material. However, whilst the proposals are rightly designed with the child in mind, we are concerned that there could perhaps be more explicit consideration of family viewing in the proposals. Experience suggests that television is much more powerful as an educative tool when the child is encouraged by another person to engage, and will usually copy observed behaviour. There may be benefits for a child's social development if watching television is regarded as a shared activity, rather than as a substitute for personal interaction. In addition, programming that can be enjoyed by the whole family may be beneficial in helping children as they make the transition from children's to adult's media.
- ❖ The Mothers' Union believes that the media should always be seen as a means of broadening and enhancing one's life experience rather than as a substitute for direct experience. We therefore welcome the fact that a large proportion of the proposed programming points to the wider world, both in the pre-school channel (e.g.: "documentary 'windows on the world'") and older children's programmes (such as the magazine in the style of *Xchange*).
- ❖ We note that the justification used for repetitive programming on the channel for younger children is that "younger children love repetition". Whilst this may be true, we would perhaps question the desirability of reinforcing such a tendency. However, we are confident that the BBC would not intend for children of any age to watch television for a long enough daily period to encounter repeats. In addition, we note that the BBC's proposals compare very favourably with competitor channels in consideration of variety, with 2 vis-à-vis 12 transmission days per year.

We trust that you will take our strong endorsement of the BBC's proposals together with additional comments into account in your deliberations, and look forward with interest to the outcome of your decision:

Yours sincerely



Michelle Coulton  
Social Policy Officer