

Report on visit to the University of Westminster: 'Making television for young children: Future prospects and issues' conference
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The media is facing increasing financial pressure. As far as the broadcast media is concerned, children's television has been particularly badly hit, being cut from all but two of the UK's terrestrial channels, and intense competition among the satellite channels dedicated to younger viewers. It was against this background that the University of Westminster held a conference looking at just what the future holds for television produced preschool aged children.

The conference speakers included well-established academic researchers, those starting out on their career, industry professionals and an educational advisor. Papers focused on the complex and changing relationships between broadcasters and producers that create television for young children.

The conference was opened by the University of Ulster's Professor Màire Messenger Davies, who took a trip down memory lane. But, are we damaging that experience for future generations because of an over-reliance on merchandising thanks to the industry's grim financial situation? Professor Jeanette Steemers, the conference organiser from the University of Westminster, looked at the tension between artistry and industry. Without the £800 million revenue brought into the preschool children's production industry through licensing and merchandising, the television programmes simply could not be made.

Although the under tens are well catered for in terms of virtual worlds on the internet, according to post-doctoral researcher at the University of Westminster Lizzie Jackson, children still use television as their primary source of information for the news. Màire Messenger Davies and Kaitlynn Mendes presented their research on 'Newsround', highlighting that although children appreciate and value having a current affairs show dedicated specifically for them, they did not use the Newsround website.

Presentations were given by producers from Astley Barker Davies (the London-based company which created 'Peppa Pig') Hit Entertainment (the company which is modernising classics such as 'Thomas and Friends' and 'Fireman Sam'), Little Airplane Productions and TT Animation. They addressed how producers apply creative and technical innovation to production. Preschool children's television producers are using cutting edge technology to create shows that are experimental, original and hugely entertaining. For researchers who may be unfamiliar with the day-to-day business of creating a programme, this input from industry professionals will certainly help to inform future work.

In summary, the conference fostered a sense of community – in a relatively new research area, it offered a good opportunity for those in the field to discuss their work. The

friendly atmosphere was conducive to promoting academic dialogue during the breaks between sessions. It brought together researchers based all over the UK, as well as industry professionals, united by an interest in the development of preschool children's television in the digital age.

For details on the research that is being carried out in the Centre for Media Research at the University of Ulster, go to <http://cmr.ulster.ac.uk>. To find out more about the University of Westminster's Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI), go to <http://www.wmin.ac.uk/mad/page-57>

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