



Aalborg Universitet

AALBORG UNIVERSITY  
DENMARK

## **Terrible Teletubbies?**

*Analysis of the British debate in the Spring and Summer of 1997 on a recent children's television programme*

Gram, Malene

*Publication date:*  
2002

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Gram, M. (2002). *Terrible Teletubbies? Analysis of the British debate in the Spring and Summer of 1997 on a recent children's television programme*. European Research Unit, Aalborg University.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

European Studies

Series of Occasional Papers, no. 33/2002

European Research Unit, Aalborg University

**Terrible Teletubbies?**

**Analysis of the British debate in the Spring and  
Summer 1997 on a recent children's television  
programme**

**Malene Gram**

© Malene Gram & European Research Unit, 2002

ISSN 0906-0308

**European Studies** is a series featuring publications on European issues (cultural, communicative, economic, political), in a historical, contemporary and cross-cultural perspective. Further the series will comprise publications focussing on matters of interest to the history, structure and current development of the European community.

**European Studies** is published by the European Research Unit in collaboration with the Institute for History, International and Social Studies at Aalborg University, Denmark.

Requests and orders for issues can be made to the following address:

*European Research Unit  
Aalborg University  
Fibigerstraede 2  
DK-9220 Aalborg O  
Denmark*

*Phone: +45 96 35 71 95*

*Fax: +45 98 15 11 26*

*Email: [julie@humsamf.auc.dk](mailto:julie@humsamf.auc.dk)*

# **Terrible Teletubbies?**

## **Analysis of the British debate in the Spring and Summer of 1997 on a recent children's television programme**

by Malene Gram<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

“Outraged mothers”, “Parents divided across the country”, “A surreal joke utterly devoid of constructive teaching”, “Goo-goo style”, “bad influence” are all extracts from articles from the Spring and Summer of 1997 where a fierce debate took place in the British media regarding a children's television programme, *Teletubbies*.

In this paper articles and letters to the editors regarding the programme are analysed. The articles and letters stem from a broad range of British national and local newspapers in the period from March till August 1997. The analysis seeks to reveal why *Teletubbies* could awaken so very strong feelings among journalists and parents. Particular interest is paid to descriptions of the *Teletubbies* given in the articles and letters and how the preferred alternatives to *Teletubbies*, the usual children's programmes, are described.

Theories on childhood and theories on children and mass media are applied to put the findings of the empirical analysis in perspective. The idea is that the harsh debate over *Teletubbies* rests on myths of ideal childhood deeply anchored in Western images of good childhood and that television is a particular minefield with regard to children because children traditionally have been viewed as very vulnerable, innocent and passive in the consumption of mass media. Furthermore *Teletubbies* could be considered as out of tune with dominant British ideals for upbringing.

The relevance of the debate on *Teletubbies* goes beyond children's programmes. It reflects dominant perceptions of children in the Western world in general and in Britain in particular.

Keywords: childhood, children's television, *Teletubbies*, ideals for upbringing

## **1. Introduction**

“Gentle TV characters from Warwickshire are at the centre of one of the strangest rows to hit television” it is written in *Coventry Evening Telegraph* 21<sup>st</sup> of May 1997. “[F]rom the moment they appeared, the *Teletubbies* have enraged mummies across the land” states *The Mirror* the 23rd of May 1997. The reason for this row and this rage is a children's television programme described as “plain silly”, “bizarre”, “a surreal joke” and “devoid of constructive teaching” with

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared for the ISA 2002 World Congress in Brisbane, Australia. Malene Gram, PhD, is Assistant Professor at Aalborg University, Denmark. E-mail: [gram@humsamf.auc.dk](mailto:gram@humsamf.auc.dk). Acknowledgements to Anne Wood at Ragdoll's for sending copies of articles and letters to the editors. Thanks to Ulf Hedetoft and Henrik Halkier, both Aalborg University, for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

characters who “cannot even talk properly” just to mention a few of the accusations which rained down over the programme.

*Teletubbies* is a children’s programme, produced by Ragdoll and BBC. The programme aired for the first time the 31st of March 1997. *Teletubbies* are four creatures, Tinky-Winky, Dipsy, La-La and Po, with antennas on their heads and televisions screens on their tummies. They live in a green and hilly landscape in a spaceship-like house inside a hill. Outside colours are bright, flowers grow on the very green grass, and rabbits run around quietly. The *Teletubbies* interact and communicate like very young children with impediment of speech and a very simple vocabulary. They run around, looking at the world around them. In every programme there is the same long introduction with the *Teletubbies* and a shining sun made of the smiling face a baby looking down on them, and between sequences with the *Teletubbies*, there is a small film with real children, displayed on one of the screens on the tummies of one of the *Teletubbies*, which is repeated at full length.

Inventor of *Teletubbies* Anne Wood says: “The idea for *Teletubbies* came from children. All our ideas come from children. ‘Ragdoll works for children’ is our mission statement because, for everything we do, we watch and observe children – how they play, how they talk and how they react to the programmes we make [...] Everything in *Teletubbies* has been done with love and a sense of fun. We go to a lot of trouble to show affection in our programmes. Children need to see their experiences reflected back to them as part of discovering who they are. We hope that enjoying *Teletubbies* will help them work through their own experiences and grow a little” (interviewed in *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 20 March 1997). According to Anna Home, head of BBC children’s programmes, the programme is designed to aid children’s speech development and interest them in the world around them (interviewed in *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 20 March 1997).

Being a Dane, used to a large range of apparently silly children’s programmes, the debate over *Teletubbies* in the UK puzzled me. One of the most famous and lasting (20 years this year) children’s programmes in Denmark, *Bamse and Kylling* (Teddy and Chicken) seems to contain many of the same ingredients as *Teletubbies*, and this programme has been – if not loved then at least – accepted by parents without much ado. *Bamse* is an extremely selfish bear with problems of pronunciation similar to the *Teletubbies*. Today *Bamse and Kylling* is a source of national pride almost – symbol of the quality of Danish children’s programmes.

With this in mind I find it quite surprising that the *Teletubbies* could arouse such fierce feelings of anger, when children apparently like the programme: angry parents, but happy children. In this paper the debate is analysed as it took place in British media in the period from March 1997 till August 1997. I take a close look at the arguments used against the children’s programme and I set the debate in the perspective of the dominant Western/British view of children and the general perception of mass communication to children. The research question is thus: what ideas and norms about good childhood hide behind the *Teletubbies*-debate?

The hypotheses are that *Teletubbies* do not match the general idea of what is “good” for children to watch: what is portrayed in the programme is not perceived as a normal and sound children’s universe – particularly not in a British context. At the same time, television to children is a minefield, in general, as children are perceived as passive and defenceless viewers making the issue of children’s television programmes very sensitive.

## **1.1 Methodological considerations**

The paper is based on a discourse analysis of articles and letters to the editors of British newspapers which appeared in the British press from March till the end of August 1997. The articles analysed cover the period from before the programme was aired through the launch and the first stormy months of broadcasting. The articles are mainly expressions of journalists' opinions, but the journalists also pass on the points of views of parents who have entered the debate in various ways. A number of letters to the editor from parents are included as well. I have mainly focussed on the negative views, but I will also turn to the positive views, to reflect the debate in a varied way.

## **1.2 Delimitations**

This paper is not concerned with what children think of the programme, and it is not discussed whether the programme is or is not good for children. It is the opinion of adults - of British adults in particular - which is in focus. Whether or not a public debate is a real reflection of the general public opinion is of course a question which must be raised, but the debate must be considered as a cultural construct, where the points and arguments raised in articles and letters to the editors are embedded in the general discourse about childhood and television, and therefore I find it meaningful to examine them as bearers of more general cultural meaning.

## **2. The Debate**

In the articles the reasons for the antipathy towards the programme seem to circle around three main features: firstly that the content of the programme is worrying (confusing, abnormal and making children stupid), secondly that the programme is not similar to earlier educational programmes with an emphasis on correctness, setting the good example for children, rationality, and explicit school directed learning; and thirdly because of a scepticism towards television programmes directed to children in general. These accusations will be examined one by one, even though they are inter-linked, and hereafter explained in a historical and theoretical perspective.

### **2.1 Harmful bad examples?**

Two days before the launch journalist Maggie Brown from *The Daily Telegraph* reviews the new children's programme in her article "Tailored for the baby-gros" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 29 March 1997). She describes the names of the *Teletubbies* as "yucky", and the "actor 'babies'" are described as having funny voices and to love dashing around and they are compared with Monty Python. "The style is set by opening shots of a sun with a plump baby's face, rather like a Renaissance cherub, laughing out at you".

The journalist describes different features in the programme (e.g. cartoon animals marching through the landscape). And then she writes: "But there is an even more bizarre feature" namely that the *Teletubbies* have TV screens in their middles". It is understood that it is all bizarre, and the TV screens are "even more" bizarre. Brown writes that on these screens real toddlers appear in small films and "they all babble away in toddler talk at the camera [...]. And once the sequence has been played, it is instantly repeated, at full length. For an adult, viewing it with a child, the repetition is enough to induce screams". Maggie Brown continues: "The baby's face in the sun (grotesque enough to cause concern at the BBC) survived only because target audience children laughed back at it, and instantly identified the programme through it". The dismay of the journalist is put forward in a humoured and ironic way, but her choice of words is interesting

to examine more closely. Words like “bizarre” means that the programme is odd, strange and not normal. And that something is “grotesque” means that it is strange or unnatural.

The programme is compared with Monty Python, which is a programme for adults which is highly sarcastic. These connotations are not perceived to be compatible with the normal children’s universe. The baby in the introduction of the programme is described as “plump” meaning too fat or overweight and thus not normal/healthy. The repetitiveness of certain parts of the programme is a source of provocation mentioned by several journalists. This is not perceived to be normal or rational but irritating. Rationality and normality are seen as the expected norm of what children should be exposed to.

The issue of whether or not the programme is a bad example or a bad influence comes up several times. Marion McMullen titles her article “Are they local heroes or a bad example to our youngsters?” (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 21 May 1997). And in another article: “[...] newspapers have pretended to be shocked by them, claiming that they are corrupting children [...]” (*The Sunday Times Magazine*, 29 June 1997). What is a bad example? A good example is to show children the “right” way, to be a good model for the children, whereas bad examples make the children develop in a “wrong” direction, not the ideal pattern. This reflects an image of children as soft wax, who can be shaped and manipulated while young. Thus to be a bad example is to put the soft wax in the wrong mould, and thereby deteriorating (corrupting) children for good.

The programme has also been accused of having a hidden agenda: “Others have read more sinister meanings into the bizarre antics of Tinky Winky and friends. With its garish colourings and mind-numbingly repetitive images, some have suggested that the programme draws on the stylistic references of the drug culture. Tinky Winky himself, the potbellied purple creature who often carries a handbag, has even become an icon for the gay community” (*The Express*, 25 August 1997).

The programme has been watched – much to the surprise of the producers – by some adults where it has almost reached cult status. This has been described by Sheryl Garratt: “The cult of Teletubbies is everywhere – students are throwing parties in their honour and men in pubs across the country are arguing about which is their favourite” (*The Sunday Times Magazine*, 29 June 1997). There is a reference to this in the above quotation from the Guardian “surreally enjoyable for adults, particularly if they are stoned”. The landscape has been called “a LSD-universe” and the connection drugs (stoned adults and LSD-universe) and children is not perceived to be a good cocktail.

The programme is defended by conferring to earlier cases of similar programmes. “There has been some controversy over the content but, if you look at another children’s programme such as the *Clangers* in which the characters communicated by whistling, I didn’t see a generation of children growing up whistling” Anna Home, Head of children’s programmes by the BBC, is quoted to have said in *The Express* 25 August 1997. “Some people call *Teletubbies* ‘childish’, but surely that’s the point. It’s appealing to the younger children. I watched *Bill And Ben* as a child and I remember trying to make out what the hell they were talking about. But I don’t go around saying ‘flobadob’ anymore” managing director of Noel Edmonds’ Unique, Paul Pascoe, says (*The Mirror*, 23 May 1997). These two writers argue by using similar cases in television to prove that the children who watched these programmes with characters not talking “normally”,

grew up to be normal people despite the abnormal behaviour in these programmes. The argument goes that abnormal television does not give abnormal children (later adults), because “normal adults” who e.g. speak properly are the aim of the upbringing.

The negative arguments and derogative words applied in the articles are to a large extent centred around the programme’s lack of normality. This is particularly focussed on the incorrect talk, the behaviour of the *Teletubbies* (“dashing around without a purpose”, “daft antics”, “plain silly”), and the structure of the programme (e.g. repeating the same sequence twice, “confusing”).

## **2.2 Plain silly and not educational**

The new programme is clearly seen as being in contrast with former programmes. Maggie Brown writes: “On Monday parents of small children should brace themselves for a big surprise” (*The Daily Telegraph*, 29 March 1997). A “big surprise” means that the parents will see something which they had not expected, emphasising that the new programme is a break away from normal conventions and expectations for the content of a children’s television programme. Brown continues: “The BBC is boldly replacing *Playdays*, its regular 10am programme for pre-schoolers, with an entirely new and unconventional format: *Teletubbies*” (*The Daily Telegraph*, 29 March 1997). Already in her use of “boldly” the journalist indicates that the BBC has been acting a little bit too quickly and without really consulting or considering the points of views of parents.

*Playdays* is presented as a programme where “adult presenters speak clearly and try to teach tiny children letters, numbers and songs”. The new programme is described as “resolutely childcentred”, “full of giggling, in which adults are kept firmly at bay”. The journalist indicates that the old programme starred adults who aimed to be a good example by teaching children to speak and learn useful skills for school. In the new programme no adults appear, and the creatures that do appear do not speak properly. It is understood here that the new programme does not teach children “useful” skills. This is supported by the following letter to the editor from Melanie Walker (*The Times*, 28 May 1997) “Sir, *Teletubbies*, in my view, is a poor replacement for *Playdays* and *Playbus*. My four-year-old daughter watches taped repeats of *Playdays* because they interest and challenge her. She loves *Teletubbies* but never asks to see them a second time. I wouldn’t dream of not allowing her to watch them [...] but in no way can they replace *Playdays* and *Playbus*, which combine endearing and humorous characters with educational content”. *Teletubbies* does not interest and challenge her daughter and the content is not educational seems to be the message.

In August, according to Tobynd Andreae, parents are still divided on the effect of the programme on children’s education “Some say that the show uses acknowledged teaching methods to aid communication and development. Others have railed against the perceived “dumbing down” of children’s television which, they say, can only prove detrimental in the long term” (*The Express*, 25 August 1997).

Judith Williamson (*The Guardian*, 5 July 1997) is very positive towards *Teletubbies* arguing that this programme takes seriously the needs of babies. She writes: “More revealing is the widespread complaint that the *Teletubbies* are “slow, silly, banal and incoherent”, that they are “repetitive” and “don’t talk properly”. Adults’ obsession with “talking properly” is well known to children. [...] It’s as if the *Teletubbies*’ saying “good morning” instead of “ha-ho” would somehow make the show cleverer. In fact, its selfreferential structure and visual content are



sophisticated: children are constantly made aware that television isn't "real", their knowledge of generic devices is evoked, while their own language and habits are looked upon playfully" (*The Guardian*, 5 July 1997)

Maggie Brown (*The Daily Telegraph*, 29 March 1997) acknowledges that Anne Wood has sought to make the programme educational, but: "An emphasis on learning through play seems all well and good, but I found the programme confusing". The combination of learning and play is fine, according to the journalist, but it is not the usual way and the journalist indirectly questions whether it is as good as traditional programs as e.g. *Playdays*. Maggie Brown carried out her own small reception analysis with her own children and children of friends and concludes that most of them found it boring except one 20-month-old child, but – as Brown notes - he will probably not be allowed to see the programme anyway because of "the scathing reaction of their parents; they, after all, will decide whether to switch on *Teletubbies*". Her adult opinion about the programme is clear.

In *The Mirror*, Gill Swain writes "The question on every parent's lips. *Teletubbies*. Are they harmless fun or bad for our children?" (*The Mirror*, 23 May 1997). The *Teletubbies* are not perceived as educational in the traditional sense of the word, but the question is asked whether they are harmless at best (not good but not deteriorating the children either) or bad (harmful, deteriorating the children) at worst. Gill Swain continues: "Parents bombarded the BBC and Radio Times with letters objecting to the "goo-goo style" of the programme and the repetitive phrases the creatures use. They said the show was a bad influence on their children. That the *Teletubbies*' nonsensical speech and daft antics stopped their youngsters' development". Swain writes: "*Teletubbies* is bizarre and quite different from any children's TV show which has gone before" (*The Mirror*, 23 May 1997). A parent quoted in the article regrets that *Playdays* is gone and says: "This new programme is just plain silly" *Playdays* is the programme that *Teletubbies* replaces, and it is described as an educational programme with educational stories "that everyone could feel happy about their children watching".

Even though, as Nigella Lawson writes, "*Teletubbies* is for the amusement of toddlers, not their parents" (*The Times*, 14 May 1997), a "scathing reaction" from the parents mentioned in Maggie Brown's review is evidence of a negative judgement from adults, despite the fact that at least very young children (who are the target of the programme) seem to like the programme. "By all means let children watch programmes designed to appeal to children. But, in a society increasingly led by television, we also have a responsibility to introduce them to language and other forms of education. *Teletubbies* [...] is a surreal joke, utterly devoid of constructive teaching. The characters don't even speak English, but instead communicate in a series of gasps and made-up words" (*The Express*, 5 August 1997, reader Kim Sherwood, Nottingham)

Adults have a responsibility to form children the right way which is seen to be passing on educational school centred skills, a responsibility which is not honoured in "a society increasingly led by television". In a letter to the editor in this debate, one parent goes against the focus on educational skills: "Why don't we let the kids be kids and stop ramming education down their throats at such an early age?" (*The Express*, 5 August 1997, Derek Hudson Skelmersdale, Lancashire). This comment clearly reveals that "ramming education down their throats" is a central question in the debate.

The programme has clearly triggered an anxiety of what the programme does to children: “The debate goes: is *Teletubbies* damaging drivel that will inhibit children from learning? Or is it harmless babble, surreally enjoyable for adults, particularly if they’re stoned? Both sides agree on one thing: that *Teletubbies* is pretty much nonsense” (*The Guardian*, 5 July 1997).

The inventor of the programme Anne Wood insists that it is not instructional. She believes that young children learn – and learn to think – through play. In an interview with *Radio Times*, she points to studies that have shown that children with behavioural problems become calmer, readier to learn and to be disciplined if their parents are taught how to play with them. So she recognises that there needs to be more play encouraged: “The programme is trying to encourage interaction, to give the children the confidence to speak back to the screen. [...] By putting the child at the centre you build up their self-esteem and confidence and encourage their curiosity [...] All these things are to do with the skills you need before you go to school. It’s all about empowering children, which I feel very strongly about” (*Radio Times*, 29 March 1997).

As demonstrated above the programme has, however, not been perceived as stimulating for children. As described by Buckingham also “politicians routinely display the rigour of their educational policies by complaining about the anti-educational influence of ‘trashy’ soap operas or the ‘dumbing down’ of children at the hands of *Teletubbies*” (Buckingham, 2000, p.94).<sup>2</sup> The programme is thereby categorised as directly harmful.

### **2.3 “Why can’t TV entertain our children?”**

In the debate on the television programme, the role and place of television and television programmes are questioned. It raises questions as ‘Should children watch television at all?’, ‘What effect does television have on children?’, ‘What is the proper content of a television programme?’ and “Why does television attract children?”.

For mothers looking after their children at home, morning television for children is by some participants in the debate perceived as the ‘easy’ solution. Mrs. Sarah Crossing writes to *the Times* (Letters to the Editor, 28 May 1997) “Sir, Having just watched *Teletubbies* for the first time, I think it is quite the most enchanting children’s programme I have seen in a very long time. To the parents who are complaining that it is not educational, I have this to say; instead of expecting the television to babysit your child at 10am every weekday, why not switch it off and actually *sit* with your child and *do* something educational yourself. Now there’s a thought.” Mrs. Crossing indicates that mothers are lazy enjoying time off from the children while they are watching children’s television. She tells mothers to take responsibility themselves for the education and intellectual stimulation of their children not passing on the responsibility to television.

The debate is about what by several perceive as a “bad” children's programme, and through this constructions of good children's television come into focus – and the demands tend to get out of proportion. In the debate on the lack of proper content of the programme, it is argued that the demands of a children’s television programme are exaggerated. Nigella Lawson writes: “The fuss about the new BBC2 series *Teletubbies* has reached such a pitch that it seems as if parents think it is the duty of children’s television to be teaching the under fives the rudiments on quantum physics” (*The Times*, 14 May 1997). Lawson’s use of ‘the duty’ indicates a reflection of

---

<sup>2</sup> Buckingham refers e.g. to Stephen Byers, the incoming government’s schools minister in his article “Telly Trouble” (1998b, p. 16)

the public perception that television has a moral responsibility which must be respected. Nigella Lawson continues: “No, *Teletubbies* won’t teach them to read and no, it won’t teach them to count or to play the piano, speak French or pass grade IV ballet – but it is after all only a television programme. You can do the rest yourself” (*The Times*, 14 May 1997).

What is it that draw children to the screens? Nigella Lawson writes: “It seems curious to argue that because children like watching a programme it means it’s no good. But of course they must be “mesmerised”, with all the nasty druggy implications that carries” (*The Times*, 14 May 1997).

### **3. Theoretical and historical reflections**

In the debate the critical arguments against the television programme inscribe themselves in culturally constructed images of childhood. To deconstruct these arguments I will put them into a historical and theoretical framework in the following.

#### **3.1 Innocent and vulnerable children**

Erasmus from Rotterdam wrote a number of books on upbringing and childhood in the 1520s inspired by Italian humanists and thoughts from the Antiquity along with his own experiences. An important idea was that the child should be disciplined right from the start. According to Erasmus the child would most probably grow up to become “an unproductive brute unless at once and without delay he is subjected to a process of intensive instruction” (Cunningham, 1995, p. 43). Erasmus claimed that omitting to bring up one child was a bigger crime than infanticide, and he compared the child with a piece of wax which can be formed as long as it is soft.

John Locke wrote an influential book on upbringing *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* in 1693. Locke considered the child as a *tabula rasa* who should be filled up from the external world (parents, teachers) with knowledge and skills. Locke considered children to be empty shells, neutral at the beginning, which of course made it quite a responsibility to fill up the heads the “right” way.

A third important figure within this field was Rousseau, who opposite Erasmus and Locke did not see children as empty shells who could be totally manipulated by the external world. Rousseau described the child as a plant which should be allowed to grow. For Rousseau the upbringer was like the gardener only cutting away weeds. It was his idea that the child had a value in itself- not just as a means to reach a goal. Rousseau saw childhood as being the phase in life where man is the closest to nature – nature in a positive romantic sense. Being one of the main sources of inspiration of Romanticism, he claimed that the virtues of childhood were: spontaneity, purity, strength and happiness. The child had qualities that should be protected against civilisation and the corrupted adult world. These ideas came to be extremely influential in the further development of the concept of childhood (Rousseau, 1761, Postman, 1982, Cunningham, 1995). Erasmus’ and Locke’s ideas about the responsibility of adults to fill the heads of the children with the “right” material, and the ideas of Rousseau of the child as pure and natural but therefore also vulnerable who should be protected against the adults who were already spoiled, became the basis of European perceptions childhood.

In the general Western discourse of childhood of today, children are still presented as being innocent, vulnerable, passive and dependent of adults (e.g. Zelizer, 1985; Qvortrup, 1990; Young, 1990; Cunningham, 1995; James et al. 1998). As Qvortrup (1990) describes it children

tend to be perceived as human becomings rather than as human beings. In recent decades a different and more active view of the child has found its way into much research, offering a more adequate perception of how children's role in society is. The "old" view is, however, still dominant within public perceptions of children.

Buckingham writes: "For all the post-Romantic emphasis on children's innate wisdom and understanding, children are defined principally in terms of what they are *not* and in terms of what they *cannot* do [...] Children may be defined in terms of their lack of rationality, social understanding or self-control; yet, by the same token, they can also be extolled (in however patronizing a way) for their lack of artifice, self-consciousness and inhibition. There is, of course, a whole self-help industry which is premised on the claim that adults need to get in touch with their 'inner child' – claims that implicitly reinforce romantic notions of childhood as a site of truth and purity" (Buckingham, 2000, p. 13-14).

Young (1990) points the general perception of childhood out: "The child is seen as progressing from a state of vulnerability to sophistication, from an earlier lack of skills to a later possession of abilities" (Young, 1990, p. 41). This common Western way of perceiving children naturally implies consequences in terms of perceptions of how children, seen as vulnerable and innocent, passive and dependent, should be treated and socialised.

These perceptions are indeed still in circulation as it appears in the debate on the *Teletubbies*. In the articles it is claimed that the programme is no good because it is abnormal and the bad example (the wrong wax mould). Children should be protected from aspects that do not belong in the "garden of good childhood" i.e. sarcasm, irrationality, hidden agendas, drugs. The programme is clearly seen as – at least - a waste of time ("harmless at best"), possibly even corrupting children. Children's television should be used to fill "useful" things into the heads of children.

It is my argument that the heat of the debate is caused by the fact that journalists and parents perceive children as very vulnerable and unable to protect themselves against the content of the programme which is considered as being out of tune with what ought to be in such a programme. The contrasts between the "Good Childhood's Universe" and the "*Teletubbies*' Universe" are sketched in Table 1.

<b>The good childhood's universe</b>	<b>The perceived <i>Teletubbies</i>' universe</b>
Normal	Bizarre, Grotesque
Protected	Drug universe
Healthy	Sick
Sound	Corrupting
Educational	Waste of time
Rational	Irrational
Asexual	(Homo)sexuality

Table 1. Perceptions of the good childhood's universe and the *Teletubbies*' universe

### 3.2 British ideals for upbringing

As described by Michael Sanderson (1999, p. 155, see also Wiener, 1985, discussed in Halkier, 1991) there has been a long tradition of associating Britain's supposed economic failure with defects in education. This has meant a critical debate about the quality of education – education came to be considered as a very important way of strengthening the country.

Between 1880 and 1914 British children came to be considered as “the citizens of tomorrow” (cf. Hendrick, 1997, pp. 50-51) and particularly as children of the nation. Hendrick writes: “In an age of fierce imperial, political, military and economic national rivalries, in addition to domestic anxieties regarding poverty, class politics, social hygiene and racial efficiency, children were being reconstructed as material investments in national progress” (Hendrick, 1997, p. 51).

Compulsory schooling came into being, along with the industrialisation and the creation of nations, and with it spare time became a reality for adults and children. This new free time was, however, seen as a dangerous time and there was a wish that the time out of work and out of school was spent in a sensible way. Stephen Hall Clark writes about the Victorian middle class' shaping of “the idea and practice of leisure as direct responses to its fears of political instability, labour unrest and appalling problems of public health at the time”. Leisure for the middle class had to be not only respectable but also productive and “good both for the soul and for the country as a whole. Leisure and recreation above all had to be rational”. The leisure activities should, according to the middle class: “re-establish through leisure a moral and codified framework which would stabilise and transform society” (Hall Clark, 1996).

Britain has had a tradition of “moral panic” as described by e.g. Buckingham (2000). This has meant an anxiety for how and in which ways the young generations were developing, in a concern for maintaining and strengthening British identity and influence (cf. below 3.3).

Organised spare time activities for children started to grow after the Second World War and the aim was to ensure that children had sensible activities to do when they were not in school. There was a wish both to strengthen the children in their socialisation process and to avoid that they were alone, among children, on the street, with all the dangers it represented (Schultz Jørgensen et al., 1986, p. 29). Organisation of the free time was seen as a moral necessity. Sports clubs and scouts were among the organised activities offered. Organised spare time activities were

conceived above all as a moralistic idea to ensure that free time would be spent in a socially constructive way.

The concern with the content of children's programmes reflected in the *Teletubbies* debate seems as a natural extension of the early concern with the content of spare time in general and with children's spare time in particular with a wish that it should be rational, worthwhile, stimulating children's development into citizens keeping Britain competitive.

In an opinion survey, conducted by Malpas & Lambert (1993) on *Europeans and the Family*, published in *Eurobarometer 39*, one of the questions the survey asked was "Which qualities should the family environment seek to encourage in children?" The results show that parents' national and socio-cultural background has a major effect on the way in which they bring up their children, and on the qualities that they find are important to encourage in their children. Although parents from the different EU countries agree on the importance of certain core values when it comes to child rearing (responsibility, tolerance, good manners, self-reliance), the survey also shows substantial differences in the rankings of these values for each country.

In a comparison with Denmark – the *Bamse og Kylling* country - it is interesting to note that "Creativity/imagination" scores highly among the Danish respondents (22.8%) but significantly lower in the United Kingdom (9.7%). The relatively high appreciation of creativity and imagination might be one reason why the programme 'went down' more easily in Denmark than in the UK, where the programme were perceived to be "devoid of constructive teaching", "plain silly", etc.

In the UK, as described by M. Daphne Kutzer in her book *Empire's Children. Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children's Books: "Fantasy, more than realistic fiction, is often considered to be escapist in the most negative sense of the word, and hence to be devoid of any serious purpose whatsoever"* (2000, p. 79). This negative judgement of fantasy may have played a role in the judgement of the programme in Britain.

"Good manners" is the second most important value mentioned by the British respondents in the survey, whereas "good manners" are only the fifth most popular choice among the Danish respondents (Malpas & Lambert, 1993, p. 85). This could mean that the role of "the good example" (mentioned several times in the debate) is considered as being more crucial than in the Danish audience.

In a recent comparative study of values in British print advertisements for toys, the most frequently portrayed value was 'learning', i.e. the educational dimension of toys. This, however, was not an exclusive feature of British toy advertisements; the educational value of toys and play seemed generally to be an important theme in all the toy advertisements in the survey. In the advertisements, learning in a playful and enjoyable way was portrayed as being important (Gram and Niss, 1998). It seems from the debate that the playful dimension of the programme was perceived to be too dominating.

In the same period as *Teletubbies* hit the screens in Britain, New Labour was elected on the slogan 'education, education, education' and as described by Andrew Blake in his article "Reading Harry Pottermania" (2001) its reforming initiatives included schemes designed to address a perceived decline in literacy. This might explain why this programme which was not

perceived to be educational in the traditional sense of the word (stimulating correct speech and reading skills e.g.) wasn't welcomed.

The UK has had a tradition (different than e.g. the Danish) with children starting at an early age in school and with a strong emphasis on learning in the children's programmes (paradoxically Anne Wood, creator of *Teletubbies*, defends her programme saying that it is a programme emphasising learning – but this has not been perceived as learning in the conventional way). Also the UK has had more ambitious ideals for upbringing regarding intellectual development and has a more elitist school system than in Denmark, where strong concerns for wellbeing, care for the weaker pupils and play have held an important place.

Summing up the dominant ideals for upbringing of children in the UK seems to be in juxtaposition with the values *Teletubbies* were perceived to offer as illustrated in Table 2.

<b>Dominant British ideals</b>	<b>Perceived ideals in <i>Teletubbies</i></b>
Rationality	Irrationality
Worthwhile	Waste of time
Making good citizens	Dumbing down children

Table 2. Dominant British ideals and perceived ideals in *Teletubbies*

### 3.3 TV is bad – bad TV is even worse

With the view of children as passive and vulnerable, children have in particular been and still are considered as passive viewers and communicators based on a very simple and linear way of perceiving communication and children. As Goldstein writes: “Anything to do with children’s entertainment is a source of controversy: Children’s television programs, musical preferences, and leisure activities are frequent sources of debate.” (Goldstein, 1994, introductory note). Mass media has always been considered with suspicion. To use the word of Nigella Lawson, quoted above, television in particular has traditionally been seen as “mesmerizing” its audiences. Buckingham writes that in the public debates there is “a fundamental belief in the enormous power of television, and in the inherent vulnerability of children. Television has, it would seem, an irresistible ability to ‘brainwash’ and ‘narcotize’ children, drawing them away from other, more worthwhile activities and influences.” (Buckingham, 1998a, p.133). “Narcotize”, “brainwashed” and “mesmerize” and “druggy implications” imply meanings of dulling children’s senses, that the children are spell-bound, that they are out of control and cut off from the use of their free will. In public debates children’s relationship with television is negative and even damaging as clearly demonstrated in the *Teletubbies* debate.

If a children’s programme is perceived as bad or downright harmful, it is perceived as being extra horrible because it is to children who are constructed as innocent and unspoiled, and the view of communication and children means that children are perceived as completely passive beings who get the bad (LSD-universe, sarcasm, sickly looking and abnormal creatures) injected in the communication process and get harmed and thereby deteriorate. Children are perceived as passive recipients in the communication process, and the fact that *Teletubbies* has been the first programme to deliberately target so young viewers (1½-5 year olds) may have reinforced the negative reaction.

Popular literature, music, movies and comics have always provoked “moral panics”, which typically has led to censorship to protect children “from their allegedly harmful effects” (Buckingham, 1998a, p. 132). In the 1980s there was a strong debate on the negative effects of videos and particularly in 1993 there was a debate regarding the violence on the screen in connection with the murder of Jamie Bulger (the two-year old boy killed by two ten-year old boys).

Buckingham writes about the double challenge in the production of texts for children that creating these texts has traditionally been characterized by a complex balance between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ motivations:

“On the one hand, producers have been strongly informed by the need to protect children from ‘undesirable’ aspects of the adult world. Indeed, in some respects, texts for children could be characterized primarily in terms of what they are *not* – that is, in terms of the *absence* of representations that are seen to constitute a negative moral influence, most obviously in the form of sex and violence. On the other hand, there are also strong pedagogical motivations: such texts are frequently characterized by the attempt to educate, to provide moral lessons or ‘positive images’, and thereby to model forms of behaviour that are seen to be socially desirable.” (Buckingham, 2000, p. 12)

In Buckingham’s words cultural producers, policy-makers and regulators in the field of have to be concerned with – on the one hand - protecting children from harm, but on the other also to ‘do them good’.

“Adult definitions of childhood are simultaneously repressive *and* productive. They are designed both to protect and control children [...] Yet they are seeking not just to prevent certain kinds of behaviour, but also to teach and encourage others” (Buckingham, 2000, p.12).

In the public debate *Teletubbies* is said to go too far in the first domain (e.g. not protecting children from irrationality), and not far enough in the second domain (i.e. not being constructive and productive enough for the positive development of children). Below the content of the critical voices regarding good television in the debate is sketched in Table 3.

<b>Good children’s television</b>	<b><i>Teletubbies</i></b>
Clear	Confusing
Educational	Dumbing,
Clever	Silly
The good example	The bad example
Honourable intentions	Hidden agenda

Table 3. Characteristics of good children’s television and the *Teletubbies*

#### **4. Discussion**

In the Spring of 2002 the programme is still being aired (even though it is reruns now). *Teletubbies* survived even if feelings ran high the first months. The cause of the fuss had an



element of nostalgia in it, liking of the traditional children's programmes. The BBC defends itself that there was a similar fuss 9 years ago when *Playdays* replaced *Playschool* (*The Mirror*, 23 May 1997). But there was more to the debate than nostalgia.

The attitudes in the articles and letters start out in a very negative tone in the beginning of the debate and gradually more and more positive views turn up. In August negative critique has almost ceased. From being perceived as something sick and harmful, not convenient for children, voices in the debate appear questioning the necessity of being so very educational towards the youngest viewers. It suddenly turns up that not only children but also groups of adults and young people watch *Teletubbies*. *Teletubbies* becomes an issue on the Edinburgh Film and TV Festival. Andy Medhurst, lecturer in media studies at Sussex University, is quoted in *The Express*: "The programme has broken away from the moorings the makers intended for it. It is helping adults to receive comfort and nostalgia. It's like mashed-up baby food, soothing and comforting, taking grown-ups back to their childhood of innocence" (*The Express*, 25 August 1997). Suddenly *Teletubbies* are now presented as being compatible with the children's universe of innocence, and not as in the beginning, where they described as confusing, corrupting and harmful and considered incompatible with this universe.

The journalist Tobynd Andreae writes "But what is more surprising is the way in which educational panels, academics and style gurus have championed the phenomenon as an inspirational addition to our cultural repertoire". So from being harmless at best, the programme is suddenly – by some - seen as innovative by the educational community.

BBC head of Children's Programmes, Anna Home, has been interviewed about the supposed secret meanings in *Teletubbies*. Anna Home answered "There is no hidden agenda. I have never even talked to Anne Wood of Ragdoll Productions, who created *Teletubbies*, about these things. The programme is an innocent children's show and adults can read and will continue to read anything they want into such pleasurable and playful things" (*The Express*, 25 August 1997).

The BBC responsible has to deny that there is a hidden agenda (homosexuality, interest of dumbing down children, drug connotations), and claims that the programme is innocent (i.e. = fitting for children). Aspects like homosexuality are part of the repertoire of elements which do not seem to fit into the appropriate children's universe according to the general discourse on childhood. According to Tobynd Andreae, *The Express*, *Teletubbies* is not so much odder than other children's programmes "No, what seems strange is that learned, wise and informed individuals are analysing a programme whose primary purpose is providing an innocent diversion for infants as though it were on display at the National Gallery." (*The Express*, 25 August 1997).

The storm of critics this children's television programme ran into seems to have several reasons. British parents were woven into a *Playschool/Playdays* tradition with an explicit educational content, and *Teletubbies* were perceived as out of line with ideals of appropriate content of such programmes. Also this was the first programme where so young viewers (1-3 year olds) have been targeted which maybe reinforced the sensitivity.

What is striking and interesting about the *Teletubbies* debate is that it is a case where certain parts of adults' discourses of childhood are demonstrated clearly. In the discussion of what is

perceived as bad and problematic, images of perceived childhood are sketched – the innocent and vulnerable childhood with potential for the future.

Whether or not it is appropriate to perceive of children as innocent, can, however, be discussed. As Jacqueline Rose writes in *The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984): “Innocence is not “a property of childhood but... a portion of adult desire”. Children are possibly not as defenceless and passive viewers as they tend to be perceived in public debates, which is an issue which has been studied particularly in the context of advertising to children. Advertising has been of great interest to a number of researchers because of the obvious clash between the perceived innocent and vulnerable child and the persuasive and manipulative intent of the advertiser. In two reports from ITC (UK) and GFK (Denmark) on children and advertising, it was evident in both reports that mothers tended to under-estimate their children's ability to comprehend and interpret children's television advertisements. In the conclusions from the two reports it says that most children are able to distinguish between television programmes and television advertising for example. Children quickly assimilate and interpret children's television advertisements and generally little confusion or misinterpretation in relation to the children's reading of the television advertisements occurred. Children understand the intent of television advertising and develop a more and more critical view in relation to television advertisements.

What characterises much of more recent research on children as readers of mass media content is that individual differences of children are considered and seen to make the viewers respond in different ways to the same message. To a much higher extent children are the last decades considered as active viewers. In early childhood research it was believed that children's attention was kept by loud sounds and fast movements, but according to several researchers of recent date, children are selective (Buckingham, 1998a, p. 138). Buckingham sums this up: “Yet what unites this work is a view of children, not as passive recipients of television messages, but as active interpreters and processors of meaning. The meaning of television, from this perspective, is not delivered to the audience, but constructed by it” (Buckingham, 1998a, p.137).

The debate – and also this paper – has been mostly about what the programme is *not*. My criticism is that from my – Danish – perspective the programme does not have the asserted negative functions (that it is harmful, not educative, irrational, etc). But what *is* the programme then? Why is this programme so fascinating for children? What signs and significations does it carry?

In my view children like it, as one participant in the debate says, because of the playful look at their own behaviour. *Teletubbies* mirror toddlers and their pleasure of recognition, pleasure of repetition, pleasure of colours and music – and particularly the baby's face in the sun, all carefully developed by Anne Wood and her team. But even if - to me and to several of the journalists and parents taking part in it - this debate seems grotesque and exaggerated that is of course not to say that a society should not be concerned with content and forms of children's products. It seems that media literacy grows with the experience of the child and of course the very young viewers in the target group are without much experience towards e.g. advertising and not least the heavy merchandising of *Teletubbies* products. But in the discussion of the content and form of television programmes for children, a deconstruction of common ideas about children and knowledge about research on children's abilities in their handling of media are useful tools for a more qualified debate.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper the question was raised why a young children's television programme created a fierce debate in local and national British media. The arguments in the debate circled around three issues particularly. The first issue was that the content of the programme is worrying (bizarre, confusing, abnormal and making children stupid). The way the *Teletubbies* is described in this respect can be considered as being out of line with predominant ways of perceiving the good childhood universe, as an innocent, protected and straightforward garden. The second issue regards the fact that the programme is not perceived as being educational but rather as silly, irrational and a waste of time. That the programme is not perceived as educational can be seen as in conflict with British ideals for upbringing and a traditional strong concern with the education of young citizens. Finally the third issue regards a general scepticism towards television to young children, which is probably provoked particularly in this case because of the programme's target audience being the youngest children ever targeted directly.

## References

- Blake, Andrew (2001): "Reading Harry Pottermania", <http://www.opendemocracy.net/forum/document> (May, 2002)
- Buckingham, David (1993): *Children talking television: The making of television literacy*, 1993, Falmer Press
- Buckingham, David (1998a): "Children and television: a critical overview of the research" in Roger Dickinson et al: *Approaches to audiences. A reader*, Foundations Media Arnold
- Buckingham, David (1998b): "Telly Trouble", *The English & Media Magazine*, No. 39 Autumn
- Buckingham, David (2000): *After the death of childhood. Growing up in the age of electronic media*, Polity
- Cunningham, Hugh (1996): *Barn og barndom fra middelalder til moderne tid*, Ad Notam, Gyldendal (translation of Cunningham, 1995)
- Goldstein, Jeffrey H. (1994): *Toys, Play and Child Development*, Cambridge University Press
- Gram, Malene and Hanne Niss (1998): "Different Parents, Different Dreams: A Comparison of Cultural Values Manifest in Danish, German and British Advertisements for Children's Products", *Proceedings of the 27<sup>th</sup> Emac conference, Marketing Research and Practice*, Stockholm
- Halkier, Henrik (1991): "The Political Economy of Britain's Decline", in *History and Culture. Britain: Nation, State and Decline* edited by Uffe Østergaard, Academic Press, Copenhagen
- Hall Clark, Stephen (1996): "The Development of Leisure in Britain after 1850", <http://victorianweb.org/victorian/history/leisure2.html> (May, 2002)
- Hendrick, Harry (1997): "Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood: An Interpretative Survey, 1800 to the Present" in Allison James and Alan Prout (eds.): *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, Falmer Press
- James, Allison et al (1998): *Theorizing Childhood*, Polity Press
- Jørgensen, Per Schultz et al. (1986): *Efter skoletid – En undersøgelse af de store skolebørns fritid*, Socialforskningsinstituttet, publikation 154,
- Kutzer, M. Daphne (2000): *Empire's Children. Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children's Books*, Garland Publishing, Inc., member of the Taylor and Francis Group
- Locke, John (1714): *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (abridged and edited with an introduction and commentary by F. W. Garforth, 1964), Heinemann, London
- Malpas; N and Lambert, P. Y. (1993): *The Europeans and the Family*. Eurobarometer 39, Brussels, Commission of the European Communities

Postman, Neil (1982): *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Norwegian translation (1987): *Når barndommen forsvinder*, Hekla

Qvortrup, Jens (1990): *Childhood as a Social Phenomenon. An Introduction to a Series of National Reports*, Barndomsprojektet, University Centre of South Jutland, Esbjerg

Rose, Jacqueline (1984): *The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. London, Macmillan

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1761): *Emile ou de l'éducation*, GF Flammarion, 1966

Wiener, Martin J. (1985): "Conservatism, Economic Growth and English Culture", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 34

Sanderson, Michael (1999): "Education and economic decline 1870-1914: an innocent suspect?" in Jean-Pierre Dormois and Micahel Dintenfass (eds.): *The British industrial decline*, Routledge

Young, Brian M. (1990): *Television advertising and children*, Clarendon Press, Oxford

Zelizer, Vivian (1985): *Prizing the Priceless Child*, New York, Basic Books

### **Articles from the *Teletubbies* debate in Chronological Order:**

20 March 1997, Marion McMullen: "Deep in the depths of Warwickshire..." *Coventry Evening Telegraph*

29 March 1997, Maggie Brown: "Tailored for the baby-gros", *The Daily Telegraph*

14 May 1997, Nigella Lawson: "Why can't TV entertain our children? *Teletubbies* is for the amusement of toddlers, not their parents", *The Times*

21 May 1997, Marion McMullen: "Are They local heroes or a bad example to our youngsters? Row rages over 'baby talk' stars, *Coventry Evening Telegraph*

23 May 1997, Gill Swain: "The question on every parent's lips. *Teletubbies*. Are they harmless fun or bad for our children?" *The Mirror*

28 May 1997, Letters to the Editor: "Mothers at odds in Teletubbyland", *The Times*

29 June 1997, Sheryl Garratt: "Tele addicts", *The Sunday Times Magazine*

5 July 1997, Judith Williamson: "Babyvision", *The Guardian*

5 August 1997, Kim Sherwood, Nottingham and Derek Hudson, Lancashire: "Should we stop our children watching *Teletubbies*?", *The Express*

25 August 1997, Tobyn Andrae: "Why none of us can resist the lure of the *Teletubbies*", *The Express*

27 August 1997, Serena Allott: "Why I invented the *Teletubbies*", *The Daily Telegraph*