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Deirdre Brennan

Hello everyone, and thank you very much for joining me. I'm a little overwhelmed, so bear with me if the nerves take a while to calm down. But I'm delighted to be here, and who better than my wonderful colleagues at Corus Entertainment to come up with a title for my MIP Junior Keynote? But some of the ideas, and I'm very bad at operating PowerPoint, so forgive me if I get this wrong, the ideas were so entertaining and said a great deal about the people and culture that I've come to know in Canada over the last six months, so I wanted to share a few. Okay, here we go. "Hotter than you think." "Sorry, but we're cool, eh?" This is one of my favourites. "We don't say a-boot." "Today I bought a bag of milk and other stuff only heard in Canada." And my personal favourite, "Our Prime Minister Is cuter than yours. And he is."

Deirdre Brennan

What a guy. So I'm actually going to remove Justin Trudeau's picture, because some of you won't listen to me otherwise. Okay, so now down to business. I was a late starter in the world of kids' TV and MIP Junior. Fifteen years ago, at my first market with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, I could not have been more excited to collect my six VHS tapes at a time to watch children's programming from around the globe. Some of you don't even know what a VHS tape is. But on a serious note, all was not good with our world. It was early October 2001 and many companies and broadcasters didn't attend due to the understandable fear that swept the world after 9/11. Everyone was nervous about the future, and we all faced much bigger challenges than shrinking licence fees and a new platform called Video on Demand. That anxiety was further heightened when the Afghanistan War began, as guests sat on the bus returning from the launch of new preschool series, Brum. But my strongest memories from that MIPCOM are not only the programmes that emerged... How many of you remember these? Little Robots, Busy Buses, Totally Spies, Butt Ugly Martians. What happened to Butt Ugly Martians? The Nelly Nut Show, which was incredibly progressive at the time, and The Adventures of Jimmy Neutron. But my strongest memory was the children's community that I came to feel such a part of.

An incredible group of people that felt an overwhelming responsibility to keep going, making and sharing great stories for children. Since that time, I've had extraordinary experiences, both as a public broadcaster and in the commercial arena. And they really have much more in common than you would imagine. The greatest lesson I can share with you relates to the Nickelodeon principle of what's good for kids is good for business. How many times have we seen a spectacular

commercial programme go belly up, because they forgot about the quintessential magic of storytelling and character? Something none of us can ever manufacture without the fairy dust that comes from people who truly believe in what they're creating. In honour of my broadcast home, my Australian broadcast home, here are my ABCs of the children's world as I see it, being an old person. A, adapt to the audience and the market and, most importantly, understand amortisation. Thank you, Jules Borkent, wherever you are, you gave me that gift. B, build trust through great partnerships and always be passionate. And C, collaboration doesn't mean a loss of control. Always put creativity first, and work with Canada. That's a good segway.

Deirdre Brennan

Right. Canada has played such an influential role in the development and success of the global children's industry, and back in 2001, I sought out established companies, such as [Sena] and Nelvana, new player Decode Entertainment. They haven't succeeded, have they? Not. Hello. And influential broadcaster YTV. Earlier this year, I was thrilled to join Corus Entertainment, with ten dedicated services, including YTV, Teletoon and Treehouse. And partnerships with the most influential children's networks in the world. I've learnt a great deal about the North American market since then. I'm humbled by the scale of it and surprised by how large the US looms in the minds of both broadcasters and local producers in Canada. One of my key observations around the kids output was that Canada no longer had the same creative leadership position internationally. I can't help but wonder if the extensive funding support has actually hindered creative ambition. Volume is not a content strategy. However, I strongly believe that with the extensive talent pool available, writers, directors and producers, the world should work with us, because we're outstanding partners, not just a great source of financing. We just need some more distinct creative runs on the board to get your attention. Netflix and Amazon remind us that it is possible to break out of standard content formats, yet we continue to stick with 11 minute animated comedies that give you a sense of deja vu, because you've probably seen it before. Live action series, mostly sitcoms, must be 13 by 30, or maybe 26 episodes if a network really believes in the concept.

These formats are shaped by a traditional distribution model, which has moved on. It's not shaped by the demands of our audience. Why have we handed complex storytelling over to SVOD services, movies and books? Are we underestimating kids, or even sending them elsewhere? Which leads me to an opportunity, an opportunity that is driven by a big change in society. We know that the generation gap has disappeared. Parents and their children have an inclusive

relationship. Parental trust and approval is central to kids' self-esteem and they actually want to share experiences. So how does this translate to their content choices?

Deirdre Brennan

Reality TV franchises have actually led the way without even realising it, because children want to see people being real, raw and authentic. As they grow up in an increasingly protective environment, it's a chance for them to learn life lessons on screen. Live TV and shared viewing, particularly around sport and events, is a community experience. Watching alongside other people is special. Fantasy series still appeal. Who doesn't love a good special effect or a superpower? But they're also looking for strong characters and relatable drama. They want programming that allows them to relax, but they also want to think, and they also want to feel. So, what can we learn from YouTube? It's not just about the platform, but it's actually the content young people are seeking out. It's so much more than shareable cat comedy, even though that has its place. YouTube shows us that our audience wants information. It's brought a new meaning to the term, "How-to". That sounded so Australian, how to. As well as experiences and opinions. Vlogs are actually a new form of expression. Kids can't really fulfil these needs and wants on traditional media and it's actually not really our role to do that. But it will influence the type of content we offer and the stories we tell in future. You may have seen a recent study from the University of California that revealed parents across most Western countries spend more time with their children than mothers and fathers did 50 years ago. Fathers' time with kids nearly quadrupled, which reflects their desire to be more involved in their children's lives than their fathers. Study co-author, Professor Judith Treas, believes the results are in line with, and I quote, "An intensive parenting ideology that has become a cultural child-rearing trend." I got through that fine, good. It's fascinating stuff, and I do advise you to read the study. But what does it mean for us? Well, I believe we have an opportunity to reflect and benefit from this clear water in a crowded market.

The family dinner table has become our new water cooler. If a child, sibling or parent is prepared to talk about something they care about with their family, you've achieved something very special. There are three areas we are seeing as the most common drivers of that conversation around television content.

Deirdre Brennan

Three areas, firstly the activity. The best example of this is MasterChef, a series that champions

success rather than fails. So how many of you here today have had a family member comment on your excellent plating, mum? Secondly, casting. When the activity is not so important, we identify with specific people. How they respond to different situations drives our attachment and can build large consolidated audiences across all demographics. Think of the hippies on the US version of the Amazing Race, or The Voice contestant who has overcome personal heartbreak and triumphed on stage? Although there's probably too many of those to mention. Finally, story and character. From Little House on the Prairie, to Game of Thrones, it's a bit of a difference, Full House to Modern Family, there have always been series that have inspired us to talk with our friends and family. Many of you have often heard me call out BBC One's Merlin as one of the strongest family scripted series ever produced. Daniel's heard me talk about it so many times. I do wonder now if the multi-generational talkability of Stranger Things may knock this out of the park and encourage linear broadcasters to be bolder in their choices. I hope so. So what does this opportunity look like? It could encompass children's live action and factual entertainment with broad appeal, ambitious family scripted tent poles, or even general entertainment or competition formats, produced with the right heart and tone. The answer is probably a mix of all these things and it will take some experimentation.

But with our expertise in children, isn't it time we embraced the rest of the family? I had the honour a few weeks ago to spend some time with actor Martin Sheen, or as I kept looking at him going, President Bartlet. I thought, "I'd vote for you." He's a wonderful guest star in the YTV commission Anne of Green Gables. He's an incredibly warm and intelligent man. I get goosebumps when I think about it. So within a few minutes I couldn't help myself, I was asking his thoughts on what I should talk to you about today. I love that, I get script notes from Martin Sheen. And I'm glad I really asked him, because he told me that he truly believed that there was a thirst in young people today for humanity. And I quote, I was scribbling this down, you can imagine, "They're asking so many questions and we need to give them some answers to help them live their lives. After all, we are all responsible for each other." When acclaimed British poet Lemn Sissay addressed the Children's Media Conference earlier this year, he challenged us to create opportunities for children and young adults to relate to real stories and characters, to help them build empathy and better understand society. He called out the fact that we have the power to innovate, so "Stop talking about it and get on with it." That's how he finished. I guarantee that everyone who was in that room has been thinking about that moment ever since.

So why did I pick the title, "Why the world needs more Canada" or "How I learnt to love ketchup

chips or crisps." It's harder to say ketchup crisps. Well, I believe that the world really needs a voice that's optimistic and aspirational. And who better to identify this than the outgoing American president speaking to the Canadian parliament in June this year? If the children's content industry takes a moment to understand the importance of what we do and the role we play in the lives of future generations, it could be our chance to contribute to a better world. But why ketchup chips? In a small way, Canada has taken something that we all know very well and given it a twist that strangely works. It's that originality and risktaking that I would like to drive in our business, and I believe I'm in the right place to do it. The world is again very nervous, 15 years later: Brexit, the US election and the ongoing threat of terrorism. So much is out of our control, but it's good to remember that we are responsible for each other. The last 15 years have proven to me that the children's industry can adapt to the rapidly changing entertainment environment better than anyone. Broadcaster investment is down, we'll find another way to build a finance plan. Audience fragmentation, we'll find them. New technologies, bring it on. So let's focus on what's really important. Children want a deep variety of entertainment and information, content that will provide an imaginative escape, as well as guidance on where they fit in, in an increasingly complex and sometimes scary world. If they want great drama, a laugh with friends, an imaginative new toy, or a shared experience with their family that will help them live their lives, they turn to us. We are a unique voice into the adults of tomorrow, so let's embrace that. Kids are creative, resilient and fearless. So why should they expect anything less from us? Thank you.

Nico Franks

Hello. Very, very interesting, Deirdre. I think a good place to start, in terms of a question, will be towards the end of your keynote there, you were talking about the sense of social responsibility for the children's industry. And I'm interested to know how you think producers and broadcasters should apply that, without producing content that is kind of overly worthy and didactic.

Deirdre Brennan

And it's a really good question. In fact, it came up in a few meetings today. It's not about applying a curriculum, it's not about saying, "This is going to be good for you," it's about bringing heart to what we do. I'm amazed sometimes that millions of dollars can go into the production of, you know, a well executed series or a concept, but there's nothing in it that brings you joy or has an emotional response or even makes you smile. So some of the greatest programmes that have been on-air successes, commercial successes, don't try to do anything. But they are charming, they bring happiness to an audience and to parents. So I don't think it's a checklist, it's a mindset,

and I just think the broadcasters, people who have the resources to make content and help creatives produce, it's our responsibility to lead the way in that.

Nico Franks

And is it a case of the broadcasters being more risky, or is it a case of the producers bringing those kind of projects to them?

Deirdre Brennan

That's a really good question and I think it's a bit of both. I think if we decide that we're responsible for future generations, just automatically changes the way you think. If you imagine your child at the age of eight is watching something, it's a different perspective. It is very difficult, the business is tough and we have revenue responsibilities, so the ability to experiment is challenging, because resources are tight, but it's almost not having a radical change, it's just understanding the power of our industry. I look around, you know, it's wonderful to come to Junior, because there's a reason why you're all here. You're not making things that aren't important to you. I very rarely have ever met a children's creator that doesn't care about what they're doing. So it's just recognising that and saying, "Yes, we can celebrate that." And working together on both sides of the community, I think we can actually impact the world. I know it's almost like I'm having my "I'm going to Kenya to work with orphans moment," but that was about ten years ago and now I'm thinking, "Hold on, in my daily life and the work that we do, we can actually play a part in that."

Nico Franks

And I'm going to throw it open to audience questions, so if there's anyone with a question, if they could put their hand up after my question now. Earlier on today, during the panel with the broadcasters, like Amazon, Canal+ and the BBC and Disney, they were talking about diversity and that being a big thing that does need to change, both on screen and off. Do you think that's the key thing? The key thing that's missing to this idea of promoting a sense of social responsibility? And you mentioned Brexit and the US election and obviously a large part of those arguments are being driven by immigration and inclusivity, so is that the thing that needs to change, do you think?

Deirdre Brennan

It's not the only thing, but it's a very important part of it. And I think it is available, I should see if

we can get the transcript of Lemn Sissay, who's a poet laureate and inspiring individual in the UK, he told it through his personal story. He lived a life in care, he had never seen anybody on television that looked and sounded like him. And when you hear someone tell their story, it makes so much sense. I mean, we were very lucky at the ABC, because in children's it was just taken as a given, it wasn't until we were doing some of the benchmarking to work out how well we were doing in Australia that we realised wow, kids have been doing it for years. In Canada, I have to say, I am absolutely struck by the integrated nature of culture, particularly in Toronto, and it comes down to something like even seeing a billboard for a fashion label, you'll see three models of completely different heritage. And there's many places in the world where you don't see that, and I think we're very lucky. Again, in Canada, it's taken as a given. So whatever we have to do to get to that point, we need to do, and I think that helps to build empathy. And I don't want to be the preachy person that's sort of going, "Oh, we can change the world," but it's little things. And I'm absolutely guilty of it. I now am learning, after the speeches and the things I've seen this year, just to ask myself the question, so instead of just assuming. And there's a lot of incredible activity happening around female creatives, particularly in the director area. And before I left the ABC, and I know so much in Canada is being done, both at a regulatory but at a broadcast level, just to stop and ask that question. Do we have a balanced gender voice in the creative teams that we're working in? And again, I think the children's area is leading the way. But diversity, after seeing Lemn Sissay's speech, yes, I agree. It's very important.

Nico Franks

Do we have any questions from the audience?

Francis Fitzpatrick

I'm Francis Fitzpatrick from Futurum Kids, Ireland. Speaking of diversity, we have north and south. Can I just bring you back to your point, Deirdre, which was really well made, about originality and risk. It's a tough balance to get on the basis that if you look at Harry Potter, that was refused by, I think, nine publishers. Looking back to before you were born, The Beatles.

Deirdre Brennan

I was born.

Francis Fitzpatrick

Oh were you? Okay. And Christophe Erbes mentioned Spongebob, many rejections, and

Teletubbies too, so just when you're pitching to a broadcaster, you've got to push the envelope and sometimes you push it too far.

Deirdre Brennan

And the way that those shows happen is because somebody ended up being a passionate advocate for that idea. And in a way, I like to think it's a little seed and then you find someone who goes, "I really like that." And then all of a sudden, you start to see some amazing trees that we take for granted now. But it is a balance, and when it comes to understanding who are the broadcasters and who are the partners, where is the right fit? So even if a concept pushes the boundaries a bit, where would it sit? And for some things I go, "Would that sit next to Spongebob?" It's quite a good measure for me. Or does it need to be somewhere else? So understanding where the potential home can be can really help. But I don't want us to go, "Yay, we're going to be adventurous." There's a lot of bread and butter content that we need to make that serves a purpose that is very good in its nature. But it's having a combination and I think the people with the resources are the ones that have to allow you to take those risks. Which is risky in itself. But it's worth doing.

Nico Franks

There's a trend in the US involving game shows featuring children, so they've got Little Big Shots and Ricky Gervais is about to do a show with ABC in the US featuring children, and then there's The Voice Kids as well, which is coming to the UK. What do you make of that trend? And do you at Corus Kids have the budget to do those kinds of shows on your channels now?

Deirdre Brennan

It's almost like you've been in the office for the last six months, because we talk a lot about this. The great thing about Corus is that we're not just a children's broadcaster, we have a free-to-air network and 45 speciality channels that cover a range of women's and lifestyle drama. and I'm very lucky to have my colleagues Daniel Eves and Barb Williams who are with us at Junior for the first year. I think if you want to be able to achieve the quality that you need of those type of formats, it takes significant investment. And Daniel has encouraged me to think of the concept, not the price tag, because so often in children's we go, "Oh well, that's a children's budget and that's a children's half hour." But you look at dramas, great kids' drama, and I'm speaking in Australian currency, but can be between a million and a million and a half an hour. So it's comparable with adult drama. Those formats of the editorial nature of it, some I think get it bang

on, some absolutely celebrate what it means to be young and to be talented or to have an experience, some there's a tone that's not right for me, it's like laughing at children. So the way we talk about it with the local production community in Canada, when we're trying to get to grips with what this tone is, and I have to say it's feedback from everybody that's helped us pull out those three dinner table conversation factors. But it's, would you be happy if a seven year old, a 12 year old and your grandparent was in the room? So it's almost like would you feel excluded? Would you feel inclusive? Would the seven year old be bored? It's like, is there something in it for everybody that you can take away? And generally the something they take away is a smile, or something that makes them feel included. If a show actually uses children for laughs, not so keen on that. But there are some fantastic formats. And if you look at MasterChef, the Australian reinvention of MasterChef was the number one show for five years for five to 12 year olds. And there was a reason for that, because it captured a moment in the Zeitgeist that was incredibly positive and delightful to watch. But yes, what that balance is of those shows, mixed with content that is inspired from the kids' side, I think we're still to work it out.

Nico Franks

And I thought your point about tax credits in Canada was really interesting. So were you saying that, to an extent, tax credits can be an inhibitor on creativity, just because it becomes more about, you know, raising finance? And so would you say tax credits aren't all that? Countries like the UK and Ireland have quite a competitive tax credits situation where they're constantly trying to one up each other, would you say that that's probably not a good route to go down?

Deirdre Brennan

I have to be very careful what I say here. No, that sort of funding support is vital, but when a finance plan becomes more important than the creative, and I've been part of this as well, we might do a show because we could get it financed, we could get it up. And actually, you need to stop and go, "Hold on, do I need to work harder to find partners internationally to get a budget together to make the show that I know is great?" So I think so often, if support like that is available, we settle for second best. And it's up to the broadcasters and commissioners to really change that, because it's as much our job to pull budgets together as it is producers. And if we're working and having those conversations, we should highlight that at every point of the way. We desperately need that support to continue production and because our role is so important, those incentives have to exist. But we need to put some creative criteria around them.

Nico Franks

And I'm going to be very generous and for our last question, I'm going to let one of you ask it. Does anyone have a question?

Stuart

Hello, Stuart from the MIP blog. You mentioned learning from YouTube and not necessarily having to copy the formats on there. What are you excited by on YouTube, beyond vlogging, which you mentioned? What do you think is quite interesting that TV here can learn from and adapt and give a twist to?

Deirdre Brennan

I think the information that they're looking for, because somehow in life they're not getting that type of information about everything from a little thing of what to do here or something big in life, they're getting it from YouTube. And at the ABC, we really looked into that and thought, "We're a public broadcaster," so it was really important that we were reflecting and serving the needs of Australian kids, so we completely changed our short form content. I should actually ask Rebecca, because I haven't been there for six months, but to reflect what they wanted to know about. And that was something quite easy to do. But I cannot wait to see what the YouTube team do in terms of creative development, because they understand kids so well and they also have a drive to create. So I think it's a real watch this space. Because the one thing about YouTube is you never know what is going to be the next thing that is going to capture their imagination. But if we just think of them as a platform and not a content creator, bonkers.

Nico Franks

And that unfortunately is all the time we have. So thank you, Deirdre, for your thoughts and thank you for joining us.