

Thunderbirds Are Go

Re-booting Female Characters in Action Adventure Animation

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This article explores the ways in which children's television producers are making conscious efforts to include non-traditional gender representations in their shows. The aim of the research was to analyze and explain the complex creative processes that can increase the cultural visibility of diverse female characters in action animation made for school-age children. *Thunderbirds Are Go*, the 2015 re-boot of the 1960s cult classic *Thunderbirds* is used here as a case study; the producers of the new series were determined to challenge *Thunderbirds*' gender stereotypes, while retaining the lead characters of the original. Using approaches grounded in production culture, media studies and political economy, this research draws on extended interviews with *Thunderbirds Are Go* executive producer Estelle Hughes. It reveals that despite successful efforts to achieve a more balanced representation of female characters in children's action animation, commercial forces still exert enormous influence over how these shows are produced, distributed and experienced by their audiences.

This article details the efforts of an established producer of children's television to redress gender imbalance in an animated series, the 2015 re-boot of the Gerry and Sylvia Anderson cult classic *Thunderbirds* (1965-66). Drawing on extended interviews with one of *Thunderbirds Are Go*'s executive producers Estelle Hughes, it examines how individuals can effect change in production norms in children's television, working within established economic and industrial parameters. Hughes' efforts to redress gender imbalance in *Thunderbirds Are Go* focused on increasing female visibility through the inclusion of diverse female characters, minimising stereotypical female behaviour and appearance, and reflecting on and adapting creative processes to improve female representation throughout the production process. Drawing on cultural studies, production culture and political economy frameworks, this article analyses the intersection between cultural, creative and economic influences in a contemporary children's television production.

Potter, Anna (2017). *Thunderbirds Are Go. Re-booting Female Characters in Action Adventure Animation* p. 65-74 in Dafna Lemish & Maya Götz (eds.) *Beyond the Stereotypes? Images of Boys and Girls, and their Consequences*. Göteborg: Nordicom.

Thunderbirds Are Go, an animated series aimed at 6-12 year olds is a co-production between UK-based ITV Studios and New Zealand's Pukeko Pictures (which is connected to Peter Jackson's Weta Studios in Wellington). It is set in a futuristic world and features the exploits of the altruistic Tracy Brothers, whose International Rescue operation is based on a secret island in the Pacific Ocean. Given television's socialising role in children's lives (where it remains their most popular form of media), the re-working of *Thunderbirds* offered considerable scope for subverting stereotypical gender representations; the producers' influence amplified by contemporary digital production norms that rely on the exploitation of intellectual property across multiple platforms and products (Caldwell, 2004; Doyle, 2015).

Thunderbirds Are Go was always intended for distribution on broadcast, subscription and Over the Top (OTT) television services in global television markets. Its additional interlinked multi-platform content includes program apps, games, an interactive website and a YouTube channel. It is therefore a multi-faceted children's property with high cultural visibility. Consumer products associated with the series' brand encompass 75 global licensees with revenues providing important streams of production funding. A toy range is supplemented by DVDs, games, story and sticker books, a magazine, clothing, confectionary, party goods and posters.

After a high profile launch at the international children's television market MipCom Junior in Cannes in late 2014, *Thunderbirds Are Go* had its television premier in 2015, in the UK on free-to-air commercial channel ITV, to a consolidated audience of almost 3m viewers and generally favourable critical reception. The re-boot went on to sell to over forty countries and is particularly popular in Japan. With two 26 half-hour episode series in production, a third series was announced in April 2016, along with a US distribution deal on subscription video on demand (SVOD) service Amazon Prime, where it premiered in 2016. Children's television is one of Amazon's biggest growth areas; the company uses its Prime Entertainment offerings to attract audiences to its main retail site (Landau, 2016).

Part of the retro appeal of the original *Thunderbirds* lies in the ways in which it reflects 1960s social norms, despite being set in 2065, with science fictional narrative structures. These norms include a utopian view of technology, a transnational, yet Western-centric sensibility and a fear of China's rising power, symbolised by the Oriental appearance of the series' villain The Hood (Bignall, 2011). In contrast, in contemporary animation, Asian Americans are frequently portrayed as academic high achievers with an aptitude for business and technology, rather than series' baddies (Schlote, 2012). *Thunderbirds* also features five white men as the lead characters, around whom most of the death-defying action revolves. Other characters including scientists, pilots, geologists and security personnel are uniformly portrayed as males.

The representation of the series' female characters is also dated, although their passive and domesticated behaviour is still frequently ascribed to girls in contemporary animation (Götz, Hoffman, Dobler, Scherr, Bulla, & Schreiner 2008; Götz & Lemish

2012). Thus secret agent Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward is an ultra-glamorous socialite and model who is chauffeured everywhere in a pink Rolls Royce, while Grandma Tracy spends most of her time performing domestic chores for the brothers. Tin Tin, daughter of Jeff Tracy's manservant Kyrano and described by creator Sylvia Anderson as a 'decorative sidekick' has various secretarial and assistant roles. She is also portrayed as Alan Tracy's love interest. As executive producer, Hughes was aware that female representation was a less palatable element of the original's retro charm; she and the team of writers she led were committed from the outset to creating a more balanced and diverse set of female characters.

The re-booted *Thunderbirds Are Go* has some key differences from the 1965 original. In acknowledgement of the faster pace of contemporary children's television, the new episodes are 22 rather than 44 minutes long. (The original *Thunderbirds* was produced for the US market, which at the time required shows for one-hour time slots with space for advertising). The Supermarionation puppetry has also been replaced by a combination of computer-generated imagery (CGI) animation and live action model sets. And although the five Tracy brothers have been retained, they no longer unwind with a scotch and cigarette after a successful mission. (The original series can no longer be played in children's viewing times in the UK, due to its portrayal of characters smoking). Production of the re-boot was divided between Pukeko Studios in New Zealand, where the live action sets and props were built, Los Angeles, where scripts were largely written, Taiwan where much of the CGI animation occurred and the UK, where casting and most of the post-production was done. These dispersed production practices are typical of contemporary screen industries, as companies seek out the least expensive, most skilled creative labour force and, where possible, favourable government location inducements (Curtin & Sanson, 2016). They also allow production to occur virtually 24 hours a day, which represents an important cost saving measure.

Re-creating female characters in *Thunderbirds Are Go*

In her role as executive producer Hughes was determined to challenge the gender stereotypes with which the original *Thunderbirds* is imbued, while also managing the demands of producing high quality children's television across several locations and time zones. Although individual producers' views of the most pressing issues associated with gender equality are inevitably socially and culturally constructed (Lemish, 2010), for Hughes the lack of visibility of female characters in animation is an important issue, as are the stereotypical behaviours attributed to female characters when present. As Hughes explains, "it's about seeing more female characters on screen and seeing them doing jobs that are still being given to male characters – such as pilots, mechanics, drivers and crime fighters" (E. Hughes personal communication, May 11, 2016).¹

Given that globally 68 per cent on average of main onscreen characters in children's television are male, with male characters generally portrayed outside or at work while female characters most often appear in either homes or schools (Götz et. al., 2008), Hughes' concerns are well founded. Her first priority was the reworking of key female characters from the original, particularly Tin Tin who, she says, had not really stood the test of time. Her second was to ensure that the new characters required for each episode (who tend to need rescuing, given the series' plotlines) were, as often as possible, females who subverted stereotypes by being written as characters including engineers, geologists, scientists and miners. Indeed Hughes describes her starting point when talking about the writing of a new episode as 'why can't that character be female?'

This commitment to 'numerical equality' (Lemish, 2010) also makes commercial sense. Girls tend to move away from action adventure animation at around 8 or 9 years; thus Hughes was aware that creating compelling female characters who would engage girls in the new series would broaden its audience appeal. Nonetheless, the creative team felt that replacing one of the Tracy brothers with a female character would not work:

When you look at those five characters in the puppet series and their relationship to their specific five vehicles it's a brilliantly created, worked-out series where those five characters and vehicles really complement each other and create a perfect whole. So that was the reason we retained the five male leads – creatively they worked. And they'd spawned an amazing series and brand that didn't need fixing. (E. Hughes, personal communication, May 11, 2016)

The writers were fortunate however that Tin Tin, who for copyright reasons is renamed Kayo in *Thunderbirds Are Go*, provided an excellent opportunity for redevelopment. According to Hughes:

What we wanted to do was create a 100% new and fully-rounded modern girl character whose personality could be newly made, rather than fit into pre-existing sibling parameters. That meant she could disagree with the boys and have an independent streak – the brothers are almost always in agreement. By making Kayo the sixth member of international rescue rather than gender flipping one of the five brothers she is able to be much more independent, proactive and nuanced. We see her struggle with family secrets and personal identity, all of which ensures that our female character has depth, emotion, strength, vulnerability, courage and ambition. (personal communication, June 25, 2016)

Kayo is now head of security for International Rescue, a capable and feisty young woman who wants to be proactive, by going out and preventing crimes and thereby reducing the need for rescues. Her methods, which include breaking longstanding International Rescue rules, cause her and Scott Tracy to clash repeatedly. Kayo, who is deliberately dressed in a plain, combat trousers and T-shirt uniform, with her hair pulled back in

a ponytail, is also a non-combative martial arts expert whose superior skills mean she trains the Tracy brothers in physical and self-defence:

We've got episodes where she's training the boys – she's far more military in that way. She's a really good character who has proven immensely popular with boys and girls. Kayo is where we absolutely know 100% that you can have strong, female, physical action characters and boys will still completely relate to them. (E. Hughes, personal communication, June 25, 2016)

Kayo has her own vehicle, Thunderbird Shadow, designed by Japanese visual artist Shoji Kawamori, whose credits include the *Transformers* toy designs. Her vehicle, however, is for stealth missions rather than rescues, which means that due to the rescue-focused storylines she is less visible in the series than the Tracy brothers. The creative decision was made because:

We knew there was no point making her the 6th rescuer, because the original series had so brilliantly covered every possible form of rescue vehicle or rescue pod. That's why Kayo's role is security and her vehicle is not a rescue vehicle, it's a stealth vehicle. The downside is that she can't feature in as many episodes as the others because every episode is dominated by rescue. Fitting a large cast of characters and vehicle into 22 minutes has been the biggest challenge of the series and the rescue action has to be the priority. That's the only reason Kayo wasn't in as many of the early episodes as we all wanted. (E. Hughes, personal communication, June 25, 2016)

Although Lady Penelope and her iconic pink Rolls Royce provided less opportunity for character redevelopment as she is such an established and highly visible presence in the original, the writers made some modifications for the re-boot. Thus less emphasis is placed on her hereditary wealth and modelling career. Lady Penelope is portrayed instead as a business woman managing her own investments, who is also much more physically active. For example, she is seen scuba diving, and is good at solving problems. As Hughes puts it, "She doesn't need rescuing ever, she is definitely a rescuer". (E. Hughes, personal communication, June 25, 2016).

Reducing the portrayal of gender stereotypical behaviour in Grandma Tracy, however, proved more difficult. Hughes explains that the character had to stay, because in the absence of the boys' parents it is important to have a female matriarch. But she does not feel she and the rest of the creative team managed to get it quite right and avoid sexist stereotypes in the earlier episodes:

Because she is the matriarch and domestic head of the family, we wanted those scenes every now and again that show they are a family of kids together and those tend to be set around mealtimes. In the 22 minute episode, you need some of those quieter domestic scenes, the full on action pace is exhausting for the

viewers. And children recognise those scenes from their own families, complete with family banter. They're the hard scenes really, to not let Grandma become stereotypical. And in some of the early episodes I think we made too much of the bad cooking gags. We've really pulled back from those as the series has gone on. And in later episodes we learn about her history as a pilot. (E. Hughes, personal communication, June 25, 2016)

Non-traditional female roles

The introduction of new characters that need rescuing provided another means of including females in non-traditional roles. While *The Hood* is responsible for a large number of the dangerous situations in which characters find themselves, technological failure is another useful plot mechanism. Thus many of those being saved from disaster in the *Thunderbirds Are Go* storylines are operating, designing and testing equipment. This work necessarily entails high numbers of associated mechanics, miners, machinery operators, engineers, scientists and pilots, providing producers with ample opportunities to incorporate female characters into these non-traditional roles:

The great thing about the writing team though is that the people needing rescuing are never weak, their situation has arisen because of a credible set of circumstances or events that caused something to go wrong. They're nearly always bright, competent, capable, impressive professional people, so that still makes it worthwhile and valuable to make those characters female. (E. Hughes, personal communication, June 25, 2016)

The creative team was aware, however, of the risk of constantly portraying female characters as damsels in distress being rescued by males:

The rescue storylines gave us a great opportunity to make female characters have these non-traditional roles. The downside is that you can't week in, week out show women needing to be rescued by largely men. Although Kayo is an equal and extremely important part of International Rescue, she is not rescue, she is security and her vehicle isn't a rescue vehicle. So it's still nearly always one of the boys that is rescuing someone, and we really have to work to balance it. (E. Hughes, personal communication, June 25, 2016)

ITV Studios were also supportive of *Thunderbirds Are Go's* efforts to create strong female characters, while recognising the marketing benefits of having famous actors involved in the series production. Lady Penelope, for example, is voiced by Rosamund Pike, who was nominated for an Oscar for the movie *Gone Girl* during production. The series also had sufficient resources to cast high profile guest actors such as Jenna Coleman, from *Dr Who* and Emelia Clarke, from *Game of Thrones* in series two. In addition to

the publicity this kind of casting generates, media coverage surrounding famous actors' involvement provides additional opportunities to distribute non-stereotypical images and increase female characters' visibility. In this case, Emelia Clarke's character was as an oil rig worker while Jenna Coleman's worked as a geologist.

Once episodes had been written to increase female visibility and subvert gender stereotypes, various technical aspects of the animation processes had to be managed to ensure that the characters' on screen behaviours were consistent with the creative team's intentions. For example, in animation production, all characters have walk cycles, which is the looping animation seen when they are walking; they also have particular gestures and stances. Although children's television is a feminised profession, its technological and professional roles remain male dominated, especially animation, with only 10 per cent of the animation guild's membership being female (Lemish, 2010). Hughes realised early in production that the walking cycles required alteration:

Walk cycles definitely needed some work with the animators. Female characters' default walk is a lot more sashaying, so we redid that, with all the female characters. And with default positions, when Kayo or one of the female characters is angry we sometimes found that at the first animation pass they are standing with their hands on their hips. We very quickly made a rule: "No hands on hips for female characters – don't treat the female characters any differently to the males in terms of poses". (E. Hughes, personal communication June 30, 2016)

Once a female character has been created in CGI, the model can be re-used, meaning an automatic economic incentive for greater female visibility, because producers do not have sufficient resources to build new models every single time. The gender neutral clothing and hairstyles designed for the re-boot also facilitate this process:

The easiest way to re-use a model is to change the colour of their costumes or their hair. For example, a background lab technician could be re-used as a plane passenger. Because we have so many female characters as secondary characters and we rarely put anyone in a dress or skirt and we purposely avoid delicate clothing or distinctive accessories (because they're background characters), we can make subtle changes and re-use the model. You can play around with their hairstyles and their hair colours too. We have got so many hairstyles that are interchangeable between men and women characters, which is down to the fact that we're avoiding girly buns and bobs. (E. Hughes, personal communication June 30, 2016)

Despite her commitment to onscreen diversity, Hughes accepts that when producing animation, the integrity of the storylines must be any producer's priority. Particular stories or episodes will require particular characters, which will entail individual judgement calls. But as she says, when making those judgement calls regarding the inclusion of female characters in children's television, "you absolutely have a duty to work through the 'why not?'" (E. Hughes, personal communication June 30, 2016).

Commercial considerations

Although the re-boot is considerably more balanced in its representation of female characters and their appearance and behaviour, commercial forces still exert enormous sway over the ways in which children's television is produced, distributed and experienced by its audience. Consumer products remain a crucial component of the funding of much contemporary children's television, with their success vital to the sustainability of popular series such as *Care Bears*, *GI Joe*, *Peppa Pig*, *Spongebob Squarepants* and *In the Night Garden* (Pecora, 1998; Banet-Weiser, 2007; Lemish 2007; Steemers, 2010). Historically however, children's television merchandise has been highly gendered including in the ways in which it is marketed, particularly for school aged children (Lemish, 2010). To some extent *Thunderbirds Are Go* was able to subvert that norm, through the toys created by UK manufacturer Vivid and the global licensees associated with the brand. These include Lady Penelope's iconic pink Rolls Royce and a Kayo toy and vehicle. But while Kayo and Lady Penelope are popular characters, the series is rating more highly with boys than girls and, as Hughes concedes:

At retail it has been difficult for a show to embrace girls and boys in the same way that, say, "Peppa Pig" has for the pre-school audience. Toy shelves tend to be very gendered and it's very difficult to make that jump from something very boy action oriented to something less so in toyshops. (personal communication, June 30, 2016)

Giles Ridge, ITV Studios Executive Producer and SVP Content and Brand Development Consumer Products, confirms:

That's the thing with merchandising and licensing, you need to know right up-front whereabouts in the shop they will see it. It's undeniably a boys viewed show and the product is in the boys' aisle, although that's not to say that girls won't buy it. Girls will watch boys' stuff and girls will buy boys' products, but it doesn't work the other way around (personal communication, June 21, 2016).

While Hughes had sufficient creative autonomy and status as executive producer to influence the content of the series, she had no involvement with the exploitation of the brand extensions. The belief that children prefer gendered television programs and associated merchandise (Lemish, 2010) appears still to prevail among many producers, distributors and marketing teams and to exert considerable influence in retail and marketing sectors.

Any re-boot of a cult classic is an ambitious undertaking. Nonetheless, *Thunderbirds Are Go* has been a commercial success and received positive reviews from UK television critics. One described it as "surprisingly enjoyable" and "impressively scripted" (O'Donovan 2015) while *The Guardian's* review concluded "this will do nicely" (Jeffries 2015). The success of the re-booted children's series represents an integral element of

ITV Studios highly successful business strategy of monetising the IP it owns, which has seen the company become the biggest producer of non-scripted content in the US (Chalaby, 2012). The iconic *Thunderbirds* brand remains popular with parents and their children in increasingly globalised markets for children's television and their associated consumer products.

Conclusion

The ways in which *Thunderbirds Are Go* presents more balanced gender representations to the child audience reminds us of the importance and influence of the producer in children's television. Those in the screen production sector working to erode gender stereotypes in contemporary children's television require power, status and creative autonomy to be able to effect change, which are by no means a given. Hughes is aware that her position as executive producer with decades of experience gave her sufficient authority in creative decision-making processes to exert a strong influence over the series' gender representations. She remains mindful of the privileged position she occupies in the production hierarchy and that her efforts are particularly important, because few of the women working in contemporary screen production choose to work in animation action adventure for older children. And, as the case of *Thunderbirds Are Go* illustrates, balanced gender representations are more likely to be seen on the screen when the creative labour force in the animation industry becomes less gendered itself.

Note

1. My conversations with Hughes occurred face-to-face over several weeks as we met to discuss her professional practice as a children's television producer and career in children's broadcasting

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