

TBI Kids

Television Business International

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Coming of age

YouTube is celebrating a big birthday next year and ahead of the occasion, Helen Dugdale explores what the platform offers that others can't and what 'traditional' TV can learn from its success

Next year will mark the 18th birthday of YouTube and with billion upon billion of views, it's hard to imagine life without it. For content creators, the Google-owned streamer offers almost zero barriers to entry with their shows, few restrictions on length and allows them to reach niche audiences. Users, meanwhile, can easily access content from around the globe and develop a close relationship with their favourite creators. In many ways, it's a win-win on both sides of the screen – as well as a way to grow programming, particularly of the kids variety.



Doggyland was backed by rapper Snoop Dogg and launched straight to YouTube - its creators have no immediate plans to place it anywhere else

“We said let’s go ahead and invest in the show ourselves and put it on YouTube. Down the road, we may do something with traditional TV - but we just really wanted it so everyone could watch it”

Claude Brooks



Ferly, a Finnish animation studio and brand-building company that specialises in storytelling through TV and film, has a handful of shows sitting on the platform and targets audience growth via its YouTube strategies.

“Our aim with our YouTube content is to engage with fans, but obviously at its best, content drives both engagement and revenue,” explains co-founder Laura Nevanlinna.

“We have the short-form of our pre-school brand *Momolu & Friends* out on there. *Star Stable: Mistfall* is a short-form series we developed and produced with

gaming company Star Stable and is available in three languages,” she adds.

Straight-to-streamer order

Seasoned industry figures also increasingly favour placing content on YouTube rather than going straight to public service broadcasters or streamers. The Emmy-nominated producer and creator of children’s franchise *Hip Hop Harry*, Claude Brooks, partnered with rapper Snoop Dogg, on a new show called *Doggyland*, which launched straight to YouTube in August.

The show features a colourful cast of dogs who use songs, dance and rap to teach social, emotional, and cognitive skills aimed at toddlers to eight-year-olds.

“*Doggyland* just organically developed by working alongside Snoop Dogg. It is led by a cast of dogs that teach kids about social and emotional skills through dance and song. Snoop voices the main character, Bow Wizzle, who serves as the adult mentor to the rest of the cast. It took about a year to make and we’ve already got over 30 episodes and creating more. There is a new drop on YouTube every Tuesday.”

Kris Maric, founding CEO and executive producer at Australian-based virtual production services Fika Entertainment, who has worked on programmes such as *Scream Street* and ABC’s *Mini Beast Heroes*, adds that the platform can also act as a springboard for doing more things with IP.

“We’ve seen that the digital-first approach is the future of content creation because it has enabled many to generate meaningful income and to explore their creative voice in a dynamic and agile way,” she says.

“It is also a gateway to enabling broader monetisation opportunities off the back of YouTube-launched content through other digital experiences such as games, apps, eBooks and music.”

With a household name like Snoop Dogg attached to *Doggyland* and Brooks’ experience, people would be forgiven for asking why they decided to go straight to YouTube with the new show. Surely with their contacts, they could have caused a bidding war between streamers and broadcasters, knowing the audience the show would instantly pull in?

“It was always about access and letting every child be able to enjoy the adventures of *Doggyland*.”

“We said let’s go ahead and invest in the show ourselves and put it on YouTube. Down the road, we may do something with traditional TV. But we just really wanted it so everyone could watch it. We’re not looking to build an audience on YouTube and then move on. *Doggyland* is always going to be a YouTube and YouTube Kids show.”

Brooks adds that if offshoots of *Doggyland* happen,

Adventures With Auntie Ada hails from Fika Entertainment, which believes that the digital-first approach is the future of content creation



“There is a whole world out there that loves and embraces diversity and gender-fluid stories. YouTube does a great job of enabling both of those audiences”

Kris Maric,
Fika Entertainment



organically with other channels or platforms, the team would be open to having conversations.

From its offices in Finland and Canada, Ferly, has worked on an array of shows, including animation *Kingdom Of Nom*. The company aims to create storylines that show characters in ways that reflect the fluidity of gender and avoid creating stereotypical behaviour – and Nevanlinna believes YouTube is the best place to do that.

“It’s a place that allows for more freedom of exploration in storytelling when it comes to length of content, language and non-verbal etc, and this absolutely encompasses going beyond the dichotomy of male and female in character building.

“YouTube as a platform doesn’t need to directly answer to a corporate board or a set of partners wishing for certain types of content, the creators can be more inclusive and build characters that aren’t especially one or the other but maybe more one and the other.

“I feel that young children do not consider gender as a decisive factor in a person or character, so the possibility for content creators to use YouTube as a platform mirroring this reality is wonderful.”

Direct demand & lessons

For Maric, YouTube’s appeal is clear: it shows to the world what the audience really wants. “It has allowed freer market space to allow diverse and gender fluid creators, their stories, and characters to have no barriers to release, nor barriers to being watched.

“There is a whole world out there that loves and embraces diversity and gender-fluid stories. YouTube does a great job of enabling both of those audiences.”

Clearly, there are millions of hours of content on

YouTube that receive few views, while quality levels vary dramatically. But what can the likes of public broadcasters learn from content creators who are sitting between traditional channels and YouTube with shows in both worlds?

Brookes adds: “Channels and streamers are trying to find things that feel unique. I say if you can hit your content lane and stay in it you’ve got a better chance of pulling other people in from different lanes, which is what makes the experience that much more special. *Doggyland* has a specific point of view.”

Maric compares traditional TV to the cinema a couple of decades ago. “It’s become a premium space where a series launch is like a major event that has a global community excited to share its anticipation of and then watching it.

“We think it would be good to have access to better data on the performance of these series so creators could feel more confident that they are building and pitching the shows that people genuinely want to buy and watch.”

After almost 18 years, the Google-owned streaming service is interwoven with the world of content creation. For Nevanlinna, YouTube provides kids with direct access to new ideas whenever they want it, something that broadcasters can learn from.

“Many traditional broadcasters also offer content online on either their channels or YouTube. Whether it’s the same content everywhere or different on each platform is an important decision to make. Shorter episodic lengths work better online,” she points out.

And while billions of hours of content is good, TV retains a vital role, she adds. “What traditional TV at its best can do is the same thing publishers do: offer a curated experience and quality content on both their linear and their digital platforms.” **TBI**

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The winds of change



Hoho Entertainment's joint-MD Oliver Ellis tells Mark Layton how *Toad & Friends* will both honour and update *The Wind In The Willows* for a new generation

Among the children's series headed to market in Cannes this year is a new adaptation of a British literary classic in Hoho Entertainment's *Toad & Friends*.

The London-based firm has spun Kenneth Grahame's beloved 1908 fable *The Wind In The Willows* into a 52 x 11-minute CG animated series that Hoho's joint-MD and producer Oliver Ellis tells TBI remains "true to the spirit of the book and the characters", while adding some much-needed diversity to bring it up to date for modern audiences.

The original story follows the adventures of riverbank residents Mole, Ratty and Badger as they try to help the irascible Mr Toad of Toad Hall when his obsession with vehicles lands him in trouble with the law.

As Ellis notes: "There are very few female characters in the book and certainly not central ones, so we have changed that in our series adaptation, with Hedge

(Seána Kerslake), our feisty cheery hedgehog joining the trio of Mole (Rish Shah), Ratty (Reuben Joseph) and Toad (Adrian Edmondson), thereby making a strong quartet of primary characters.

"Other female characters include Mrs Otter, who was in the book, but we make more of her in the series, and the new characters, Tinker, Heron and Adder."

An essential addition

Amid the current push for diversity both on-and-off-screen, children's programming is among areas where such change is most crucial.

As Ellis highlights: "The book was written in 1908 in a much more paternalistic society than we have now, so it wasn't just important, it was essential to make changes to better reflect 21st century society."

Alongside the addition of "eternal optimist" Hedge



to the main cast of characters, Hoho has also created “Heron the taciturn delivery bird, Adder the self-serving opportunist, Tinker the clever-but-scheming weasel and Mrs Otter, the maternal figure of the riverbank.

“They all fit into the setting and amongst the other characters very naturally and serve as a seamless extension of the line-up of characters from the original book,” says Ellis.

The producer reveals that Hoho, which is also behind *Cloudbabies* for Cbeebies and *Shane The Chef* for Channel 5’s Milkshake!, has a commitment to diversity that extends off-screen as well “from the writing team, casting and throughout the production team.”

Familiar icons

Animated in Scotland by Wild Child Animation and directed by Tim Searle (*Danger Mouse*, *Dennis And*

Gnasher), the series is not a direct adaptation of the novel, but rather an extension of the source material that follows the characters in situations both new and familiar.

Ellis explains: “Although these are 52 new stories, we were keen to continue giving nods to the original book. For instance, in the episode *A Lick Of Paint*, we see Mole whitewashing his front step, which is a nod to the very beginning of the book.

“Toad in the book has a passion for anything new, particularly the motor car. This continues in the series with Toad loving his car obviously, but he’s also driven to enthusiastically embrace a hot air balloon, his own specially designed boat and his power kite; all with the same feckless passion and zeal that we have come to expect,” he says.

Ellis adds that the traditional villains of the story, the weasels, will also return: “At the end of the book, the weasels are chased out of Toad Hall by our hero characters led by courageous Mole. In the series, we return to this theme with the weasels constantly trying to get into Toad Hall and get the better of Toad, always with disastrous consequences.

“We have also made much more of the weasels’ individual characters, who provide an additional comic element to the series.”

Acquisition opportunity

Toad & Friends has already been picked up by Warner Bros. Discovery for pre-school brand Cartoonito across EMEA and on streaming service HBO Max in Europe for a 2023 debut, with Ellis describing the media giant as “terrific partners throughout.”

However, for any buyers out there whose interest has been piqued, linear broadcast rights to *Toad & Friends* are also still “broadly available” in those territories, as well as all rights outside of EMEA, as of the time of writing.

Some episodes are now complete and have received “very positive feedback” after being shown to broadcast partners, says Ellis, who confirms he will be treading *La Croisette*, with Hoho’s new riverbank friends in tow. **TBI**

Toad & Friends adds new characters to the familiar setting, for a diverse cast



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Cultivating curiosity

With parents acting as gatekeepers to kids' content consumption and young viewers often stuck on their old favourites, Mark Layton finds out how streamers and broadcasters go about getting children to move on to new shows

As any parent can tell you, getting a young child to move on from their favourite shows and try out something new can sometimes be a bit of a challenge. Linear programming blocks with a set schedule make this process simple, but when the possibility of binge watching is available, it can become a whole different ball game.

Unsurprisingly, streamers and broadcasters want to make sure that young audiences are watching their latest original productions and acquisitions, but despite the anecdotal evidence, just how much of a problem is discoverability?



Stephen Mowbray, head of series & kids, Viaplay Group

“Every viewer is unique, regardless of age. But in general, we don't see any major difficulties in introducing younger Viaplay viewers to new shows,” reveals Mowbray. “It's true that some titles always seem to be at the top of the viewing charts.

“However, that's just as much about their quality and broad appeal, as it is the same viewers watching them over and over.

“Kids grow up quickly and are usually open to something new that matches their own developing interests,” adds Mowbray, whose Viaplay Group teamed with Moonbug to produce *Mia's Magic Playground* (pictured, below) and is soon to launch *Karma & Jonar*.

“We've learnt that the more visible we make a series on Viaplay, the more likely it is that kids will watch it. Positioning new content by featuring it at the top of our landing page when it premieres, followed by suitable blocks and promos over the following weeks, is one proven approach. We also see positive viewing levels for new shows that are based on a well-known brand.”



Monika Oomen, VP, brand, communications and franchise management, Warner Bros. Discovery

“Firstly, it's important to note that kids, and pre-schoolers especially, do love to binge watch and this, in many ways, is a very positive habit,” says Oomen. “It's born out of comfort rather than boredom and creates a strong emotional connection between the audience and the brands and characters they love.”

She explains: “When introducing new content to pre-schoolers, parents are the gatekeepers, and as much as they listen to their child's preferences, they have ultimate control over what their kids watch. As such, we consider a dual audience in marketing and communications when introducing any new show – the kids and their parents. The amount of content offered to kids at home is overwhelming and the challenge is to be heard and seen amongst all the noise.”

Kids and parents are more likely to try something new from a brand they trust, notes Oomen, highlighting the power of a portfolio of known brands, such as Warner Bros. Discovery's Cartoon Network, Cartoonito, Boomerang, Boing or HBO Max.

“It helps if that world or characters already resonate with parents too. That's why we're launching pre-school iterations featuring some of our best-known and most loved global franchises with brand new preschool series *Batwheels* (pictured, above) and *Bugs Bunny Builders* set to premiere in the next few months across EMEA.”

**Shannon Friedrichs-Higdon,
SVP of content & brand
strategy, kids & family,
Paramount Global**



“I would argue that young children are amongst the most content curious viewers I’ve worked for. Their tastes are just forming and, as such, they are very open to experiencing new things. It’s up to us as content creators and programmers to serve them lots of different types of programs,” says Friedrichs-Higdon.

“This is not to say that young children don’t have strong opinions or that they don’t have favourites,” she adds, with titles such as *PAW Patrol* and *The Patrick Star Show* (pictured, right) performing well for Paramount’s Nickelodeon.

When it comes to introducing young viewers to new content, Friedrichs-Higdon suggests: “You really must go where the audiences are. Increasingly, this means a diverse mix of linear (pay-TV & FTA) and streaming (SVOD & AVOD), paid and organic media placement. If you are building a franchise, you need to reach the broadest possible audience as quickly as possible, so ubiquity is key.”

However, she adds, “if you were asking me how to build a platform or a channel brand, I would be telling you the opposite - exclusive content is key to a unique USP. There is a natural tension between these competing goals and that’s where a content strategist with brand expertise can help you define which partners and platforms are best positioned to help you reach the biggest (and most aligned) audiences for your content.”



**Katie Wilson, VP of channels
& global acquisitions,
WildBrain Television**



“Discoverability is always top-of-mind, given the range of entertainment choices available for kids and families to engage with content, both in terms of the different platforms where content lives and also the volume of programming,” says Wilson, who is currently seeing titles including *Curious George*, *Mighty Mike*, *Caillou*, *Grizzly And The Lemmings* and *LEGO Ninjago* (pictured, left) performing well with young audiences on Wildbrain.

“When it comes to new exclusive titles, the connection takes longer than it would with an established show – this investment in time is key,” she adds.

“When building an audience for new content, it’s ultimately about being flexible and creative in your approach. For example, insights from WildBrain Spark, our digital media team, can develop our understanding of how to engage kids through digital and social platforms, supporting the awareness of the shows on our channels and driving their long-term success.” **TBI**

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Kids Hot Picks

The latest kids shows heading to market





Top Pick

Karate Sheep

Producer: Xilam Animation

Distributor: Xilam Animation

Broadcaster: Netflix

Logline: Hybrid animation following an over-enthusiastic sheep whose antics keep causing trouble for the rest of the flock

Created by Xilam's Hugo Gittard (*Zig & Sharko*, *Mr Magoo*), this 78 x 7-minute hybrid of CG, 2D and stop-motion animation is a non-verbal slapstick comedy following Trico, an enthusiastic sheep who loves to share new objects and ideas with the rest of the flock.

Unfortunately, this causes problems in the mountain pastures for Wanda, a tough ewe whose job is to keep the sheep safe from a nearby hungry wolf.

Morgann Favennec, EVP of distribution at Xilam Animation, says that the show is a “unique and engaging blend of themes - there's friendship, teamwork and accepting the differences of others, but there's also martial arts, plenty of humour and a celebration of nature in the mix too.”

The exec adds: “Through the adventures of Trico, Wanda and the flock, the series really promotes the importance of sharing and listening to each other, as well as sticking up for those who may need a bit more help.

“For example, we see Wanda not only helping her

fellow creatures, but also the wolf when he's in difficulty.”

Favennec expects the series to be a hit with kids who “are going to love the endearing and varied characters in *Karate Sheep* - there's Trico who is a showman at heart and promises progress, novelty and fun, but without considering the consequences. Despite having the best intentions, Trico's often the root of all the chaos happening in the mountain, resulting in some very humorous situations.

“Then there's Wanda who is a natural-born leader and doesn't let anyone walk all over her - she's actually a martial-arts expert and will knock you flat in two shakes of a lamb's tail!

“Then of course, there's Wolf, who is the time-honored predator of the pasture, and there's the [wider] flock who tend to think and react as one, with a routine that revolves solely around grazing and sleeping.”

The show, which is aimed at 6-9-year-olds, is set to make its global debut on Netflix next year, although second-window linear rights are still up for grabs at the time of writing.



Big Nate

Producer: Nickelodeon Animation Studio

Distributor: Paramount Global Content Distribution

Broadcaster: Paramount+ (US)

Logline: Animation about the misadventures of sixth-grader Nate Wright and his friends

This US animated series follows the adventure of Nate Wright, a precocious 11-year-old boy, and his best friends, as they navigate the challenges of sixth grade.

“Whether he’s dealing with disasters at home or detention at school, Nate is no stranger to a challenge,” explains Lauren Marriott, SVP of content partnerships & brand strategy, Paramount Global Content Distribution. “Luckily, he’s able to express himself through the world of cartoons that he creates. Charming, mischievous

and a magnet for misadventure, Nate always finds a way to turn trouble into fun.”

Marriott says that *Big Nate* owes its legacy to the Nickelodeon series of the 1990s - “shows that were not afraid to push the envelope with both storytelling and design.”

“The sole purpose of the show is to make people laugh, which seems like something everyone can get behind after the last couple of years.”

Marriot reinforces that comedy is “the pillar of the



series” and says that while children will enjoy the hijinx that Nate and his friends get up to,

she adds that “all of the stories are wrapped in love, acceptance, and understanding.”

The Smeds & The Smoos

Producer: Magic Light Pictures

Distributor: Magic Light Pictures

Broadcaster: BBC One (UK)

Logline: Two bickering families of aliens learn to put aside their differences in this adaptation of the Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler story

The UK’s Magic Light Pictures continues its successful run of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler adaptations with this

new one-off half-hour animation.

Due to premiere on BBC One in the UK this Christmas, it follows the story of the red

Smeds and the blue Smoos, who are longstanding enemies on their far-off planet.

However, when a chance encounter between young Smed Janet and young Smoo Bill leads to romance, it results in a great intergalactic adventure - and two families who must learn to understand and work together for the very first time.

Producer Barney Goodland tells TBI that the story shows viewers that “differences are to be celebrated and something that makes life magical. The Smeds and the Smoos learn that through their bickering they lose the people they love and feel worse as a result. By working together and accepting others they all get to enjoy themselves and experience new things.”

Goodland adds: “On their journey, the Smeds and Smoos also visit lots of incredible planets and meet new aliens. Similarly, we hope that this will leave young viewers feeling excited

about discovering new cultures and the benefits of doing so.”

This is now Magic Light’s 10th adaptation of a Donaldson/ Scheffler book and Goodland praises the source material as “engaging and wonderfully imaginative” and for creating “exciting worlds where children want to spend time.”

“Our goal with the specials is to take that experience further and develop the story into a half hour animation for families to enjoy and bring them into the world they know and love.”

Goodland adds: “The look and colour palette of the special is quite incredible, and it’s been a great challenge designing and building all the planets – there’s even one made out of slime!

“We’ve loved creating a universe where lots of things feel familiar, but that are all slightly alien. Every shot is enchanting with something amazing to look at and you can almost touch and feel what’s on screen.”



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Happy The Hoglet

Producer: Paper Owl Films

Distributor: Aardman

Broadcaster: CITV (UK), RTÉ Jr (Ireland), S4C (UK)

Logline: Pre-school animated series following the adventures of a prickly hedgehog and his friends, whose experiences reflect the emotional ups and downs that young audiences are coming to grips with in their own lives

New 26 x 7-minute animated series from Paper Owl, the Northern Irish firm behind popular BBC series *Pablo*.

Set in the Sunny River Community Garden, the series follows Happy, a little hedgehog with big feelings.

Through their adventures, Happy and his friends reflect the emotional ups, downs and everything in between, that are experienced by pre-school audiences; from feeling excited to feeling angry to feeling like you just need a quiet minute.

“The stories are very relatable to the audience, ranging from feeling guilty about hurting a friend, to giving something a go even if you aren’t good at it yet, dealing with being overwhelmed and celebrating the joy of feeling happy with your friends,” Paper Owl Films’ producer Grainne McGuinness tells TBI.

“Each episode of *Happy* explores different emotions, and models how to acknowledge, accept and share these feelings. For young audiences, Happy names and validates feelings they may encounter in their own lives. For co-viewers, watching *Happy The Hoglet* with their child will spark conversations about emotional wellbeing.”

McGuinness describes the series as “more than a TV show - this is a global movement for ‘Making Happy’.”

She adds: “The characters are really funny, the stories are relatable and the world of the show is stunning.

“There’s danger and scary, there’s music and laughter, comfort, joy and true friendship. It respects the emotional intelligence of the audience and reassures them about their own feelings,” McGuinness says.



Biff & Chip

Producer: BBC Studios, Kids & Family Productions

Distributor: Jetpack Distribution

Broadcaster: CBeebies (UK)

Logline: Live-action kids series based on the phonics books, following youngsters who come up with interesting scenarios through their play - and often turn small disasters into big adventures



Kids and parents in the UK will recognise *Biff & Chip* as being based on the Oxford Reading Tree phonics books that are commonly used to teach children to read in schools.

This live-action series extends their world to the screen for “pure entertainment” with a focus on children, their family and friends, spending time together, having fun and coming up with interesting ideas through creative play.

The young characters will go on such adventures as: “losing their cuddly toys while playing detectives, which turns them into real detectives to solve clues and find the toys,” reveals Jetpack CEO Dominic Gardiner.

He tells TBI: “In one episode they think they have made their dog disappear while playing magicians!

“The kids also do thoughtful and kind things like make a restaurant at home for their

parents, who are not able to go out.”

What sets this show apart from other kids series is its “strong focus on real kids having fun and playing, as opposed to being focused on aspirational characters such as superheroes or being overly educational,” says Gardiner.

“It’s a mix of relatable situations and imaginative, sometimes magical, solutions or explanations.”

He describes the series as “a warm, family focused comedy drama” and explains that during the kids’ playtime: “Invariably something unexpected or funny happens and characters come together to make things right or turn a disaster into a fun adventure.

“It’s especially interesting for children to see popular book characters come to life through live action, as opposed to animation.” **TBI**

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