In the face of changing viewing habits, distributors are finding new ways to deliver kids the content they want on all the many platforms they’re using.

By Kristin Brzoznowski

The biggest shift in the kids’ programming landscape today is not necessarily what kids are watching but rather how they are watching.

Appointment TV is becoming a rare commodity, as children are making their own schedules to watch the shows they want at any time in any place. From networks launching their own apps and catch-up services to the myriad of new SVOD, AVOD and streaming platforms entering the marketplace, the availability of content that can be accessed by kids anytime, anywhere is seemingly limitless.

Within this on-demand environment, Netflix has undoubtedly been one of the greatest game changers, but perhaps even more disruptive as of late is YouTube. According to a recent study that surveyed more than 8,300 children and their parents in the U.S., YouTube ranked as kids’ “most loved brand” in 2017. For a second year, YouTube beat out iconic kid-pleasers such as LEGO, McDonald’s and Crayola, and outshined the likes of Netflix, Disney Channel and Nickledeon.

“Broadcasters have been telling us that starting at around 8 years old, kids are now going to YouTube,” says David Michel, the managing director of Federation Kids & Family. Added to that is the draw of gaming and other digital entertainment that is taking up more of kids’ time nowadays.

“Our challenge as an industry is how we get back the 8-, 9-, 10-, 11-year-olds that have left in herds,” Michel continues. “We’re not going to get them back by giving them what they’re seeing on YouTube. We’re going to get them back by giving them a unique value proposition that they cannot find online!”

For Federation Kids & Family, this means a focus on quality. “One of the reasons kids are leaving for YouTube is that the production value of what’s on the platform is not that different from what’s currently on TV, especially in terms of live action,” says Michel. This is why, he believes, now is the time to deliver these discerning young viewers series that have the same level of production quality found in shows for adult audiences. As such, Federation Kids & Family, via its sister production arm Cottonwood Media, is currently producing with ZDF and ZDF Enterprises an international premium series for tweens, Find Me in Paris, which has a (very adult) $12 million production budget.

ACTING LIKE ADULTS

“The quality bar has been raised and keeps on rising,” says Tom van Waveren, CEO and creative director at CAKE. “Because kids are avid consumers and users of SVOD and AVOD platforms, it’s very easy for them to jump to content that was not necessarily created for them. So, we need to make sure that the content that we produce is actually more relevant to them as viewers than before.

The storylines in shows that they watch should remind them of scenes and situations that they experience themselves.”

He points out that comedy writing, in particular, has gotten quite good for kids’ shows. “You can compare it much more to what is being done in prime time [for adults] than ever before. Just because we’re writing it for kids doesn’t mean we need to go slowly or over-explain things. Today’s children are more sophisticated as an audience than children have ever been.”

CAKE’s Total Drama franchise, which has now been running for six series, answers the call for high-quality comedy, van Waveren says. “From the beginning, the show has treated children as grown-ups and was basically spoofing reality shows... The level of irony in the series and the way it plays with all the rules of reality shows make it a sophisticated concept that children love.”

Angelo Rules is another example of a successful CAKE series that offers some of the key ingredients that children want from their entertainment today: comedy and relatability.

LAUGH TRACK

Pierre Sissmann, the chairman and CEO of Cyber Group Studios, also points to comedy as a standout genre in today’s marketplace, alongside preschool content. “While comedy for kids and preschool are still in strong demand, content providers have tried to distinguish themselves in recent years,” he adds. “There has been a comeback of action-adventure with a touch of comedy and the appearance of strong girl-led series, reflecting the change in the audience.”

Cyber Group’s The Pirates Next Door, which is an adventure comedy, debuted on France Télévisions with “great ratings,” says Sissmann. “At the same time, we have high hopes for two upcoming series: Gigantosaurus, a preschool series to be released on Disney Junior worldwide in 2019, and Tuffy, a pure cartoon comedy co-produced with Turner that will debut this year.”

In 2017, the company saw success with its evergreen preschool property Zou, which launched in its third season, and the girl-led animation Mirette Investigates.

“We have seen a rise in popularity for both upper-preschool ‘pre-cool’ shows as well as genre-inclusive shows with comedy,” echoes Finn Arnesen, the senior VP of international distribution and development at Hasbro Studios. “Our shows such as My Little Pony and Rescue Bots address this demand.”

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic is returning for season eight this year, and the success of the brand’s first full-length animated feature film, My Little Pony: The Movie, has helped to bring fresh energy to the franchise. “My Little Pony: Equestria Girls is a great companion to the My Little Pony brand and is perfect for our older, tween audience,” adds Arnesen. The series returned in 2017 via digital shorts on YouTube, and there will be 45 new episodes released on a weekly basis.
The Hasbro catalog is home to a wealth of series like *My Little Pony* that are based on iconic toy properties, including *Transformers: Robots in Disguise* and *Stretch Armstrong and the Flex Fighters*, which recently debuted on Netflix.

"What's working well at the moment is when a series is based on an IP that already exists, like a book or graphic novel," says Jérôme Albry, the managing director of Mediatoon Distribution. "*Little Furry* is a good example of that. The *Little Furry* books have already sold over half a million copies in the French market alone." The property is published in 11 countries, including Germany, Spain and China, and the series will soon be aired in more than 50 territories worldwide.

Mediatoon also represents *The Garfield Show*, inspired by the classic comic strip, with shorts and specials surrounding the brand. "When you hit the market with a show that's based on an iconic property like Garfield, it resonates distribution and co-production.

Mondo TV has taken note of the trend toward shorter running times and larger episode counts as well. While the first two seasons of its animated hit *Sisi the Young Empress* were done as 26 half-hours, the brand-new season three has changed its format to 52x11 minutes.

**SIZE MATTERS**

Micheline Azoury, Mondo TV's head of acquisitions and TV sales, says that the shorter runs mean a faster pace, making it "easier to translate the comedy in the episode into an adventure or a gag. Shorter is better—also for the scriptwriters. A half-hour is not going to work anymore for a comedy; 7 to 11 minutes is a good length."

"Ten years ago, there were still a lot of kids' series with episodes of a half-hour, 22 or 26 minutes," observes

With comedy in high demand, Gaumont believes that *Belle and Sebastien*, a comedic adventure series, will resonate with audiences.
Mediatoon’s Alby. “That has now gone down quite a lot; it’s more like quarter-hours, very often 11 to 13 minutes. The pace is faster, and that’s what the audience wants.”

The shorter format is particularly well suited for digital platforms like YouTube, Netflix and Amazon, which allow kids to quickly move onto the next episode without the constraints of the traditional time slot.

“What is cool with the nonlinear offers now is that [viewers] can get into serialized storytelling much more easily,” Alby adds. “People used to have to wait a week or a couple of days to watch the next episode. When it’s on SVOD, for example, platforms program many or all at the same time, and viewers can binge-watch them; it’s easy!”

CAKE’s van Waveren says that children have long been fans of serialized content, and it’s the platforms that needed to catch up. “The reality of kids’ channels is that they would strip shows and rerun series so many times that they wanted to be able to play them in any order possible to get the maximum flexibility in their schedule. Kids have always loved the concept of a bigger backstory, but it didn’t work with the model of the platforms that they went on to get their content. The arrival of SVOD platforms, where people will watch a whole series sequentially over a weekend, creates the ideal environment for something that’s serialized.”

He emphasizes that the proliferation of these new platforms has meant that there is more choice, not only in places to find content but also in the kinds of formats that can be found.

Cyber Group’s Sissmann agrees, noting that kids’ predilection for on-demand viewing is reshaping the content itself. “It gives us more freedom to test new formats, serialized productions, and all genres as opposed to just comedy, which has been the ruler in the last five years. This is why it is key for us to have a panel of different genres in development. Over the last three years, our number of series in the development stage has gone from 5 to over 12, reflecting the genre diversification.”

Cyber Group is also reacting to kids’ increasing appetite for additional content linked to properties, “whether it appears on YouTube, on a proprietary channel under the form of short formats, or even on apps or video games. For Mirette Investigates, we have created a stream of short, interactive investigation episodes for the web that kids have particularly enjoyed.” The company is planning additional content to engage viewers for Gigantosaurus and Sadie Sparks as well.

“Digital extensions have become very important, as kids want to engage with their favorite characters across multiple formats,” says Gaumont’s Shapiro. “As we develop our new kids’ shows, digital extensions are a key component that we are focusing on now.”

GET APPY
Mediatoon has incorporated digital into the DNA of its series Maxi, geared toward kids 8-plus. “You can see the content on linear, but at the same time you can download the Maxi app, where you can watch the episodes and even rewrite the beginning or end of the episodes you like,” explains Alby. “We launched Maxi on the app before it even hit the linear network in Canada.”

While kids do enjoy having an app or other digital content tied to their favorite shows to interact with, Alby cautions that the add-ons need to be worthy of children’s time and attention—which seem to be in short supply these days.
“There have been lots of shows that hit the market with transmedia offers, but if the transmedia isn’t up to the kids’ expectations, it’s no use.”

And today’s finicky youngsters are now more easily able to share their opinions about what they like and what they don’t, having a nearly direct connection with the content creators themselves.

“You can see that especially online on platforms like YouTube; that is how content is being produced,” says CAKE’s van Waerden. “I am fascinated by it! We as linear producers never had that feedback, so we simply don’t know what our audience thinks in such level of detail. Whereas if you talk to people who produce content for digital and post new episodes every week, they get feedback and can see which episodes are embraced by their audience and which aren’t. They get a very direct relationship with their audience, and that, in turn, influences how the content turns out. ‘We’re not 100 percent there yet, but we are certainly looking at ways that we can do the same,’ he adds.

FEELING REPRESENTED

Something else CAKE is working on is ensuring that the diversity kids see in the world around them is reflected on screen, an initiative that van Waerden feels is beneficial for children and the industry as a whole. The company has brought to the market Pablo, about a boy who is on the autism spectrum.

“All the stories are based on the experiences of parents and caregivers who have children with autism and also people with autism who have contributed their own ideas,” van Waerden explains. “Pablo is also co-written and voiced by young autistics. We are getting incredible feedback from parents and audiences of children who for the first time see themselves represented on-screen, which is really special. We find it exciting to work in an industry where we can tell these stories to different segments of the audience and make them feel recognized.”

“There is a growing trend for more socially responsible, gender-inclusive content in the current climate,” says Hasbro’s Arnesen. He highlights the important messages of acceptance and friendship explored in My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic and My Little Pony: Equestria Girls.

REAL KIDS

As children are warmly embracing shows in which they can see people like themselves represented on-screen, live action is gaining in popularity once again. Mondo TV’s Azoury points to this as a genre she’s keeping a close eye on. The company already has in its catalog Heidi Bienvenida a Casa and its follow-up season Heidi Bienvenida al Show, and there’s a third on the planner. “We are strongly investing in this area and looking for more IP down the road,” she says. “The broadcasters know that it is something viewers want, so they are willing to try it—we need to have the material for them.”

Mediatoon’s Alby is equally optimistic about live-action fiction for kids. “Especially now that we can go back to serialized, we think that live action is going to be redeveloped. Kids can more easily identify with these characters.”

The company is gearing up to launch the live-action show Lucas et al., which Alby says encompasses many of the elements that are trending with kids today: “it’s serialized, it’s short—each episode is 7 minutes—and we have pranks that we can make available on the web as well as a making-of.”

Federation Kids & Family is also looking to live action to fill what Michel sees as a gap in the marketplace. “There is a lack of shows for kids about strong, empowered female characters. There are a few in the market, but if you compare them to their male counterparts, it’s nothing. Girls are an underserved market.”

Michel says the company is addressing this with the series I’m Me in Paris and other new shows in development. “Believe it or not, it’s really hard to find writers that write interesting, compelling female characters. Usually, female characters are either written as very girly or very tomboyish, there’s nothing in between. Interesting female characters that are created with finesse are hard to come by.”

The production community will hopefully rise to the challenge of incorporating more true-to-life characters, in all their diverse glory, into the shows kids are watching.