Highbrow: Helping children achieve their full potential

by Rahul Raswant · Priyanka Raswant · with Dr. Ger Graus OBE – Version 1.0.0

A Personal Introduction

The genesis of Highbrow dates back to 2013 when we, Priyanka and Rahul, were both finance industry professionals. As we moved closer to starting a family, we began to worry about where we would live, who would help us with childcare and how we would maintain our careers. In addition, Priyanka began to question how our children would acquire the skills or exposure we were fortunate enough to gain directly from our parents.

That year, Priyanka became interested in and began to explore children's video content with the intent of creating a curated list of videos. What she found was that the majority of children's content had little focus on skills enhancement, and instead focused on ensuring mass market appeal. Industry terms like 'edutainment' held little value other than acting as a marketing gimmick. That being said, it was possible to find content creators who were originating compelling responsible children's content… but only after extensive search. This realisation that the world lacked a solution for parents to easily access learning focused children's content, was the genesis of Highbrow. And so, our journey to build a children's media platform with the aim to make children's screen-time count.

The initial years of Highbrow were slow as only one of us to could work on the development full-time. It was not long before competitors began to copy our thinking and even our content library with the intent of occupying our niche before we could execute our vision. We tried to be positive and took this as a compliment, as it meant our little company was having a positive impact on the industry as a whole. In 2016, Rahul joined Highbrow full-time in order to help accelerate our efforts. In addition, we enlisted the advisory support of Dr. Ger Graus OBE who has been a great mentor to us both.

The following paper, represents our and Dr. Graus' analysis of several structural challenges in education, media and culture today; and how Highbrow's business model, values, content and technology addresses these challenges with the mission of helping children achieve their full potential. This paper is the foundation upon which Highbrow has been built and the value system that will guide our efforts for years to come. While we have no doubt the open sourcing of our thinking will lead to copy-cats and more compliments, we trust our earnest focus will be recognised and rewarded by those who matter most: parents and teachers. And should we continue to positively impact the industry as whole, with children being the ultimate beneficiaries, then so be it.

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CEO & Co-Founder

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Executive Summary

Over the past two hundred years we have witnessed a great expansion in formal education. More recently, the digital revolution has given rise to the availability of more information and resources than ever before. Yet, a set of structural challenges exist within our education system and media industry that hinder children from achieving their full potential. While each of these factors, and in some case the underlying drivers, have been discussed in great detail, their collective impact on children has never been codified. This paper outlines each of the challenges and presents a first of its kind consumer solution which harnesses the best developments in education and technology to put in place sustainable economic model and consumer proposition in order to help children imagine their brightest futures and achieve their full potential.

There are three key challenges. The first is the narrowing of education around literacy and numeracy at the expense of what are considered 'less academic' subjects such as art, dance and drama. Effectively, there is a structural de-emphasis of creativity as children progress through the education system. Second, reductions in public funding of extracurricular activities despite the long-term positive impact on life outcomes, which in turn transfers the burden back to parents reinforcing income-based differences over time. Third, the rapid increase in children's screen-time and the associated proliferation of content specified to the lowest common denominator in order to drive advertising revenue. As a result, parents struggle to ensure their children consume a balanced mix of screen-time.

Against this backdrop, Highbrow (joinhighbrow.com) was carefully conceived with the aim of providing parents access to 'healthy content'™ for their children, creating a viable economic model for well-intended independent creators and ultimately helping children to achieve their full potential. Highbrow is a curated subscription video on demand platform for children's extra-curricular and educational content delivered ad-free to any device, anywhere, anytime. Unlike traditional 'commercial content' driven platforms / channels, Highbrow's content is strictly focused on learning new skills e.g. drawing, crafts, science experiments etc.

In addition to being marked by the positive and engaging nature of its content offering (coined as 'healthy content'™), key platform benefits include hand curation to ensure quality and safety, an effortless child-first user experience and a technology enabled understanding of preferences to deliver a bespoke viewing experience to each child. Finally, Highbrow is underpinned by the philosophy that Highbrow should be available to all, and thus provides free or subsidised subscriptions to charities, schools or families in need.

At a time of increasing global contentiousness, there is no better time to harness the best of technology to break the long-standing orthodoxies. Highbrow… imagine and become.

The Rise of Formal Education

Formal education, defined as mass systems of public education, did not exist until the middle of the nineteenth century. Academics and practitioners often cite the development of formal education systems in large part to support workforce readiness. Irrespective of cause, the world has seen a great expansion in education over the past two centuries. This can be seen across all quantitative measures including global literacy rates, primary, secondary and tertiary school enrollment and average years of schooling. For example, from 1850 to 2014, global literacy rates climbed from approximately 15% to 85% [Figure 1]. From 1840 to 2000, UK primary school enrollment increased from 20% to 100% and from 1870 to 2010, the average years of schooling in the UK grew from 1 to 12.5 years and in the US from 4 to 13 years.[1]

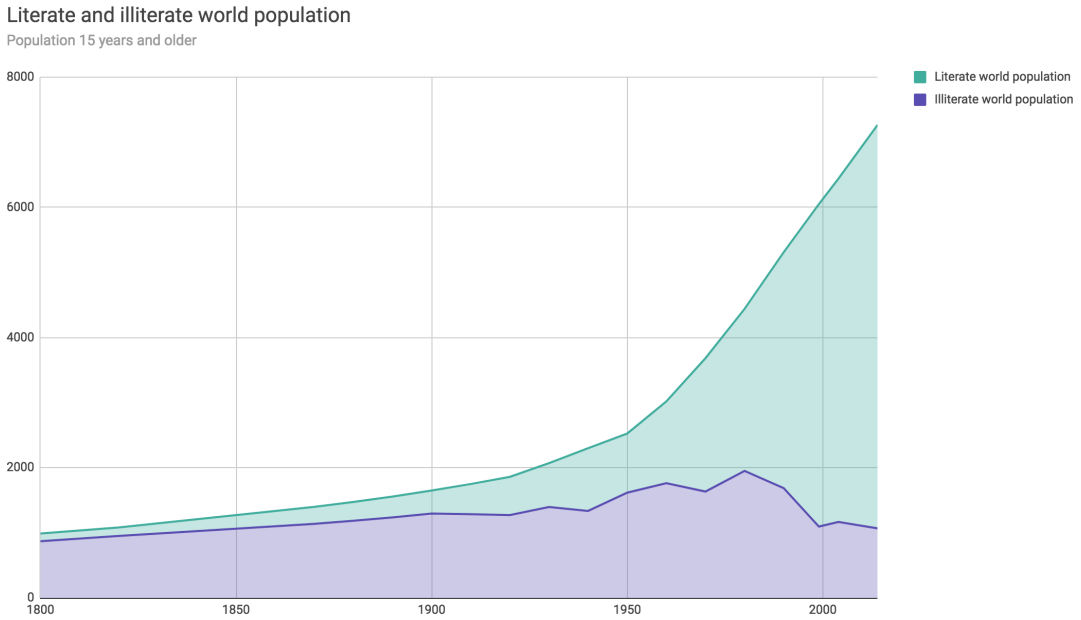


Figure 1. Literate and illiterate world population, 1800-2014

Today, education is widely accepted to be a fundamental resource. In most countries basic education is perceived as a sine qua non (an essential right). Governments are expected to ensure access to basic education and citizens are often required by law to attain education up to a certain level. Education has become so prolific that global spend on education and training has grown to £3 trillion to £4 trillion per annum.[1]

Structural Challenges Across School, Media and Society

In a system where 'education' increasingly equals 'schooling', close examination of children's education across the home, school and the environment, reveals challenges that suggest children may be structurally impeded from achieving their full-potential. Specifically, the combination of a de-emphasis of creativity in the school system, a growing socio-economic gap in extracurricular involvement and the proliferation of 'commercial content' all combine to hinder children from exploring their interests and cultivating their talents.

De-emphasis of creativity in the school system

The tenet of work-force readiness as the foundation of the modern education system is fairly common across academics, practitioners and social commentators. An associated theory, espoused by the likes of futurist Alvin Toffler, is that the modern education model dating back to the industrial era, goes beyond work-force readiness but is also designed to pre-adapt children for life working in a factory. Toffler writes in his 1970 book *Future Shock*:

> *"The inner life of the school thus become an anticipatory mirror, a perfect introduction to the industrial society. The most criticized features of the education today – the regimentation, lack of the individualization, the rigid systems of seating, grouping, grading and marking, the authoritarian role of the teacher – are precisely those that made mass public education so effective an instrument of adaptation for its place and time.*

Sir Ken Robinson, education scholar and speaker, who famously gave the most popular TED Talk of all time[2], builds on this notion of the adverse aspects of standardisation, critiquing the emphasis of literacy and numeracy over what are considered less crucial skills. He writes in his book *Creative Schools: Revolutionizing Education from the Ground Up*:

> *"Most national curricula are based on the idea of discrete subjects. In most systems there is a hierarchy to these subjects. At the top are literacy, mathematics and the STEM disciplines. Next come the humanities, including history, geography, and social studies. Because the standards movement emphasises academic study, it places less value on practical disciplines like art, drama, dances, music, design, and the physical education… which are all thought to be nonacademic. Within the arts, the visual arts and music are usually given higher priority than drama or dance. Often these last two are not taught at all. Furthermore, Robinson contends the de-emphasis of creativity accentuates as the child progresses through the school years, increasingly focused on the academic and away from the creative with each successive year.*

Martha Nussbaum, the Law and Ethics professor at the University of Chicago, levies a similar critique with respect to supremacy of literacy and numeracy; but in her thesis it is critical thinking that is subordinated. One example, Nussbaum cites is that if children are to be expected to think critically then surely the child should have a voice in the planning of the day's activities and the curriculum itself.[3]

Pushing up against this systematic narrowing of education, and complicating matters, is the modern world where the ability to access information and learn has never been greater. Children will require help to reconcile these competing dynamics and determine the right path themselves.

Growing socio-economic gap in extracurricular involvement

The positive impact of extracurricular activities on education attainment and accumulated earnings has been shown across studies. Activities such as chess clubs and football teams promote important non-cognitive or 'soft skills' – such as, grit, teamwork, self-discipline, emotional intelligence and leadership – that are associated with educational attainment and higher returns in the labor market. For example, involvement in secondary school extracurricular activities is associated not only with educational and occupational attainment, but also with political and civic engagement in adulthood as well as mental and physical health much later in life.[4]

However, there is also much evidence to suggest that as schools face funding pressures, Headteachers and Principals opt to focus on 'making the grade' on standardised tests, sacrificing spend on extra-curricular activities (irrespective of the implication on long-term outcomes). Reductions in public funding of extra-curricular activities, in effect transfers the burden back to parents and reinforces income-based differences in access.[4] In fact, a recent study based on longitudinal data from the 1970s to the present collected by the US National Center for Education Statistics reveals class disparities in involvement with school extracurricular activities steadily increased over the past three decades. Specifically, students in the top quartile of the socioeconomic status index (SES) increased their participation in extracurricular activities up to approximately 75% (driven by increasing competition for college admissions) while the bottom SES quartile experience a decline in their participation rate down to 55% [Figure 2].[5]

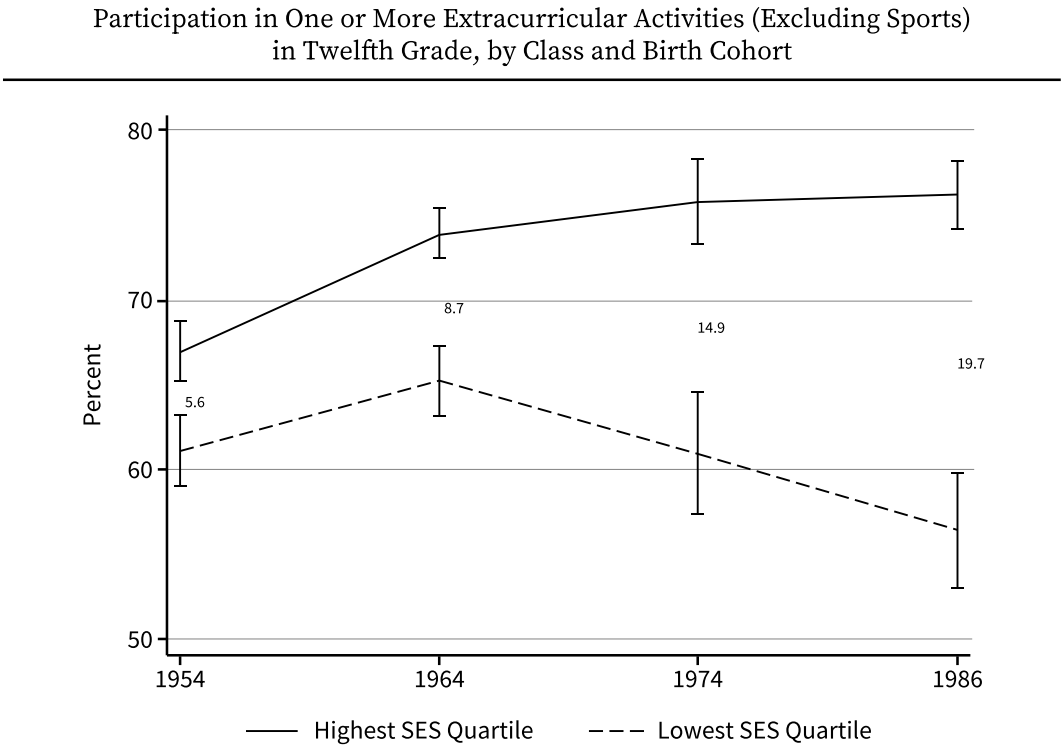


Figure 2. Extracurricular activity participation, 1954-1986

The concerning implications of these findings are best captured by the authors of the study:

> *"If class increasingly predicts participation in activities that in turn predict educational attainment and future income, in effect we may be witnessing a vicious cycle that shapes patterns of intergenerational mobility.*

Stopping this vicious cycle will require either a reversal of the current trend associated drivers or an alternative model for access.

Proliferation of commercial content at the expense of enrichment

The challenge posed by the proliferation of commercial content and drivers behind this phenomenon do not appear to be widely understood. Close examination of the topic and underlying economic drivers suggest a structural specification of content to the lowest common denominator, delivery of advertising to children despite known issues, and changing media delivery and consumption patterns, all combine to hinder access to learning content. And as a result, parents struggle to ensure their children consume a healthy & balanced mix of screen-time. Instead parents

are forced to resort to mix of solutions including expensive in-person classes, the limitation of screen-time and/or YouTube, despite the commercial messaging and risk of exposure to harmful content.

Lowest common denominator commercial content

Starting with radio but following on with television, the internet and most recently mobile, multi-media has been dominated by the commercial content model. Whereby, the content is designed to maximise the reach of the associated commercial messaging. An unfortunate consequence of this model is that content is specified to meet the lowest common denominator in order to appeal to the broadest possible audience. As a result, children's programs are often biased towards amusement and passive viewing as opposed to enrichment and active learning.

Adverse impact of advertising

The adverse impact of advertising on children has been extensively documented by researchers around the world; yet the ubiquity of commercial messaging delivered to children, whether via television or internet, would suggest the matter has not entered the public consciousness to point of out-right rejection. In 2004, the American Psychological Association convened a panel of noted psychologist to review the body of academic literature on the impact of advertising on children. The panel found:

> *"Advertising targeting children below the ages of 7-8 is inherently unfair because it capitalizes on younger children's inability to attribute persuasive intent to advertising [...] As a result of this limitation, children below this age comprehend the information contained in television commercials uncritically, accepting most advertising claims and appeals as truthful, accurate and unbiased.*

As a corollary to the above, the report also found that there was a material increase in the quantum of parent child conflict as children were not able to tell what was good vs. bad for them.[6]

Changing media delivery and consumption patterns

When we look across the UK and the US, there are three consistent themes with respect to the change in media delivery and consumption patterns of pre- and primary school age children. First, mobile device ownership has markedly increased. According to OFCOM, the UK's communications regulator, tablet ownership amongst 8-11 year old children has risen from 2% in 2011 to 52% in 2017. For 3-4 and 5-7 year old children this has risen from 0% to 21% and 35% respectively. Similarly, over the same period, Common Sense Media, a US non-profit focused on promoting safe technology and media for children, estimates 0-8 age children's ownership of their own tablet increased from <1% to 42% [Figure 3].[7]

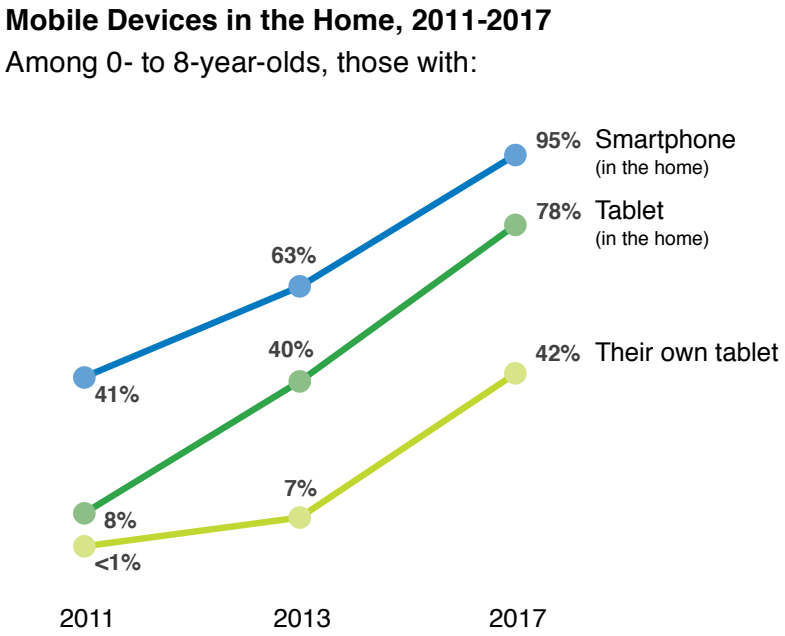
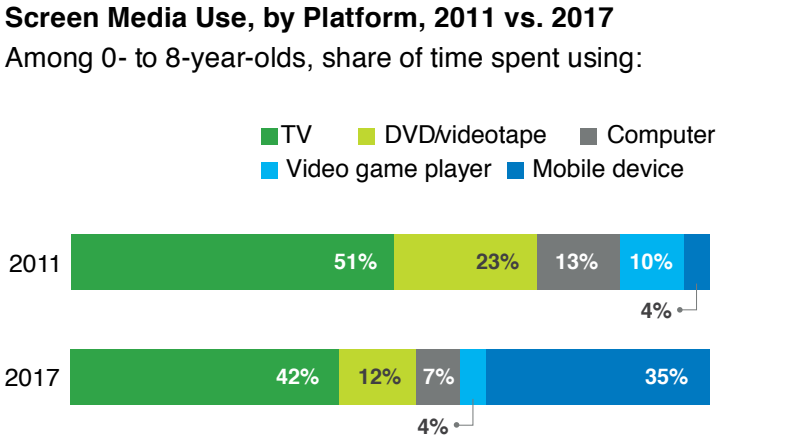


Figure 3. Mobile Devices in the Home, 2011-2017

Second, a material shift in consumption towards mobile devices and away from the DVD and TV. For example, in the US, television and DVD/video share consumption decreased from 74% in 2011 down to 63% in 2017. While share of mobile consumption increased from 4% to 35%.[8]



Note: Video game player includes console and handheld players. Mobile device includes smartphone, tablet, iPod Touch, or similar device. Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Figure 4. Screen Media Use, by Platform, 2011 vs. 2017

A similar pattern holds true in the UK. For example, the use of a DVD player amongst 5-15 year old children was 86% in 2010 dropping to 51% in 2017. Amongst the same age group and over the same period the use of tablets went from 3% up to 78%.[8]

And third, average time children spend on screens has seen a material rise. For example, hours of internet usage amongst children 8-11 in the UK went from an average of 4.4 hours / week in 2005 up to 13.2 in 2017.[8][9] Furthermore, OFCOM estimates that children in the UK on average consume upwards of 6 hours of screen-time per day.[8]

Together these dynamics have disrupted the economic model for educational video content, which had relied on the DVD distribution model, free from 'appeal to all' pressures of commercial programing delivered via linear television supported by advertising. Furthermore, it has enhanced the ability for the child to engage in solo viewing in their room as opposed to joint viewing in the living room. As a result, the need for positive screen-time alternatives that allow children to engage in independent viewing safely has become all the more important. That said, the need for parents to continue to play an active role in their children's consumption of content, e.g. co-viewing, continues to remain essential irrespective the device, location or content.

Together these structural challenges paint a troubling picture

Are we, amidst the greatest technological revolution and access to information, creating a generation of children who, irrespective of individual passion, must toil to make the grade, be limited in learning options and be over exposed to commercially motivated screen-time? Are we impeding children from exploring their interests, cultivating their talents, pursuing their passions and thereby structurally holding back the next Vincent Van Gogh or Steve Jobs?

Helping Children Achieve Their Full Potential

This meta challenge posed by the combination of the narrowing of education, the socio-economic gap in access to extra-curricular activities and the proliferation of commercial content, remains unsolved. A multitude of companies have sought to solve any one of these problems in insolation or staked the claim to be solving more than one in name only. For example, there have been players who have adopted the delivery of children's content on an ad-free basis coupled with the claims of being 'educational' while still delivering traditional 'commercial content' as opposed to genuine learning. Another strategy often used is to license a host of 'commercial content' along with an educational program or two, only to then package the whole offering as a 'learning' platform. While savvy marketers can spin almost anything, the simple fact remains that if a platform does not meet the standard of a school then it very unlikely to be genuinely educational.

Against this backdrop, Highbrow was carefully conceived as a mission driven enterprise with the aim of providing parents access to 'healthy content'™ for their children, creating a viable economic model for well-intended independent 'healthy content' creators and ultimately helping children to imagine their brightest futures and achieve their full potential.

Highbrow

Highbrow is a curated subscription video on demand (SVOD) platform for children's extra-curricular and educational content delivered ad-free to any device, anywhere, anytime. Unlike traditional commercial content driven platforms/channels, Highbrow's content is strictly focused on learning new skills e.g. crafts, science experiments, drawing, etc. In this way, Highbrow is designed to be a form of participatory screentime rather than a regimented learning activity. For example, a curious child can learn Korean on a mobile phone; explore mathematics on a tablet; practice ballet using a Smart Television; or sing along to nursery rhymes using a classroom SmartBoard.

Highbrow is uniquely able to be carried both in the home and in schools. This good fortune and synergistic outcome stems from Highbrow holding itself to the high standards of an educator and the needs of a parent. Specifically, from the onset and on an ongoing basis, Highbrow developed its offering in consultation with schools, educators, and academics including Arbourthorne Community Primary School, the British Schools in the Middle East Association, Dr. Ger Graus and Professor John Siraj-Blatchford. We also formed a Highbrow Pioneer Group of 80+ parents who constantly monitor and quality assure the content and technology over and above Highbrow's own robust internal efforts.

Parents and Children

Highbrow's consumer value proposition is predicated on six elements which together deliver an entirely new proposition to consumers, creators, investors and society at large. Together these elements allow children to learn and develop skills in a self-initiated, self-directed and self-sustained manner.

- **Healthy** - Each content provider is carefully selected based on the company's proprietary Healthy Content Framework™ which carefully assesses the provider's content based on ten distinct criteria including elements such as being 'participatory', 'skills-focused', 'independent' etc.
- **Safe** - As a platform serving pre- and primary schools aged children, safety is front and center across all of Highbrow's efforts. And thus, in addition to the upfront screening of creators and their content, each video is pre-viewed in its entirety before ever making it on to Highbrow. Furthermore, Highbrow is advertising free and is committed to never selling children's personal data.
- **Engaging** - Ensuring that selected content is 'engaging' to Highbrow's audience is a core element of Highbrow's selection process. Furthermore, the Highbrow community of creators is constantly growing and thus presenting children with fresh viewing and learning deepening opportunities. But also, affording Highbrow, the ability to remove or retire content as and when appropriate.
- **Personalised** - Highbrow uses technology to understand preferences and deliver an entirely bespoke viewing experience to each child. Furthermore, Highbrow helps better understand your children's interests based on viewing as well as provide pro-active suggestions on how to cultivate passions offline.
- **Effortless** - Highbrow's user interface has been designed to be highly intuitive and child-first, such that even a toddler can manage to navigate from icon to the content of his or her choice effortlessly. Furthermore, Highbrow's content has been carefully curated to support usage and learning. And finally, Highbrow is available across all devices and the core eco-systems ensuring the service can be accessed at all time.
- **Empowering** - Highbrow provides affordable access to extra-curricular activities that could otherwise be prohibitively expensive for many. Furthermore, for charities, school and families who can not afford it, Highbrow provides free or subsidized subscriptions. And finally, once Highbrow reaches scale, the company or non-profit affiliate will look to offer grants to creators who focus on 'healthy content' production.

Schools

Highbrow deliberately operates outside the confines of the education establishment, fundamentally delivering extra-curricular learning opportunities, embracing the life of the mind and learning for learning's sake in an authentic and purposeful sense. Nonetheless, Highbrow is a powerful platform for schools given it's content and technology which come together to allow teachers to selectively complement lesson plans in class, but more importantly to help students to connect and extend learning both on a directed and self-directed basis. Highbrow has a particularly strong applicability in an early learning setting given the platforms library of content, the proximity of curriculum and technology enabled personalisation.

Independent Content Creators

Independent educational content creators often struggle to monetise in the face of competition from commercial programing and disappearance of the DVD. And thus, Highbrow aggregates likeminded independents into a community with the intention of disrupting the commercial content model by putting in place a viable economic model for ad-free 'healthy content' delivery.

With Highbrow, creators benefit from improved monetisation, spurring increased production of children's 'healthy content', and ultimately driving increased availability of children's 'healthy content' on Highbrow and beyond [Figure 5].

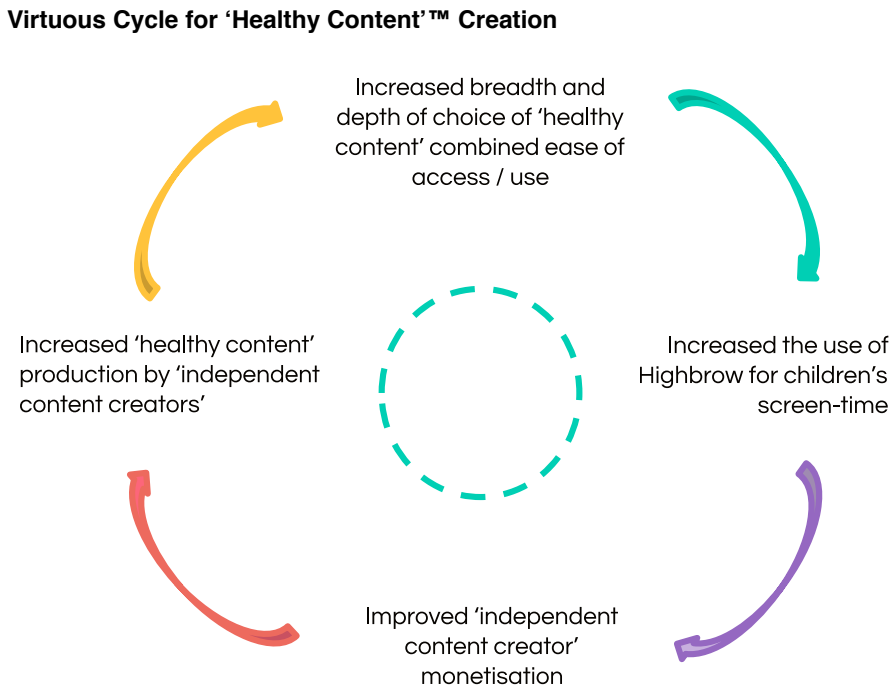


Figure 5. Virtuous Cycle for 'Healthy Content' Creation

Business Model

Highbrow's business model as with any other SVOD platform, operates an initial free-trial period which then converts to a paid subscription if the customer chooses not to unsubscribe. However, unlike other players, Highbrow is deliberately priced at a premium to other children SVOD offerings. For example, in the UK, Highbrow is priced at GBP 5.99/month while Disney's SVOD offering is priced at GBP 4.99/month.

This premium affords Highbrow the opportunity to better support its 'healthy content' creators as well as comfortably offer free or subsidized subscriptions to those who cannot afford Highbrow.

And thus, Highbrow attracts consumers who understand and support the company's mission to disrupt the commercial content model and broaden children's learning opportunities with the ultimate aim to help children achieve their full potential.

Conclusion

In our rapidly changing world competing forces shape experiences and outcomes. There are numerous ways to positively impact those forces for the better. Business with the aim of having a positive social impact is one such way. The more it goes against conventional wisdom or long standing commercial practices, the harder the path, as securing capital and commercial traction becomes that much harder. But we must not underestimate society's desire for a better world and most importantly a parent's desire to nurture their child.

Highbrow stands to help children around the world broaden their horizons and reach for heights that may have never dreamed possible.

Highbrow... imagine and become.

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