

TELEVIZION

International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)

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It won't work without breaking taboos

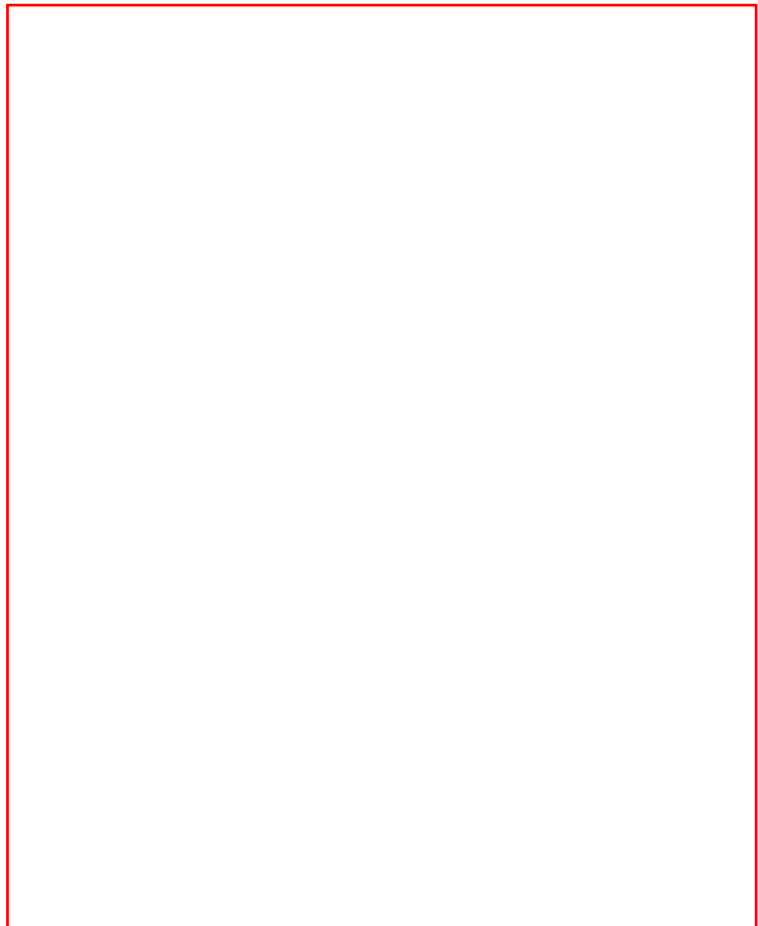
Interview with Albert Schäfer, the manager of the ARD/ZDF Children's Channel

IZI: The future of public service children's television – a colleague of yours recently wrote – lies in the Children's Channel. Is that right?

Schäfer: The future lies in the Children's Channel if strong children's departments continue to exist within the ARD and ZDF. In this combination I, too, believe that the future lies in the Children's Channel. This is simply tied up with two things: in our diverse media landscape children need to have somewhere to go to where they can expect continuity and security. They find that in the Children's Channel. Secondly, the success of the Children's Channel, which was, of course, surprising for many – even inside the ARD and ZDF – is, so to speak, a prerequisite for further success. And, as matters stand, I'm convinced that the Children's Channel will have a good and long future: as a kind of advertisement for public service children's programmes, but only – as I said – with the help of the great efforts of experienced producers in the other non-commercial corporations.

IZI: In recent times the - now famous - *Teletubbies* have contributed to the success of the Children's Channel. Was this an instinctive purchase rather than a cool calculation?

Schäfer: It was more of an instinctive decision. I had something to do at Erfurt for a few days for the Children's Channel and read a notice about a new programme in England and wanted to see it. We then looked at it, and I was – I openly admit it – in the beginning surprised if not nonplussed by such a programme, which there hadn't been any examples of up to then and which at first does have a disconcerting



effect on adults. That's the effect it had on me. All the same, I had a feeling that it was something special.

IZI: What is special about it?

Schäfer: The *Teletubbies* give pleasure to a target group for which there had so far been no explicit programme. And to that extent it is a kind of violation of a taboo, particularly for the Children's channel, which triggered very fierce public discussions. Even so, I think it is right and justifiable to broadcast this programme. We are now getting feedback from parents I wouldn't have expected. They write quite frankly when and what their young children watch on television - and that up to now there hasn't been anything for them. Or that they watched with their elder siblings, but the programme was not for them. It is often the case that there are two or three children in the family, a six-year-old boy, a nine-year-old girl, and a two and a half- or three-year-old boy as well. And he watches television on Sunday, too, or whenever it is. For him there wasn't a programme. A gap has now been filled in and at the same time a taboo has been broken. That is one reason for the success. The other reason is that this programme format breaks with certain traditions - it gets away from adapting children's television from the formats of programmes for adults. Many wonderful children's programmes from ARD and ZDF - I'll just mention *Siebenstein* - which are made very lovingly, but are adapted from adult formats in their production, in their dramatisation. That means the story is told using parallel plots; the cutting is used in a definite way. With the *Teletubbies* that is different, and that at first upsets adults, because this programme is quite radically tailored to television beginners: with the repetitions, with the slow pace, with the different language levels. There is not only the blah-blah level; but also the correct language level. There are at least three language levels. That alarms people, and this together with the attention associated with it are part of the success.

IZI: Quite a lot was changed for the German children.

Schäfer: We didn't only dub the series, but we remade about half of the inside parts. These are the scenes from the English original which don't altogether fit in with our children's environment here in Germany. For example, children in school uniforms, left-hand traffic on the road and suchlike. That, we thought, was necessary to tally with children's life experience here - that was one thing. Secondly, we also wanted to show deliberately that it was not just a purchase, but we want to show children in Germany - children who talk, who sing. Although that's possible by dubbing, it's not so simple. And it must be made clear to the viewing children: it's really taking place in your surroundings, it has something to do with you. It was possible with some of the original film inserts, but not with others. So we decided to remake about half of them.

IZI: A lot of parents like the programme. But some are indifferent and others are opposed to the programme because they feel that their educational efforts are being undermined.

Schäfer: I understand the criticism and also the annoyance. Nevertheless, I think it's necessary to stick to our position. If you look at the last few decades, the tradition of public service children's programmes is not just the good, accepted children's programme, which manages to find everybody's common denominator, but a taboo violation has always been involved. The best example is *Sesame Street*. There were discussions about the age from which children watch television; there were resolutions passed about allowing them to start doing so at the age of six. You can't pass a resolution in a committee about the minimum age

for watching television, and something quite different happens in living rooms, bedrooms and children's rooms. That means that violating a taboo by public service television also has a tradition. And has also advanced television. *Sesame Street* is one example, *Rappelkiste* another. The *Sendung mit der Maus*, too, was at first basically a taboo violation. If public television hasn't the courage to break with old ideas in order to advance the children's programme in the discussion, nobody else will do so. The private television companies only break taboos which have something to do with commerce, with a certain kind of dramatisation, with action and violence, but they will not advance the actual discussion on children's television. That is something the public service corporations have to do, and for that this discussion, too, has to be conducted and accepted.

IZI: But public service children's television does not collide with the parents' educational ideas.

Schäfer: If I might mention *Rappelkiste* again: it also took a stand against parents. At least that was the subject of discussion at that time. I myself then spoke at great length with the responsible producer about it. So to that extent that also existed in some areas. Not the whole of the Children's Channel works against the parents – and I believe it doesn't do so with the *Teletubbies* either. The Children's Channel now has an additional programme in its scheme which really does give rise to fierce discussions. That doesn't mean we have set off in a completely new direction. I believe that in one or two years this programme will be assessed differently by the public and that then it will be regarded as an interesting building-block for media education.

IZI: You're purchasing a new pre-school series from the USA: *The Bear in the Big Blue House*. A programme similar to the *Teletubbies* or something in more traditional style this time?

Schäfer: That's the right description. The programme again has a more traditional feeling about it. The – if I may use the expression – public service parents you were talking about will certainly not be annoyed by it, as it is in the tradition of what they know. Even so, this programme has great charm, great emotionality, and I'm wondering what kind of effect the package, so to speak, of the *Teletubbies* and *The Bear in the Big Blue House* will have on the viewers and the parents. I'm certain there will be less discussion about it, also less attention paid to it, but a lot of agreement and a lot of success.

IZI: There is also much discussion about what is going on all around the *Teletubbies* series. Under the term merchandising over 100 products are on sale, mainly toys and children's clothing. What does the Children's Channel get out of these sales?

Schäfer: We do get something from the sales, in that merchandising contributes to making the programme popular. That is a marketing measure. That's something we can admit quite openly. Nor is it anything new. When you see how much merchandising there is in connection with the *Mouse*, the *Tigerente* and with *Tabaluga*, that is with programmes from ARD and ZDF, there are certainly just as many different articles offered for sale. I don't know the exact figures at the moment; nor do I know what the revenues are there? But it is the case that merchandising in connection with a children's programme did not start with the *Teletubbies*. It has a tradition going back a few years. To that extent what is special about merchandising the *Teletubbies* is merely the great success. But that, in turn, has something to do with the popularity, with the special attention paid to this programme.

IZI: BBC Worldwide has earned well over £55m from the merchandising articles alone.

Schäfer: Television and commerce belong together in children's television and apparently in

public service television as well. Though here I must point out that children's television also needs this additional source of revenue for it to be financed worldwide. As long as children's television is not provided with the same financial means as prime-time television for adults, it is necessary – over and beyond the profit expectations of producer and licence dealers – to handle merchandising on that scale, since many programmes could never be made or be funded without this additional source of revenue. I must say, however, that I'm not in favour of now considering the merchandising of the *Teletubbies* in isolation. If you look at a child's room you can see that the godmother, the grandmother, the parents and friends and others as well are constantly giving the children presents: soft toys, rag dolls, all conceivable articles. Children's rooms are full of these things. That was the case before and with the *Teletubbies*. The *Teletubbies* have expanded the assortment by several products, but they didn't invent merchandising. You could say cynically that the tormented relatives have a new chance to give the children something new at Christmas or for their birthday. You can sometimes see the helplessness in their faces when they have to give the poor little children a present. That means that this consumption situation exists even without the *Teletubbies* and their articles.

IZI: The children's television market is constantly changing. New programmes are coming from SAT.1, RTL and Pro 7, and foreign competitors, too, are getting ready to start. How, then, do you see the position of the Children's Channel in this competitive environment?

Schäfer: When *Nickelodeon* stopped transmitting, we were held jointly responsible by some – something I've never understood, as *Nickelodeon* was doing quite well. It was a purely economic decision. It only showed us how necessary it is to have a public service Children's Channel, because children and parents can't rely on children's programmes from the private companies, as these are dependent on profit expectations, and if the profits are not right, the station is simply closed down. The Children's Channel, on the other hand, provides continuation irrespective of these economic considerations. Now new ones are being added. That's why SAT.1 – and that has something to do with EM.TV and Junior-TV, with a big stock of programmes, with much too much money, which is available by going onto the stock exchange and has to be put to good use somewhere – whether they want to or not, are also getting a children's programme, which will be starting up soon. I don't see any particular danger here, as the plums from the so-called Junior Package, they are at ZDF and the Children's Channel, and not at SAT.1. Things will get more interesting again in the next few years, with digital television, with regard to enlarging the programme. The Disney Channel is starting up, and then Fox Kids will soon arrive on the scene and others, too. I'm watching all this with interest – just like all the other programme providers. And we'll also discover that the cake won't get any bigger, but the pieces of cake will get smaller for everyone – including the Children's Channel. But if you see a danger in this programme enlargement, then I see this danger more for other competitors. So the Disney Channel in the digital package is more likely to give Super RTL a headache, as they also have Disney programmes. That means that then there will be two channels with Disney programmes. When Fox Kids comes, that, because of its programme philosophy, will affect other competitors rather than the Children's Channel. And that's why I'm watching the new programme providers with interest and vigilance, but I'm not worried as far as the Children's Channel is concerned. I think we have a rather different position in this market. Of course, we, too, have to be and want to be popular and seen; but we want to be, above all, indispensable. We want to provoke discussion, we want to be an opinion leader, we want to venture into new programme formats, and we want not only – and that's something we don't need to do – to look to quantitative success.

IZI: Will the Children's Channel programmes that have proved successful also be shown in the ARD Third Programmes, the regional programmes – perhaps even the *Teletubbies*?

Schäfer: The *Teletubbies* can already be seen in the Third programmes – not yet everywhere, but I think to an increasing extent – at any rate, they can already be seen in some of the Third programmes. And we have just learnt that there, too, (by looking hard enough) the viewers are apparently finding them.

IZI: The Children's Channel has managed to attract many young children in front of the television set. Is that all right with you?

Schäfer: That suits me fine, as I would rather – and I can say this quite frankly – the children, even the young ones, watched the Children's Channel than any other channel, where they see not only other programmes with a different philosophy, with different dramatisation, with a different pace and so on, and perhaps commercials as well, which we certainly don't have and never will have. For that reason, when children watch television – and that is the reality – then they should watch the Children's Channel and not another programme.

INFORMATION

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