

TELEVIZION

International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)

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Under fire from American programme criticism

In the USA, too, the evaluation of the *Teletubbies* suffers from a lack of research data and premature negative criticism.

The *Teletubbies* are really having a hard time. Not only are their toast and pudding machines not working half the time, but their journey to the USA has not gone off very smoothly either:

- In 1998 the British series was taken over into the programme of PBS, the "educational" Public Broadcasting Service. Even before it became a hit with the very young (and some older ones as well), the critics made themselves heard. Much the same as in Germany, it was asked whether there should be any series at all for young children and, if so, whether the *Teletubbies* was the right one. Unlike Sesame Street, in which the educational objectives were quite clear, most critics asked what the "value" of a series was in which tubby figures waddle around, apparently have a lot of fun, but who cannot even speak correct English.
- Hardly had the first one million *Teletubby* figures been sold, when the fundamentalist televangelist Jerry Falwell made the headlines with his criticism of the *Teletubbies*. He outed Tinky-Winky. Falwell, who often co-operates with conservative political groups, surprised the nation (and alarmed not a few Christian parents) with the assertion that Tinky-Winky showed all the signs of extremely serious homosexual tendencies: he is violet, has a gay power symbol on his head, and – who can still have doubts? – often carries a handbag.
- The third blow for the *Teletubbies* came in August 1999: the Association of American Pediatrics announced that children under the age of two should not watch television and that all programmes for young children were harmful. Some weeks later, incidentally, there were similar warnings from German paediatricians (see article by von Hofacker, p xxx).

This outing by Jerry Falwell seems to have done more damage to the evangelist than the *Teletubbies*; to a large extent he was ridiculed. In contrast, the public took the statement from the paediatricians very seriously, and both the British production company and the PBS Network in the USA published statements in defence of the series.

Press reports and discussions about the paediatricians' statement mostly assumed that the doctors had determined that the *Teletubbies* and other children's programmes were harmful

because they stunted the physical and mental development of young children. It was rarely asked how the doctors had arrived at this conclusion and why television should have these negative affects.

How does television influence small children?

In discussions about the effects of television on children it is often overlooked how very difficult it is to prove these effects indisputably and that much of what is taken for proven fact is only opinions and conjectures. Assessments of this kind are also made by "experts", such as the above-mentioned paediatricians. In fact, it took about five years and cost millions of dollars to find out whether and in which way, for example, watching *Sesame Street* had positive effects on children. And even then there were still discussions among the researchers on the validity of the findings. Anyone who carefully read up on the matter ascertained that the American paediatricians had not carried out a study of their own on the *Teletubbies* – nor a study on the influence of television generally on young children. They had only inferred from available studies that babies and young children need personal affection and interaction and that this kind of contact is better than television alone. So the doctors stated that television should not be misused as a substitute for parents spending time with their babies. And they warned that television can induce parents to use television interactions of this kind. But the doctors do not know whether playing with their parents in front of the *Teletubbies* on television is harmful. For it cannot be ruled out that this playing can be just the same as other kinds of child-parent contact.

Do the *Teletubbies* have a positive influence?

If it is accepted that watching television for half an hour a day under supervision of parents who interact with the young child is not harmful - and there is no sound evidence to the contrary – the question still remains as to whether the contents of the *Teletubbies* series are suitable for helping young children in their development. Press announcements and, of course, the American *Teletubbies* website as well provide detailed arguments for the value of the *Teletubbies* and describe the research work on which the concept and the assumption that the programme is useful for children is based. (There, by the way – www.pbs.org/Teletubbies - you will also find an explanation for Tinky-Winky's handbag.) To sum up that means:

It is assumed that children grow up in households in which television is watched, and that it is also better to have a series conceived specially for one- to four-year-olds. The concept of the series is based on observations of young children and structured on their games and language forms. The frequent repetitions are meant to make learning easier, to allow the children to recognise things and thus strengthen their self-esteem. The movements of the *Teletubbies* (dances etc) are meant to be imitated; the young viewers are not supposed to sit passively in front of the television.

Although there is frequent counting from one to four, the *Teletubbies* are not intended to be a direct preparation for school subjects (like *Sesame Street*). Instead, they are meant to help develop emotional needs, like enjoyment (the *Teletubbies* are very happy), affection (they like one another) and individuality (they look different and often do things on their own). As far as the much-discussed language is concerned, the *Teletubbie* babytalk, it is pointed out that over 80% of what is said in the programmes is the language of adults. The rest, the *Teletubbies'* "play language", is intended to strengthen the bonding with the *Tubbies*, thus making positive effects possible.

Do the *Teletubbies* fulfil their educational objectives? The producers of the series have drawn

attention to a study in which a teacher who used the *Teletubbies* in the lessons discovers that this popular pre-school programme even promotes reading and writing (see p xxx Jackie Marsh: Learning to Speak, Read and Write with the *Teletubbies*).

Children's Television and its critics

The omnipresence of the media, especially television, and the concern for children who grow up with the media guarantee an open ear for criticism of television programmes for children. Here it is easy to overlook the fact that many who criticise are only expressing their personal opinion and that all of us can hardly understand what children do in fact perceive and understand when they view such a programme.

My personal opinion is that critics should be judged more critically and that we must not forget either how difficult it is to measure the influence of a programme like the *Teletubbies*. There are certainly negative influences when parents use television as a babysitter. But we should not automatically fear the worst when such a programme becomes popular (and turns someone into a multimillionaire). Isn't it also possible that the fact that toddlers are so fond of the *Teletubbies* indicates positive influences? Do we really have to be so mistrustful all the time when something is enjoyed? I believe that the concept of the *Teletubbies* is sound and the success of the series shows that it is in line with young children's level of development. It is quite probable that the *Teletubbies* have relatively little influence compared with the parents and other factors. In 20 years they will certainly also have a cult following, like the *Sendung mit der Maus* and *Maya, the Bee*, and then maybe critics will be getting upset about a new computer for two-year-olds.

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