

Astrid Hammer

Confetti TiVi

Informing without arousing fears

In handling the subject of war Austrian children's television focussed on the children's perspective. In order to take away the children's fears the subjects of peace and conflict resolution were dealt with.

CONFETTI *TiVi* was introduced in the children's programme of the Austrian public service broadcaster ORF in April 1994 as a special interest programme for children in Austria. It is an independent "children's channel" within the framework of the "mother channel" ORF 1 that aims especially at the target group of the 3- to 11-year-olds. The crisis in Iraq and the consequences of the war were treated in particular in two programmes, in *CONFETTI TOWN* and *CONFETTI NEWS*.

CONFETTI TOWN, a kind of leisure-time glossy magazine for kids, is intended mainly to be fun and to encourage children to spend their leisure-time usefully. Serious subjects, too, are not neglected. *CONFETTI TOWN* regularly contains a newsflash which reports on worldwide current political events.

CONFETTI NEWS is a weekly news broadcast with magazine character which endeavours to deal with topical subjects, represent something like "Talk of the Town" and be relevant to international affairs. It is the aim of the programme not only to present news in a manner suitable for children, but also to deliberately select those subjects which are very relevant

for children and put them across from the angle of the young target audience.

Before the war

Even before the first troops were sent into the Gulf region, the subject of war in Iraq was all-pervasive – in the media, in schools, in the private area etc. At this point in time we regarded it as our responsibility to provide information not only on the conflict of America versus Iraq, but also on the everyday life of the people living in the region affected, paying special attention to the situation of the children in Iraq. In *CONFETTI NEWS* we reported, for example, on 10-year-old Youssef and his family, portrayed their living conditions and preparations for the impending war. In addition, we reported on the background and development of the first Gulf War and made a point of explaining terms relevant to the war like "embargo" or "UN observers" in a way children could understand.



One of the children asked about the war

Violence is no solution

"There are conflicts everywhere, on a large and a small scale. There are different ways of achieving a resolution of conflicts. In spite of the greatest efforts there are sometimes situations in which all attempts are doomed to failure. In most cases, however, an agreement is reached." It was our endeavour to mediate this message in our productions. But how can we convey the origin of a conflict and attempts to resolve it?

We decided to make conflicts a subject of discussion, conflicts with which children are familiar, which they have perhaps been involved in themselves and which they actively contributed to resolving. To this end, before the war began we devoted *CONFETTI TiVi* to the theme "Quarrels & Reconciliation" for a whole week. It centred on the idea of putting across the message that conflict is part of life and that the ultimate objective has to be reconciliation. From 10th to 17th March 2003 this central theme was examined in all its facets in the ORF's children's programme. We depicted the children's conflicts in the family, between parents or with parents, with siblings, at school, with teachers, among their fellow pupils and among friends. Our efforts focussed not only on discussing how conflicts arise but also, and chiefly, on the aspect of reconciliation.

In the phase before the outbreak of the – then still impending – Iraq War, we repeatedly called on our young viewers to ask us their questions. Their concerns were dealt with in

CONFETTI TOWN by an expert. Moreover, the expert explained how avoiding wars and/or conflicts is handled at the state level.

The outbreak of the war

On the first day of the war we broadcast trailers on our children's programme that we had produced ourselves, giving information on the outbreak of the war. Again we called on the children to articulate their questions on the Iraq War. On the following Saturday our news broadcast supplied comprehensive information on the happenings since the outbreak of war. In addition to that, a special transmission was running on the subject of the Iraq War to which a member of the Service Department for Education on Human Rights at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights in Vienna had been invited as a studio guest. The peace-educator was confronted with the following questions from the children: Michaela asked for example:

"Can the Iraq War really not spread to us, and if it does, what will happen then? And I have another question: My friends are flying to England on a school trip. Can anything happen to them? I'm worried something might happen to them."

The e-mail from Melanie was short:

"I wanted to ask if this will become the Third World War."

Tamara wrote:

"Though I'm 12 years old now, I don't understand why America wants to wage war against Iraq. Why there is war at all ... The suffering was enough with the First and Second World War, wasn't it? I'm really sorry for the children and babies in Iraq, because they can't do anything at all about the adults carrying on like this. My condolences to the Iraqi children. I hope that not too many people will die."

Whether the war would also spread to Austria was of as much interest as: "How come that the oil price has

dropped when everyone was saying that lots of things would get more expensive?" The diversity of the questions showed that children not only reacted to the war with concern, but were also close observers of the media.

The special programme dealt with the children's first reactions to the Iraq War. In addition we offered our target audience a service on our website (<http://confetti.orf.at>).

As the children were confronted with the images of war almost everywhere it increasingly became our task in the course of the war to take away the children's fears. To do this we frequently let the children have their own say, so that they could express their worries, and informed them about the current situation in the Iraq War. Selecting the pictures required special care: on the one hand, the war should not be played down and, on the other, should under no circumstances be shown in all its horror.

For adults the reporting was dominated by the discussion about propaganda. In our children's production department we also discussed how we could elucidate the mechanisms of the war propaganda in the children's programme. We came to the conclusion, however, not to enter this meta-level, as the mechanisms of propaganda would probably be understood by the older section of our target group, but not by the younger viewers.

Informing, but not arousing fears

"Informing instead of arousing fears" is what we saw as one of our principal concerns. To respond to it adequately, during the Iraq War we produced programmes for *CONFETTI NEWS* which did not directly take the war as their themes either in sound or vision, but which latently contained the subject of the war. In a programme about peace on 18th April 2003 *CONFETTI NEWS* showed

how children live with conflicts in their country. The Northern Ireland conflict was dealt with, taking as an example Sean and Daniel, two 11-year-olds, who live in Belfast.

It was altogether important for us to point out positive examples of conflict resolution, as the story "Living Together" in the special broadcast shows. It portrayed a school class from Vienna. The schoolchildren worked together on how conflicts arise in everyday life, while playing football, inside the class and how the conflicts can be peacefully resolved.

After the fighting

After the fighting in Iraq we focussed on the changed living conditions in that country. Once again Youssef, the boy from Baghdad, was the centre of our attention. For the first time in weeks he was able to leave his house, and he walked through the ruins of Baghdad with his father and asked about the sense of war. Youssef asked himself why people did that. At the same time Youssef and his family were relieved. All their relatives had survived the war. Now they were ready to start with the re-building of the town.

"Why is there war?" – this question was often asked by the viewers. A question which probably no one on children's television can answer adequately. We can, however, certainly make it clear that war is a political issue, while violence in everyday life is the personal responsibility of each individual. ■

Translated by Geoffrey P. Burwell

THE AUTHOR

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