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On the trail of secrets

How television stimulates a desire for knowledge

Finding simple answers to complex questions is an objective set by many children's television producers. Programmes such as *Die Sendung mit der Maus* ("The Programme with the Mouse") and *Wissen macht Ah!* ("Knowledge makes you go Ah!") regularly provide "Oh, I see!"-experiences – for viewers of all ages.

Television is only able to convey very small excerpts from the great adventure "life". The viewer is always separated from actual events by a glass screen. Thus, seeing something on television certainly does not mean experiencing it yourself. The limits of the medium of television are clear; nevertheless, as a "window on the world" it has by no means exhausted its potential. On the contrary, the cameras discover many things which would otherwise remain concealed from most of us. We see lions on the hunt; we can observe how a child grows in its mother's womb; we follow, step by step, the construction of an aeroplane. *The programme with the mouse* has investigated countless secrets of machines and other objects and has thus made an active contribution to imparting knowledge in our country.

Television is strong on visuals

Television is strong wherever it makes things visible. *The programme with the mouse* has always dedicated

itself to this basic principle and has been rewarded by long-lasting success. Many of the so-called "stories to laugh and learn" show production processes. They begin with various source materials, in the middle show a black box and at the other end display a finished product. The *Mouse* makes visible the production processes normally concealed in factories and machines. We look into the black box and make it transparent: how does the wire pin get into the clothespeg? How does the ball become round? When we experience the process as viewers, we also always learn something about the function of the object – often pertaining to the true "nature" of the thing. The secret is revealed: "Aha!, I see, so that's how it's done!" To the probably most-quoted *Mouse* question: "How do the stripes get into the toothpaste?" the programme provided an extremely graphic answer: film-maker Armin Maiwald cut open a tube of toothpaste, looked inside and discovered the secret.

However, if we now look inside a computer, its secret is not revealed to us. And here the production says nothing more about the nature of the object. In a service society other questions are important: How does it function? How can I personally make best use of it? And many other questions.

The picture decides, not the topic

Not for nothing is it called "television", for at the beginning of each

film the editor asks the decisive question: "So what is there to see?" The camera can capture a physical or biological process superbly. Close-ups, slow-motion shots and changes of perspective enable us to see so much more than is possible with the naked eye. Yet how do we film "grief"? With what pictures do we show children the meaning of "divorce"? It is a fact that TV-makers tend to disregard, in their films, topics which are more difficult to represent visually.

Bearing this in mind, the presentation of societal connections will in future assume a central importance. Yet how do we show intergenerational conflict? And can politics (as a synonym for what is happening in the world) be made understandable for children when the importance afforded it is steadily declining in the adult world? With the news magazine *neuneinhalb – die Woche in neuneinhalb Minuten* ("nine and a half – the week in nine-and-a-half minutes") the ARD is treading new ground in imparting in-



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Knowledge makes you go Ah!

formation. Thanks to the methods offered by the medium of television – in this case it is the so-called “blue-box” process – it is possible for the anchorwoman, acting here on behalf of the viewer, to become involved in current events, thus becoming part of the news herself. Background information in *nine-and-a-half* is conveyed in a playful and entertaining manner, the news itself is presented seriously.

The world must be explicable

Children have a right to answers. Only if adults take the trouble to explain the world to them can children learn to move independently and self-confidently within it. Here public-law television, in particular, has a great responsibility. Our films, too, give answers; an open end in a film can be difficult to deal with, especially for younger viewers. This doesn't mean that children's programmes have to have immediate solutions for all problems. Yet television can allow the viewer to experience curiosity as a positive element by showing how questions are researched. Not the conveying of facts but the sense that one has a right to ask questions – this is the best attribute when it comes to enabling someone to play an active role in shaping the future.



The Programme with the mouse: Tracing the secrets of everyday life

Aha experiences instead of educational doldrums

Finding a balance between information, education and entertainment is the programme mandate of public-law television channels. This is not an assignment for instruction! And rightly so. For the aim of trying to teach via television cannot be achieved by the medium, even with its so-called “learning formats”. Teaching means to enthuse, to categorise and to practise. In television, however, the communication path always remains one-sided: literally: the transmitter transmits and the recipient receives, questions are not possible. The medium can “arouse enthusiasm”, it may even be able to “categorise” (although the teacher is clearly at an advantage here), but it is certainly not able to “practise”. Nor has television any access to the teacher's most important instrument – control of the learning aim. But it can stimulate a desire to learn, it can provide light-bulb moments. This is already quite an achievement in an information society that is evidently floundering in the educational doldrums.

How television stimulates a desire for knowledge

Many films in *Knowledge makes you go Ah!* and *The programme with the mouse* are based on questions asked by children. The range of subjects is breathtaking and cannot be pressed into one rigid framework. They vary from simple everyday topics such as “How is chewing-

gum made?” to more philosophical debates such as “Where does God live?”.

In its approach to the respective questions, WDR children's television has developed a certain method over the course of time. This can be subdivided into the “11 *Mouse says ah!* rules”. However, the very act of drawing up this list of rules is contradictory: after all, there are no fixed rules, there is only a basic mindset, which is: Be curious! Keep your eyes open! Keep asking until you get a satisfactory answer! This attitude pervades all the *Mouse* and *Knowledge makes you go Ah!* stories.

11 *Mouse says ah!* rules

1. *Telling stories instead of collecting facts*

Each film has to tell a story. It begins with a question. How do the holes get into the cheese? How does a double-bass make its sounds? How does a key work? This question creates tension. And thus, triggered by the question, the explanation of a process is initiated, and this explanation would not be nearly as interesting without the foregoing tension. And so after each film there is an answer, a release of tension, the celebrated aha experience or light bulb moment. The viewer has the feeling of unwinding, of having become cleverer. This gives a sense of great satisfaction.

2. *Identification instead of detachment*

The *Mouse* does not wish to tell the viewers something as their superior; instead the viewers embark on a voyage of discovery together with the *Mouse* film-makers. “We are the *Mouse*.” “We travelled the road together.” The narrator never appears to be omniscient (although he is); on the contrary, the discoveries unfold as a process of trial and error. The film is often the story of the research. And

there is an exceptionally high degree of identification with the protagonists. Perhaps because Christoph, the man with the green sweater, often behaves as naively as a child, perhaps because Armin, the man with the unmistakable voice, travels the route of knowledge from A to Z, a path which many would gladly follow, too. Thus the narrators of the “stories to laugh and learn”, Armin and Christoph, really do rather resemble a mouse and an elephant.

3. *The detail is the key*

The idea is not to elucidate the subjects “completely”. The films are intended to illustrate systems by explaining one single detail (if possible the most important one). Less can be more.

4. *Seeing instead of believing*

The *Mouse* always tells its story in real pictures. Whenever possible, it refrains from using graphics and electronic tricks. Instead the *Mouse* relies on pure documentation. Thus it can happen that a 5-minute film may be shot over a whole year – until it is finally “in the can”.

5. *Concrete instead of abstract*

The aim is always to remain as close as possible to the actual process. Any leap to a comparison is an abstraction and more difficult to understand than following the thread of the central theme. For this reason the *Mouse* explains many processes, the basis of which are mechanics. Here cause and effect are clearly visible. In electronics things happen which cannot be seen. Then comparisons must be found, which are much more difficult to understand (see above).

6. *Commentary instead of reading a text*

The style of commenting, which has introduced colloquial German into

the commentary of German television, creates a distance from the pictures, gives a licence for dry humour, freedom of expression and spontaneity. It also conveys a certain feeling that at that precise moment something is happening that is live. Thus the viewer has the impression of actually being there.

7. *Inductive instead of deductive*

The focal point is always the small event, the small object. It is not the overall theory. This is always conveyed en passant.

8. *I ask, therefore I am*

There is no such thing as a really stupid question! Everyone should be encouraged to ask because there are answers. And they can make both children and adults cleverer!

9. *The answers must be correct*

The stories are so well researched that they are accurate. Even in the rare moments where this is not the case, the mistake is corrected in the next episode. This also imparts a human dimension or fallibility – nobody knows everything. Moreover, this then results in a new question in the style of a sequel.

10. *Fun is of the essence*

Without elements of comedy the information conveyed would not be nearly as impressive or memorable – laugh and learn. Everyone remembers a gag much longer than anything else.

11. *Rules are there to be disregarded*

Formats such as *The programme with the mouse* or *Knowledge makes you go Ah!* thrive on the fact that rules can sometimes be broken, that surprises are possible. Before the first monothematic programme went on air, the rule was: the *Mouse* is a pro-

gramme in which picture stories and learn stories have to alternate. With the *Atom-Mouse* this rule was waived for the first time, and since then there have been a number of these (often award-winning) *Mouse* specials.

Summary

My theory: dramatisation and good didactics are not mutually exclusive – in fact, they are one and the same. Anyone who manages to find a good approach to a problem, to create tension and to take the pupil/viewer on a mental journey is successful. In film language this is called “good dramaturgy” and in pedagogical language “good didactics”.

Children have a right to answers. The world into which they are born must be explicable for them. Only in this way can they learn to orientate themselves. With its technical possibilities and its high entertainment competence, children’s television has a particular responsibility to find simple answers to the complicated questions of our time. A special assignment indeed, yet for the programme-makers it is the great chance to produce really “new television”. The time is now. In children’s television more than anywhere else. ■

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