

Maya Götz

What's funny in children's comedy?

Children judging comedy shows of German Public Broadcasters

Kids love to laugh when watching TV. This study of 115 German children and pre-teens¹ offers some insights into what these viewers find funny in comedy programmes for children and what fails to make them laugh.

The question of whether we find something to be humorous on television, whether we smile or even burst out laughing, depends evidently on the programme shown. However, this is not a simple stimulus-response mechanism in which all the viewers simultaneously laugh at a punch line. This is particularly in the case of comedies where what is funny for one viewer may not be so for another. If we sit down and watch television with children, one thing soon becomes obvious: on the one hand, the children will laugh at different points than do adults, while on the other hand, children will laugh at different points from one another. Also, the activation of their humour seems to depend on the children's mood, their degree of familiarity with the format, and other factors.

From a theoretical point of view, television may or not be successful as a form of (para-social) communication. Humorous elements are consciously applied in comedy programmes. It is in the nature of the medium that one part – the programme – offers comic contents and the other part – the viewer – is responsive to

this communication. In terms of structure, humorous elements can provide forms of support; that is, one scene frequently contains several levels into which the comic aspect in the text is written. The question that remains open is the level at which the viewers will respond. Besides a diversity of programmes offered to adults, comedy formats explicitly created for children constantly appear on the scene.

Whether children actually find humour to be funny or not is a question that, surprisingly, has not been the subject of much scientific analysis. Despite there being a number of findings on the topic of children and humour (cf. Kotthoff, and Lyon in this issue), very little has been published in regard to the question – what do children laugh about when watching television?² This is the question that is the focus of the study reported here. We investigated the contents that children judge to be especially humorous in programmes which are designed to be particularly funny – comedy formats.

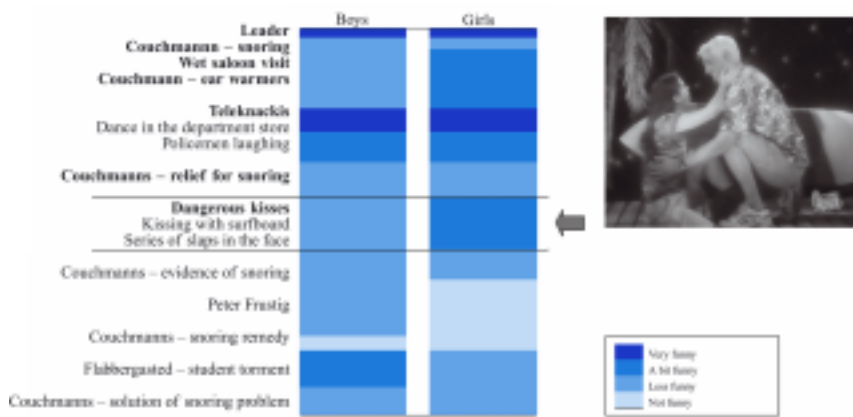
Method

We asked children to judge the funny nature of three current German children's comedies: *Blaubär und Blöd* [Bluebear and Brainless] (WDR*), *Die Couchmanns* [The couch potatoes] (ZDF*) and *Chili TV* (KI.KA*). 115 children and pre-teens (7 to 14 years of age) watched 15 minutes of each of the three pro-

grammes, assessing them by means of a special instrument called the "Fun-O-Meter"³. This instrument consists of a box as large as a child's hand with a control lever. The maximum points are characterised by a "smiley" for "funny" or a "down-in-the-mouth" emoticon for "not funny," respectively. By moving the lever in the appropriate direction during reception the participants were able to express whether they found something funny or not funny. Afterwards the pupils discussed the programmes. By means of the subsequent statistical weighting⁴ and a sequence calculation of the "Fun-O-Meter" data, it was possible to create a humour profile that provided a relative appraisal of the programme by means of shading on a scale. The inclusion of the qualitative assessment of the video recordings and group discussions reveals certain trends discussed below.

Gender-specific tendencies

Children's opinion, on whether a scene is funny or not, does reveal at certain times clear gender-specific differences, as for example in the ZDF production *Die Couchmanns*. The comical narration consists of mainly parodies of popular TV programmes. The show is hosted by puppets – the couch potatoes. Children in different age groups enjoy the introduction and like the puppets.



Sample: 115 kids, “Fun-O-Meter” evaluation

Source: Comedy programmes for kids

Fig. 1: *Die Couchmanns*

Even the seventh-grade pupils laugh heartily about the potatoes “dropping” into the title *Die Couchmanns* on the screen. But only the older ones decoded the meaning of the word “couch potatoes”.

Further on in the programme, several gender-specific differences emerged. For example, the scene in which the Couchmanns endeavour to escape Dad’s snoring by means of ear warmers is considered to be somewhat funnier by the girls than by the boys. The humour communication is mainly based on language and the relationship constellation. This gender difference becomes even more distinct in the sequences “Dangerous Kisses”.

In a parody on daily soaps, particularly the programme *Verbotene Liebe* [Forbidden Love], there is an exaggerated kissing scene, when the blond youth with a surfboard interminably kisses a young woman. This kissing scene, acoustically overdone to the sound of smooching, is judged by the girls to be “funny” on the “Fun-O-Meter”, while this is not the case for the boys.

The girls judged this scene to be extremely funny via the “Fun-O-Meter” whereas the boys did not seem to find it to be particularly comical (cf. Fig. 1). When asked directly in the discussion about this scene, the girls did not provide a detailed explanation of what they found to be funny about this scene – maybe because it is a rather delicate issue –

particularly in a mixed-gender group discussion. Presumably the subject of “kissing” is only amusing for girls, as the “Fun-O-Meter” ratings changed again:

After the kissing scene the young man says he has to go. At the moment he turns away, he swings his surfboard and knocks his loved one straight into the water. At this juncture, the boys and girls burst out laughing. But when the young man gets a gush of water in his face, he adds in astonishment: “No need for so many tears.” Here, it is the boys who are particularly amused. In the following scene, the couple meets again in an apartment, but it turns out that the young man has had an affair with two women. Accusations are exchanged followed by a long exchange of slaps across the face. Both the boys and the girls laugh about this.

During the discussion about the latter scene, the girls emphasised the relational aspects and the comedy arising from this love triangle. The boys, on the other hand, if anything at all, referred to the slapping as being particularly funny. So, it appears that children of both genders laughed, but for different reasons. Hence, not only the sequence as a whole, but also the degree of funniness of individual elements received a divergent, gender-specific appraisal.

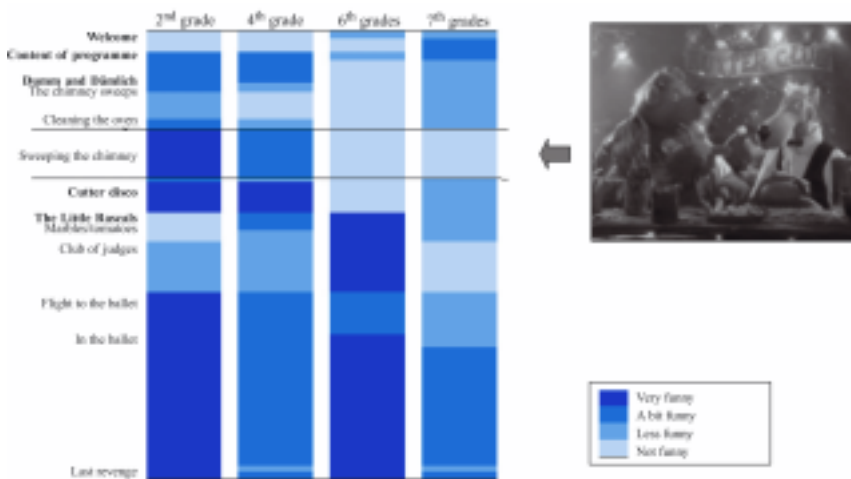
Further, when these results are combined with those from other parts of this study (for example, the individual

interviews; see Gollner in this issue), gender-specific differences are revealed, although here a degree of caution is required. The topics that seem to be funny to girls were relationships and romance. Further, comedy generated in conversation (such as in relationships with others, through words) was apparently funnier for girls than it was for boys. When they explained what they regarded as amusing at certain points in the scenes, they emphasised the aesthetic aspects frequently – the comic aspects of sound, image and movement – as well as the comedy arising from the story. On the other hand, the “Fun-O-Meter” revealed that the humour preferred by boys were features full of action – such as explosions, smacking, slapstick and extremes. They explained that they found other people’s misfortunes to be funny.

These gender-specific tendencies largely concur with the findings of other gender studies. Due to gender-specific socialisation, girls’ humour tends to be linked to relationships and appearances, whereas boys emphasise humorous elements based upon action and related to movement and the body. The latter point, in particular, however, requires far more careful consideration in regard to such tendencies and their background.

Age differences: Fooling around is only for younger kids

The children’s responses partly reveal distinct age differences. This is well illustrated by the WDR production *Blaubär und Blöd* [Bluebear and Brainless]. A sketch from the programme features the figures Capt’n Blaubär [Capt’n Bluebear] and Hein Blöd [Hein Stupid] (cf. Fig. 2). The first part of the sketch takes place on Capt’n Blaubär’s ship with the Capt’n baking a 17-layer butter-shrimp cake. He is startled suddenly by the “Schnatterschnute” [loosely trans-



Sample: 115 kids, "Fun-O-Meter" evaluation

Source: Comedy programmes for kids

Fig. 2: *Blaubär und Blöd*

lated as a Chattersnoot; a figure consisting of a broad mouth and sunglasses]. This Schnatterschnute keeps on turning up at the most unexpected places, causing Blaubär's grandchildren to flee away screaming. These loud action scenes are considered to be funny by the younger kids, but not by the older ones. This difference becomes even clearer in the sequences with the two chimney sweeps "Dumm and Dämlich" [Dumb and Dolt] that follows.

When Dumm, who is chattering away, puts his hand on the hot oven ring several second grade boys burst out laughing. The older ones remain silent. Then Dumm and Dämlich want to go into the chimney to clean it from the inside. The boss, Dumm, takes charge of the cleaning by leaning over into the chimney head downwards, held by his boots by Dämlich. Dumm slips out of his boots and falls down the chimney, while Dämlich is left holding his boots.

The second-grade pupils are delighted. They laugh loudly, hit their thighs in obvious enjoyment, accompanied by a highly positive appraisal on the "Fun-O-Meter." They judge this scene to be "very funny". The older ones, on the other hand, do not respond to this sequence. During the viewing, they sat there in utter silence and gave this scene marks well below average via the "Fun-O-Meter." Thus,

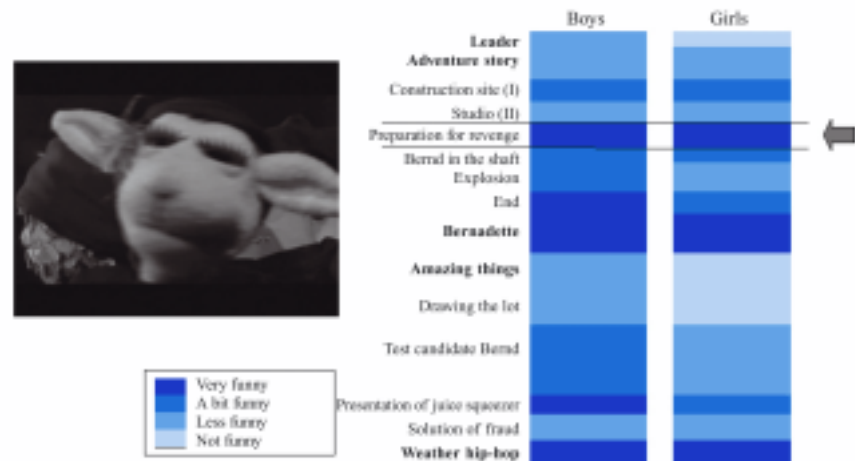
the three programmes assessed by the children reveal – albeit cautiously – age-specific trends. There were humorous aspects that all those viewing found to be funny and other features that only the younger or older kids found to be amusing. Action scenes were more popular with the younger ones; they gave good marks to tomfoolery/slapstick and tended to find exaggerated scenes appealing. Scenes in which little heroes cheekily get their own way were awarded good marks without exception. The older kids tended to evaluate humorous features as funny when they could establish intertextual and cultural relationships via the plot. Anti-heroes such as Bernd das Brot [Bernd the

Bread] were also popular with the pupils in the sixth and seventh grades.

Funny and not so funny scenes as in the case of *Chili TV*

In addition to distinctive age and gender differences, there are also a number of sequences for which there were no significant differences; for example in the KI.KA production *Chili TV* (cf. Fig. 3).

At the beginning of the episode, the main characters – Briegel the Shrub, Chili the Sheep and Bernd the Bread – are disturbed by an ear-splitting noise. The looming dramaturgical conflict is judged to be just "a bit funny" by the various age groups and by both boys and girls. In the scene that follows, Chili storms off to join the construction workers. When the burly construction worker sees Chili, he says in his strong Berlin dialect: "What do you want here? If I want a dog, I go to the hot dog stand," and laughs maliciously. Only two pupils in the sample understood the joke, but many laughed at the funny laugh of the construction worker, who also had a few gaps in his teeth. This build-up in the dramaturgical conflict, with the quite comical figure of the huge construction worker who spoke in his Berlin accent with next to no teeth,



Sample: 115 kids, "Fun-O-Meter" evaluation

Source: Comedy programmes for kids

Fig. 3: *Chili TV*

was assessed by the boys and girls to be “a bit funny.” The following development of the plot, in which Chili persuades the others to join him, is termed “not particularly funny” by the kids, irrespective of age and gender. This is unlike the following sequence when the three prepare for the “counterattack.” Set to the theme music of *Mission Impossible*, the characters proceed with the preparations as shown in a series of video clips featuring some comical exaggerations. The sequence ends with the order – “Synchronise watches!” – followed by a scene with first two wristwatches followed by a cuckoo clock mounted on a stick. Bernd, whose hands are directly attached to his body, has no capability of wearing a wristwatch and so he submits this other type of “watch” for synchronisation. This sequence prompts laughter in all the age groups, of both boys and girls, and receives a high rating on the “Fun-O-Meter” (cf. Fig.3). Humour, as is clearly illustrated by this set of sequences, is an intrinsic part of the dramaturgy and the design. If both are used purposefully, it is quite possible for programmes to be amusing across divisions of age and gender.

Elements of humour that fail to reach the kids

Overall, the programmes did offer jokes that the kids failed to register as humorous. Such was the case with the younger children in regard to the introductions to the “Teleknackis” [Telejailbirds], a parody of the *Teletubbies* in *Die Couchmanns*. The four faces of the Teleknackis and their names appear on the screen: Stinki, Hinki, Arschl and Balabala (cf. Ill. 1). At this point the sixth and seventh graders, who had been rather reticent during this particular viewing, burst out laughing and repeated the names: the humour communication is thus a success. In the case of the fourth-

grade pupils, only a few girls laughed and silence reigned with the second graders. The first ripples of laughter surfaced when the Teleknackis entered the screen. The fact that the younger ones did not laugh does not necessarily mean that they do not find the parody of the *Teletubbies* and playing with their names funny.

The vehicle for this humour communication is based on the written word and the second-grade pupils cannot yet read quickly enough to catch the joke. In the fourth grade, the girls are frequently better at reading, which explains why they are the ones who tend to laugh. In more general terms, there can be no involvement in humour communication using a pun or play on words when the children lack the cultural skills required.

In addition to skills, there are specific frames of reference in which the comedy can unfold. Certain words such as “nitro-glycerine”, with which Chili (in *Chili TV*) experiments, only raise a laugh and a “Fun-O-Meter” deflection in the case of the older children. Second- and fourth-grade pupils are not yet able to understand this joke, as they have no knowledge of chemicals and their explosive qualities. This applies in a similar manner to the sequence for *The Chili TV Sales Promotion Show*. The frame of reference of a sales promotion show is often unknown to primary school kids. The humour communication involved cannot be realised in the form of a parody but has to develop through other humorous features. This does not really come off in this sequence.

In more general terms, humour communication only has a chance of success once children have learnt to attribute meaning to words and con-



Illustration 1: Teleknackis

texts. But even when children comprehend the words and have a command of the cultural techniques deployed to become involved in humour communication, they do not necessarily jump on board.

Highly sophisticated, verbose humour does not tend to appeal to children. If what is a potentially funny joke for kids is embedded in a lengthy torrent of words, the kids are likely to fail to come to grips with this form of humour communication. Certain borders are also apparent in the case of current children’s hero figures, which children do not want to see exposed.

Besides the many successful features in humour communication, there is evidently quite a vast amount of intentional humour that does not reach the kids.

Summary

To give a first definite answer to the research question – “What is funny for children in comedy programmes?” – there seems to be the tendency that the younger ones (7 to 10) particularly like slapstick, fooling around, and action; they like to see little heroes cheekily getting their own way. In comparison, pre-teens laugh more about anti-heroes and comedy created by intertextual references or smart twists in the plot. Girls prefer topics such as romance and enjoy

comedy arising from relationships, among others. They emphasised the importance of humorous features such as a comical appearance, a funny tone of voice, funny movements. Boys tended to laugh more about action, explosions and enjoyed the excesses and the little misfortunes of others. Aside from scenes and sequences that reveal some gender or age differences in their communication about humour, the basic tendency remains: There are scenes that children do find to be funny and others that are not. If the comedy structure fails to relate to the kids' frame of reference or misses their feelings for humour, it is likely that it will not be funny for kids. ■

NOTES

- * WDR = Westdeutscher Rundfunk (West German Broadcasting Corp.), Cologne
- * ZDF = Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (Second German Television), Mainz
- * KI.KA = Kinderkanal (Children's Channel) Erfurt

- 1 Carried out with the assistance of Carolina Gollner-Ensinger, Ole Hofmann, Karin Brunner, Marieke van Oostrum, Tanja Meyerhofer, Julia Knoller.
- 2 One of the few exceptions that also touches on the subject of humour is "funny violence" (Aufenanger et al., 1996) in which the classification of violent portrayals on television is investigated. There are also a wide variety of related "programme tests" conducted as part of television practice. The findings of these investigations are generally not available to the public, however.
- 3 Developed by Ole Hofmann for the IZI.

4 The second-grade pupils judged all three programmes to be significantly funnier than did the older pupils. In particular, the seventh-grade pupils did not find the children's comedy programmes to be funny. The explanation for this may be that the formats probably targeted a 7- to 8-year-old audience rather than the 13- to 14-year-olds. The video observation and the data reveal an age-specific tendency in the operation of the "Fun-O-Meter": second-grade kids tended to submit only positive appraisals, pulling the "Fun-O-Meter" lever more frequently to the maximum "funny" position. The older ones also expressed their criticism by using the appliance in a more differentiated fashion. Hence a statistical weighting for adjustment purposes seemed appropriate.

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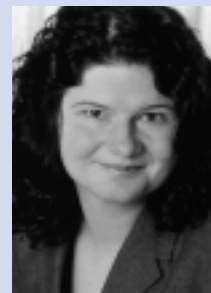
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