

Carolina Gollner

“I think that’s funny, too . . .”

Editors’ evaluations of the humour factors in their programmes and their reception by children

The editorial staff of children’s comedy programmes in Germany can pinpoint relatively accurately the sequences that children laugh about. Nevertheless, their explanations as to why their viewers consider certain scenes to be funny are sometimes off the mark.

Programme editors and children watch the same programme – but do they actually “see” the same things? This question was investigated in a qualitative study designed to examine the humour intended by the editors in children’s comedy programmes and the way it was received by children. What do editorial staff regard as humorous factors for children and what is it that actually makes children laugh?

The structure of the research project

In their search for an answer to these questions, three of the editors responsible for the children’s comedy programmes *Blaubär und Blöd* (WDR*) [transl.: *Bluebear and Brainless*], *Die Couchmanns* (ZDF*) [*The Couch Potatoes*] and *Chili TV* (KI.KA*) [*Chili TV*] were interviewed about their interpretation of children’s humour. Referring to one specific episode, the editors named the parts they considered to be funny for children. By contrast, eight 8-year-old viewers – four boys and four girls – explained what they thought was

funny about the programmes (cf. Diagram 1). The children watched the same programmes and were interviewed separately. During the first showing, their reaction to the episode was evaluated by means of the “Fun-O-Meter” to assess primarily the children’s affective reaction (cf. Götz in this issue). They were subsequently requested to express their views on the programme openly and to talk about the parts of it that they had found funny. During the interview, their most significant impressions surfaced. In the third stage, the children watched the programme a second time. They interrupted the showing by calling out “stop!” when they thought a scene was funny or, conversely, not at all funny. The film was then paused to allow the children to explain what they had found funny or not at all funny.

Category of humour	Number of mentions
Disparagement	8
Aesthetic appeal	6
Word play/puns	6
Slapstick	5
Parody	4
Absurdity	4
Action	4
Fulfillment of an expectation	4

Table 1: The editors’ categories of humour

1. Which forms of humour do editors evaluate as funny for children?

The editors strongly emphasised specific categories (Table 1) classifying what they presumed to be funny for children. Laughing about others (disparagement) is, in their view, probably the most frequent reason why children are amused by the programmes. Children find pleasure in the stupidity of others; they are amused by other people – especially those who pose as smart Alocs or know-alls – coming to grief. The editors thus maintain that the classic satisfaction gained from laughing at other people plays a key role in children’s humour. That is how Dorothee Herrmann interprets a scene that takes place in a western saloon (Fig. 1), when a cowboy gets soaked:

“I think that’s funny, too. The cool gunslinger gets doused when his adversary pulls the chain of the flush.” (Herrmann)

Another group of humour categories the editors consider to be extremely funny in children’s eyes is best



Fig. 1: *Die Couchmanns*: Cool gunslinger gets drenched

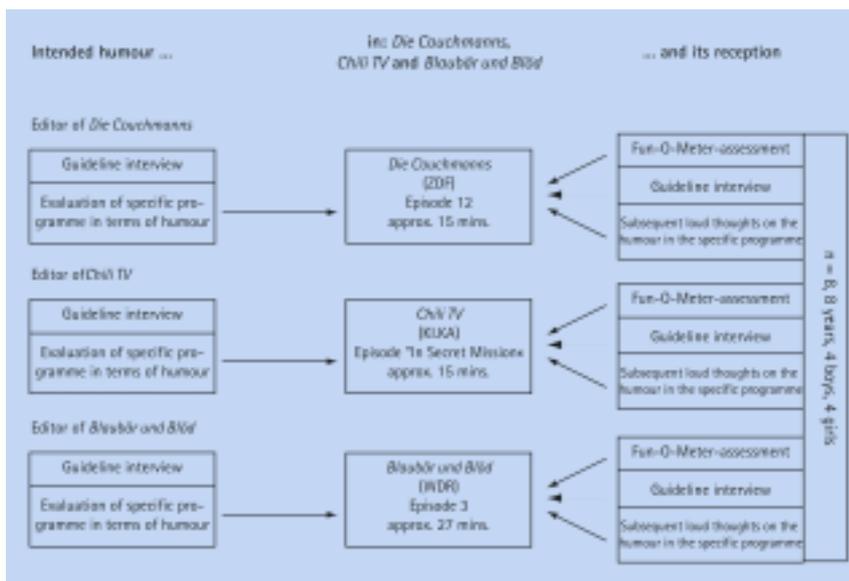


Diagram 1: Research design

summed up by the term “aesthetic appeal”. Wolfgang Lünenschloss, for example, describes a scene (cf. Fig. 2) as follows:

“[...] Once again Bernd assumes a funny appearance, for him a typical trait. Here, the screen image is funny: Bernd all plastered-up.”

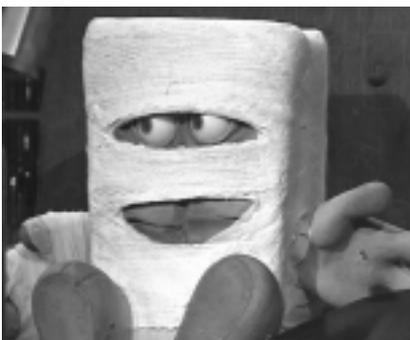


Fig. 2: Chili TV: Bernd all plastered-up

The appearance of Bernd wrapped in plaster, the clumsy movements of the “Teleknackis” (loose transl.: “Tele-jailbirds”) and the loud snores issuing from “Papa Couchmann’s” nose constitute successful humour according to the editors. The same applies to puns or word play; it should be pointed out, however, that playing with language may demand too much of child viewers, especially if they are

expected to engage in too elevated or abstract thought processes. In addition, a typical humorous category on television, slapstick, is a funny genre for children, the editors stated. The programme *Blaubär und Blöd*, in particular, offers a large number of comic cameos via its protagonists. As the name suggests, both “Dumm und Dämlich” (loosely translated by “Dumb and Dolt”) and “Hein Blöd” (transl.: “Hein Stupid”) frequently generate a lot of laughter when they dive from one disaster into the next, openly exhibiting their unparalleled ability to bungle things.

2. What do children laugh about in children’s comedy programmes?

When interviewed about the same programme, the children stressed in their statements the importance of two categories: aesthetic appeal and deviation from the norm, as being closely linked to absurdity (Table 2).

Aesthetic appeal

25 % of all the children’s statements can be assigned to the category “aesthetic appeal”; more specifically,

children can glean many funny elements from what they perceive via the various senses. Here Madeleine and Carsten corroborate Wolfgang Lünenschloss’ hypothesis that Bernd in his plastered-up state is indeed funny:

“Yeah, that was cool, the loaf wrapped in plaster. Looks funny. His eyes peer out, and his mouth and hands. He doesn’t move, either, well, he can’t, can he?” (Madeleine, 8)

“When everything exploded and the loaf was then wrapped up in plaster, that was funny. He was then all white.” (Carsten, 8)

Girls in particular emphasise the appearance and movements of figures or people as being funny – 47 mentions from the girls are attributable to this category, with only 17 from the boys. This is still a striking result, considering the girls proved to be generally more eloquent in the interviews (their comments revealed 108 items classifiable as references to categories of humour, the boys’ statements 76). The emphasis on aesthetic factors undoubtedly corresponds to the cognitive development of the age group investigated, still clearly fixed on visual perception.

Category of humour	Number of mentions
Aesthetic appeal	64
Deviation from the norm + Absurdity	51 (= 24+27)
Disparagement	26
Puns/Word play	25
Unexpected turn of events	18
Overstatement	14
Parody	12
Confusion/Misunderstanding	10

Table 2: Children’s humour categories



Fig. 3: *Blaubär und Blöd*: The characters Dummm and Dämlich

Deviation from the norm and absurdity

The deviation from the norm/absurdity category encompasses symbols depicting a departure from the boundaries of everyday life. One example of such a deviation from normal behaviour is the scene when “Klaus” from *Die Couchmanns* tosses various objects into the air from behind his parents’ couch, which, as Madeleine explains, “you” don’t normally do:

“Cos’ you don’t usually do that. You can’t just chuck your skateboard or your lamp up in the air, can you?” (Madeleine, 8)

Another part of this category is the infringement and violation of rules and regulations, as in the case of *Die kleinen Strolche* (i.e. the *Little Rascals* from *Blaubär und Blöd*) when young boys enter court dressed up as judges. After all, “there are no children allowed to work at court” (Nils). Omitting to comply with role expectations and standard patterns of behaviour also comes under this category. Children are required to show adults respect, but little Porky (a *Little Rascals* character) fails to come up to this expectation. When scolded by the ballet instructor with the words: “I never want to see any of you here again”, he cheekily answers back: “Me you, neither!” This is a scene that the children interviewed find extremely funny for the reason stated. Finally, portrayals incompatible with reality also fit into this category. It is funny when a

television set eats grass (*Blaubär und Blöd*) or when a table acts as a car (*Die Couchmanns*, Peter Frustig). Amanda says:

“I find it funny when he presses a button, but it’s really a table, making noises like a car and shaking.” (Amanda, 8)

Closely linked to the factor of deviation from the norm is the category of absurdity, which, as the name implies, includes preposterous, abnormal factors. These two categories play a significant role in children’s humour, for both boys and girls. In addition to these types of humour, laughing about others constitutes a frequent cause of amusement for children. Marie, for example, takes great delight in the character Dämlich’s stupidity (Fig. 3):

“He’s left with just the shoes in his hand. He’s really stupid. And he thinks the Capt’n is still hanging on, and then he looks into the shoes. Nobody’s hanging on.” (Marie, 8)

Word play and puns occupy a large space in children’s direct communication. In contrast, they play a less important role in television reception, but are still an integral part of their perception of humour. Funny analogies are one form: “Klaus” in *Die Couchmanns* compares his Dad’s snoring to the roar of a Jumbo jet. Playing with words that sound similar is another form of humour, as in the case of “Hein Blöd” (*Blaubär und Blöd*), who, in his role as a waiter, serves instead of lemonade first chocolate and then marmalade. Last but not least, situations that come to the children as a surprise are funny: for example, this is the case when a cowboy bellows the order “Draw!” at a shoot-out (Editor: ‘draw’ and ‘pull’ are synonymous in German) and his adversary pulls a chain that releases a torrent of water onto the cowboy’s head (cf. Fig. 1).

3. Where are the editors’ evaluations accurate?

In this sub-study, which can only be briefly outlined in this context, the editors’ statements were compared with the children’s. By means of a qualitative content analysis à la Mayring (1996) the content of statements was concisely paraphrased and categorised.

In the comparison of what the editorial staff considered to be funny for children and what the latter “really” found humorous, the first point is that the editors named the scenes that motivated the children to say “stop!” with considerable accuracy. The reasons given for describing certain scenes as funny revealed greater discrepancies, however.

Dorothee Herrmann (*Die Couchmanns*) assumes, on the one hand, that the scene featuring the doused cowboy is funny for the children because a hero whom they perceive to be “too big for his boots” is deconstructed before their eyes. Indeed, it is this mockery of the hero that makes Carsten laugh.

“The scene at the beginning when the water is poured on top of the cowboy. [...] He acted as if he was the greatest, when suddenly he gets soaked. I found that funny.” (Carsten, 8)

On the other hand, the editor assumes that for children this scene owes its funny note to the association with a potentially embarrassing situation – after all, the water is released by the flushing of a toilet. Two boys refer to a chain, but they do not make any reference to the flushing of a toilet. The assumption that the key humour factor is the embarrassment element in this association is thus erroneous. In this particular sequence, the children emphasise the element of surprise on several counts, a humour factor that Norbert Neuß refers to as the anticipation game (cf. Neuß in this issue).

"He comes in and you don't expect anything special, (then he says) 'Draw!' Then you think to yourself what's coming next. Then down comes a chain and he pulls it. I found that funny; that was so funny." (Annika, 8)

One of the girls, however, said that she could not find the sequence particularly funny without any contextualisation:

"[...] With that bad guy, perhaps he was a bad guy, that's okay. But what if it's a good guy and not a bad guy? Yeah, I guess it was okay, but in the film it wasn't that funny." (Marie, 8).

In Marie's eyes, the scene would only have been funny if the bad guy had come off the worse. In the case of a "nice" guy, however, she did not find this (water) attack funny. The editor's interpretation of this scene was quite correct in terms of the "stop" signal given by the children. One boy accurately confirms the humour factor intended by the editor, i. e. the deconstruction of the cowboy, but there are other humour factors the children find funny that the editor had not anticipated. One example where the editorial staff's prior evaluation was not really successful is Bernd's nightclub act on *Chili TV*: Bernd enters the stage dressed up as Bernadette. Briegel announces "her" as a singer. Bernd says disgruntled: "I hate you all!". When Briegel tells him off, he answers: "The applause is only taped, anyway." Then a man appears who switches off a cassette recorder behind the stage. Bernd goes on to announce a song, which he dedicates to a very good lady friend. The theme is one of friendship, pure virgin wool and a bundle of industrial explosive. He reads the title from the lyrics faded in, which he can hardly see. Logically enough, he misreads the text. According to the editor, this scene is just moderately funny, the humour being generated in this sequence by the fulfilment of the children's prior expectations:

"(The scene is) very plain, the figures appear on the stage, producing a certain level of expectation. The goings-on here are nothing spectacular. The whole thing helps to create a good atmosphere."

And yet the children interviewed were thrilled. In their statements, the children emphasised two factors: the aesthetic appeal of Bernd's entering the stage in the guise of a woman, and, above all, the way he speaks and plays with language:

"Yeah, the ear-ring, y' know, the necklace at the top, and that feather thingy. Looks funny. Then the way he speaks. The ear-rings, the necklace, that feather thingy and then the way he speaks!" (Madeleine, 8)

"Stop. I find it funny when he says 'I hate you all.' [...] 'cause he says it, 'cause he says it, like, in such a foul mood." (Lukas, 8)

"Yeah, I find it funny when he says: 'The applause is only taped, anyway.' That's so funny. You can't explain why." (Annika, 8)

The children find this scene far funnier than the editor anticipated. The fulfilment of expectations is hardly a significant factor in this case. From the children's perspective, decisive humour criteria are tangible, appreciable elements.

Conclusion

Detailed analysis reveals categories where the editorial staff came very close to the children's perception of humour. At the same time, however, it unearths not only further categories previously rated accurately and inaccurately but also several others that were almost completely underestimated by the three editorial teams. The teams were nearly always accurate in their estimation of "narrative elements" such as stories in which the little heroes rise above the others and deconstruct authority. In their evaluation of intertextual humour, particularly in the case of parodies, they sometimes hit the nail right on the

head – but there are a few misses. Humour factors the editorial staff underestimate or partly fail to perceive are to be found in the aesthetic appeal category. This is linked especially to the fact that children find noises funny, i. e. the acoustic effects were rarely referred to in interviews with the editors. An even wider discrepancy between prior judgement and actual reception occurs in the categories "deviation from the norm/absurdity". The children found many sequences funny – 51 mentions in total – simply because they ran contrary to normality. The fact that a situation is funny because "it can't be like that in real life" or because "you" should not do such a thing is never emphasised by the editorial teams.

The findings suggest that editorial teams are able to pinpoint accurately many parts in their programmes that children laugh about. Regarding the assumptions expressed in the interview on what children laugh about in detail, the editors tend to think in broader contexts, while the children argue very concretely and with reference to specific details. ■

NOTES

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

THE AUTHOR



Carolina Gollner (nee Ensinger), M. A., studied communication science at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich and was project manager in the IZI.