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Top source of information or disaster-free zone?

The disasters in Japan on international children's TV

The article presents the results of a study of 32 broadcasters from 32 countries, asking whether they covered the incidents in Japan in March 2011 in their children's programming, and if so, how.

Children's television worldwide dealt with the natural and nuclear disaster in Japan in 3 different ways:

- Some TV networks reported on the Japanese disaster **intensively and in detail**; mainly in children's news formats produced by public service broadcasters.
- Some makers of children's TV **avoided mention** of the topic in their children's programming.
- Many broadcasters had **no opportunity** to provide coverage because their children's programming offers no scope for responding to current events.

To get an impression of how the events in Japan were dealt with on children's TV worldwide, questions were sent to public service broadcasters and commercial networks on every continent using the contacts from the PRIX JEUNESSE network. The broadcasters were asked, in writing, whether and in what form they had offered their young viewers information on the topic, or why no coverage had been provided. Broadcasters who had covered the events

were asked to make their programmes available (see box). We received responses from 32 broadcasters from 32 countries. It became clear that a catastrophe such as that in Japan is a major challenge for producers of children's TV, and is dealt with in very different ways. The most striking result is that, in many countries, there has been no attempt at all to respond to such events, although editors and producers do see the importance of offering children age-appropriate information about such serious topics.

Japan in children's news

Intensive coverage of the Japanese disaster was mainly offered by broadcasters with a regular children's news programme, for example many European public service broadcasters. The approach to coverage is relatively similar here, the design elements are much the same, and in some cases the same film material is used. One reason for this is the "Youth News Exchange" run by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which almost all the European broadcasters in the study participate in.

Images similar to adult TV

The choice of images in children's news programmes is very similar to those in the news programmes for adults. There are no hesitations about using shocking pictures and scenes

Children's news programmes

Karrewiet (VRT/Belgium)
Newsround (CBBC/Great Britain)
News2Day (RTE/Ireland)
Supernytt (NRK/Norway)
Lilla Aktuellt (SVT/Sweden)
Minisguard (RTR/Switzerland)
HaMahadura (IBA/Israel)
Pocket News (CCTV/China)
Behind the News (ABC/Australia)

Other programme formats (magazines, live studio programmes etc.)

Live Tok! Tok! Bony Hany (EBS/South Korea)
Balbatika (Image Channel/Nepal)
Ala Al Hawa (Al Jazeera Children's Channel/Qatar)
World? Why? Wit and Kra-r-sa (Thai PBS/Thailand)
My World (BBS/Bhutan)
Big Pocket (MNB/Mongolia)

here. The images so often seen in the adult news, of walls shaking and people panicking, are also present in children's news. The tsunami is shown in all its destructive force, e.g. with pictures of houses, cars, and ships being swept forward by the massive tide of water. The reports in children's news also include harrowing interviews with victims, or images of children still under the influence of the events.

The nuclear disaster is also shown in explicit pictures, e.g. of the explosion of the Fukushima reactor. The danger which the escaping radiation poses to humans is also depicted: people –



Screenshot from Pocket News © CCTV

Ill. 1: *Pocket News* (CCTV/China) shows a young Chinese inventor with an emergency box for earthquake disasters



Screenshot from Karrewiet © VRT

Ill. 2: A child reporter carries out research in a nuclear power plant for the children's news programme *Karrewiet* (VRT/Belgium)

including children – are shown being scanned for exposure to radiation. The pictures are sometimes used with the original sound, while some scenes are accompanied by emotive music. The only children's news programme that did not broadcast these images is *Pocket News* from China. The presenter announces this decision in the programme: "There are many pictures from Japan which make us sad, but there are also pictures showing new strength." The programme then focuses on images showing the staying power of the Japanese people.

Explaining the context

In all the news programmes, the producers aim at helping children contextualise the disaster, e.g. with animated maps of the world showing where Japan is. In the case of the European countries, the great distance between Europe and Japan is demonstrated – a reassuring fact in the light of the nuclear threat. Various typical features of Japan are also mentioned, such as the names of well-known high-tech firms or Mount Fuji. To make the nature and scale of the disaster clearer, references are often made to natural disasters, e.g. the earthquake in Haiti. Animation is very frequently used to give clear explanations of processes or facts, for example to show how a tsunami comes about or how a nuclear power plant works.

Focusing on children's point of view

In the items in children's news programmes, the child's perspective is very clearly in the foreground. The Australian programme *Behind the News*, for example, gives a short introduction before beginning its coverage with the question: "How are the children in Japan getting on now?" The reports then deal with stories of children affected by the disaster. Children talk about their experiences of the earthquake, or how they are coping with the situation. The children portrayed are often children from the same country as the viewers, who lived in Japan with their parents. They talk about how they got away, and what they are missing. Having children from their own country reporting in their own language offers young viewers a good opportunity for identification. Japanese children are also portrayed. Items of coverage show how they manage their everyday life during the crisis. In the Australian programme *Behind the News*, a Japanese boy describes his family's daily life, for example how to get hold of food when everything in the supermarkets has been sold out. The Swedish programme *Lilla Aktuellt* presents a Japanese girl who used to live very close to the Fukushima power plant and is now staying in emergency accommodation with her family.

In rare cases adult experts report on the situation of children in the disaster area, e.g. in the Norwegian programme *Supernytt*. Here, a Norwegian expert from "Save the Children" talks about how the children are getting on and how they receive help. The Chinese children's news programme concentrates less on describing the situation of affected children, but rather deliberately reports on the strength of the Japanese people and their ability to cope with life in times of crisis. A report from *Pocket News* describes Japanese children who – although some of them have lost their parents – bravely go through with their school graduation ceremony.

Responding to the questions and fears of children in the audience

Almost every news programme from Europe gives children space to ask questions and to express their fears and feelings. In most countries, the reporters go into schools and give the children there a chance to speak. In almost every Western children's news programme the children in the home country are explicitly reassured: the programmes stress that this form of disaster is very unlikely to happen in their country. The children's news programme from China is different: the reports only offer tips about what to do in a disaster. A report is shown about an earthquake

drill in a Chinese kindergarten, and about young Chinese inventors and their devices for mitigating the effects of disasters (see ill. 1). "Little children must know how to protect themselves in an earthquake. Older children should begin to develop ideas about how to prevent such disasters."

Letting experts explain facts

Experts are often called on to explain facts. They are either invited to the studio, or child reporters interview them in their work place. In the Belgian children's news programme *Karrewiet*, for example, a child reporter interviews a nuclear scientist in a nuclear plant (see ill. 2). In the Israeli news programme *HaMahadura* child reporters visit a seismological institute to gather first-hand information about the causes of earthquakes.

Responding to children's willingness to help

Nearly all children's programmes respond to their viewer's desire to help the Japanese people, or to see how they receive help. Many news programmes include short reports on campaigns, such as Norwegian winter sports athletes donating their prize money. Several broadcasters report on school classes writing letters to Japan or making little presents, e.g. in *Big Pocket*, the magazine programme on Mongolian National Television. The Thai public service broadcaster PBS used its weekly children's magazine programme *Kra-r-sa* for a special edition and reported on the broadcaster's relief campaign, "Socks Seed for Japan". The children's magazine programme *My World*, produced by the recently established Bhutan broadcaster BBS, showed a news-style report on various relief efforts in Bhutan, including a message of support from the King of Bhutan to the people in Japan.

Calls to action

There were only a few cases where broadcasters called on their young viewers to carry out specific actions.

The Arabian Al Jazeera Children's Channel from Qatar invited its young viewers to take part in a campaign of solidarity for Japan. The children were encouraged to write letters to Japanese children, draw pictures, or donate money (see ill. 3). An edition of the weekly live broadcast *Ala Al Hawa* invited the Japanese ambassador in Qatar, who took questions over the phone, and was handed the letters and pictures for the Japanese children. This campaign of solidarity also included the online arena, where children were given the opportunity to post messages to Japanese children. The weekly children's news programme of the Australian public service broadcaster ABC also encouraged children to get involved. They were invited to get in touch with a Japanese boy portrayed in a short report, and to send him messages of support. Furthermore, they were asked to vote on the issue "Nuclear energy in Australia: yes or no?".

Other platforms

Especially countries without a regular children's news programme used other formats to deal with the topic. Thai PBS, for example, devoted an episode of its regular children's educational programme *World? Why? Wit* to the topic of earthquakes and offered children a whole range of information, with studio experiments, interviews with experts, and tips on what to do in an earthquake. Although geographically and culturally close to Japan, the Korean public service broadcaster EBS was rather reticent about dealing with the topic. In a daily live show for children the presenters only mentioned the disaster verbally. They briefly discussed how one should react if an earthquake occurs, and voiced their hope that Japan would soon recover. In one report segment of the show, presenters visited a school and talked to children about

their feelings and questions. There was also a short explanatory item about why the earth frequently moves in Japan. Our study gave the Nepalese commercial broadcaster Image Channel the idea of offering information to its young viewers. In the magazine programme *Balbatika*, children discussed their knowledge about the disaster, and experts also had their say.

"Disaster-free" children's programming

Some broadcasters deliberately decided not to report on the incidents for their young audience. First and foremost Japan itself. The editors of the public service broadcaster NHK decided to make their children's programming a disaster-free zone. The situation in Japan was, of course, special. The educational channel of NHK, on which most of the children's programming is shown, had initially filled all the children's programming slots with coverage of current events for adults. Immediately after the disaster, however, the children's editors of NHK consulted with child psychology organisations within Japan and decided to resume their regular children's



Ill. 3: Al Jazeera Children's Channel invites children to draw pictures for Japan

Screenshot from *Ala Al Hawa* © Al Jazeera Children's Channel

programming, with no discussion of the crisis, a week after it had been suspended. There was some criticism of the broadcaster regarding this decision, but overall much more approval. Another country which deliberately avoids coverage of difficult subjects

is Turkey. The explanation of the editor of the public service broadcaster TRT: “Whenever we ask our young viewers what kind of information they want, they reply, very clearly: no bad news!” TRT therefore made only brief mention of the disasters in its children’s programming.

A similar response came from Nigeria. The public service broadcaster NTA does have a magazine for children, with a wide range of themes, but the editor in charge deliberately avoided the issue of Japan – and also intends to be cautious in the future.

TV: “no”, other platforms: “yes”

There are currently no TV news shows for children in the USA, and the public service broadcaster PBS, which structures its children’s programming closely to the curriculum, has no ambitions at present to offer such a programme. Nor did the commercial US children’s network Nickelodeon respond to the disaster in its current TV programming. In the context of the *Big Help* website, however, a support forum was established where children could express their sympathy and make donations. In Canada, the events were only dealt with on the radio.

Lack of current programming platforms

The most common reason for showing no coverage of Japan or other current events in children’s programming is the absence of programming platforms. This is the case in many countries in Latin America, for example in Argentina, Chile, or Colombia. The answer received from Cuba was that information programmes there concentrate on national themes and those close to home. Programming platforms are also lacking in children’s programming in other regions of the world, e.g. in many Asian countries such as the Philippines or Malaysia, but also in countries like New Zealand. Many of the

German children’s news

German TV offers 2 major children’s news programmes which both dealt with the disasters in Japan: the daily news programme *logo!* (ZDF) and the weekly information programme *neuneinhalb* (WDR).

Images and context

Both programmes showed some of the images of adult news yet in a moderated form: they avoided close-up shots and fully omitted scenes showing



Ill. 4: Animations help children understand complex topics (here: nuclear radiation)

e.g. injured or death people. According to Markus Mörchen (senior editor of *logo!*), the reason to show those images at all, is that “children will encounter them in other media anyway. We do not want them to feel as if we were trying to shield them from terrible incidents. Our task is to take up these images and put the events into context.”

Contextualisation was especially important in view of the nuclear threat emanating from the nuclear power plant Fukushima 1 which soon became the main issue of German news coverage. By means of explanatory items and animations, *logo!* and *neuneinhalb* tried to help children understand the complex topic of nuclear radiation (see e.g. ill. 4).

Fears and hope

In response to the growing number of questions, *logo!* developed a new interactive studio format called *logo! extra: Japan – Eure Fragen* (“Your questions”). There, the studio children were allowed to ask questions and express their perceptions of the disasters as well as their worries and fears. The editors of *neuneinhalb*, Matthias Körnich and Maike Pies, emphasise the importance of a positive conclusion for news programmes for children – especially when confronted with catastrophes. Hence, their coverage of the disasters ends with “rays of hope”, showing relief programmes for the people in Japan and allaying the children’s fears that they were in danger, too.

compiled by Birgit Kinateder (IZI)

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editors from these regions explicitly expressed regret about this situation in response to our questions. There is definitely an awareness that children have to deal with the questions and fears arising from such events on their own, and are being left to search for information using sources which are intended for an adult audience. ■

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