

International views on storytelling

TV experts on storytelling for children in their countries

Children's TV experts all over the world were asked about storytelling in children's television in their country. Experts from Australia, Africa, Asia, North and South America and Europe responded to 3 questions:

1. What do you feel are the most prevalent forms and themes of storytelling for children in your country at the moment?
2. What are the stories that you would like to tell or that need to be told but are missing? Are there topics you would not bring up in children's programmes at all?
3. Is there a pool of myths, fairy tales or certain stories that have been well-known for generations that are told and still retold in children's television?

Bernadette O'Mahony (Australian Children's Television Foundation/ACTF, Australia)

In Australia, live-action drama is very popular, and animation probably equally. The advent of ABC3 for the 5-14 age group has seen a growth of this audience and the types of local programmes commissioned – we now have a lot more non-drama programming for children



which is gaining popularity alongside the drama and animation.

Australia still imports more children's programming than it produces. The hugely successful *Dance Academy* series which has characters following their dreams to be dancers, and touches on issues of growing up, relationships and ambition (cf. ill. 1); coupled with great music and dance has shown how broadly a children's series can be enjoyed with audiences from 8 to 18 enjoying the series on air or online.

Of course there are issues that are difficult in children's television, but often it is about how they are told and the intended section of the child audience they are aimed at. We have dealt with relationships, first sex, puberty, but all in a way appropriate for the intended age group. Violence is difficult to do in kids' TV and I'm

not sure why you would want to go there anyway. But bullying is something important for children's television to tackle – both in the real world and cyber bullying; and often taking these stories into drama, with much-loved characters dealing with issues is a very powerful way to get the message across to the audience.

There are universal fairy tales and stories – and Australia having a large immigrant population most of our traditional

fairy tales came from Europe or outside of Australia. Locally there are many dreamtime stories from our indigenous communities and some have been brought to television but not many as yet for children – it would be lovely to do more in children's TV with the Australian dreamtime stories from our indigenous communities.

Firdoze Bulbulia (Children and Broadcasting Foundation for Africa/CBFA, South Africa)



I think storytelling in South Africa has changed since 1994 – prior to 1994 (during Apartheid) the producers were mainly white

South Africans and mainly females. So the issues that they thought were relevant for children were issues that related to white identities and white

realities. Images on television were mainly of affluent white children living in urban areas. However, after 1994 and due to the work and lobbying of the CBFA – we workshopped producers to understand that South Africa is a diverse nation and in keeping with the “transformation to a democracy” we should also transform the images/stories that our children

former President Thabo Mbeki who wrote his “I am an African” speech for the Opening of Parliament and school children all over South Africa tried to emulate his eloquent words and images and so there was a tendency to be more lyrical and to think more carefully about what it meant to be an African – especially when South Africa is so diverse we have Black,

were being exposed to – that we needed to show images that included those of rural, black, disabled, mixed-race children and that the languages spoken should also embrace the diversity of the nation so to include South African languages such as Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa etc. Up until then only English and Afrikaans were used. South Africa was proud to say that we had 11 official languages, however, the television still had to prove that this was true. As we progressed in the area of children and media, we found that producers became acutely aware of their role and became more diligent and also more creative in celebrating our diversity and thus given children a broader view of South Africa. Stories that emerged were now steeped in a new culture, one that celebrated South African cultures, heritages and stories. The most famous would be our

white, coloured and Indian identities – all requiring equal prominence in the media.

Personally, the stories of the Indian contribution to the struggle for liberation needs to be told so that all children can learn and understand the role of minorities in the fight for South Africa’s liberation. The political stories of ordinary South Africans must be told again so that children can value their freedom which was so hard-fought. Cultural and social stories that explain to children across racial, political and social divides the resilience and importance of all racial groups.

I suppose my activism forces me to include socio-political issues in a child-friendly way. Much like the *Takalani Sesame* series that dealt with HIV-AIDS in an appropriate way (cf. ill. 2) and allowed young children to

grasp these difficult concepts – this should go for all issues – as we know in our parts of the world children look to media for education mainly and entertainment is secondary (though I must say that notion is changing somewhat).

There are no issues that I would not tackle. However, I strongly affirm that all content should be age-appropriate and that we must be cognizant of the fact that media literacy is not a priority on our schools so content must be evaluated and prepared with diligence and care.

Unfortunately, in the South African context we have not fully exploited the amazing African folk tales. I know of a recent company that is working on an animation series of the popular *Mandela’s Folk Tales* – these are African Folk Tales from the continent not only South Africa. It would be interesting to see how this series uses the folk tales and animation genre to spotlight African storytelling which is a rich oral history but has not as yet migrated to television.

Hitoshi Furukawa (NHK, Japan)

For children 5 years and older, animation programs are the most popular. But of course, we have a lot of different shows like reality shows or more educational programs on mathematics or scientific subjects. Regarding the role of storytelling in educational programming, it can sometimes be used to enhance children’s imagination, creativity, and nurture feelings. Especially for preschool children, storytelling using things close to their lives are easy to understand and they like it. For example, starting this year, we make use of a style of reading picture books in our English-education programs for preschoolers. Based on research in Japan, the most effective way to teach English to preschoolers is reading picture books. That shows, children like stories.





Screenshot from *Fun with Japanese*
© NHK, Japan

Ill. 3: *Fun with Japanese* is a preschool programme that explores phrases from the Japanese language in varied styles, e.g. Kabuki theatre, and connects Japanese children with their culture

Japanese children also like fantasy stories. That's why we have a lot of different ghost stories. Not just magic, but mystery. Children are very much attracted by imaginary stories.

In Japan, we don't have much drama for children, for preschoolers, almost none. I'd like to try that if I have a chance in the future.

As a public broadcaster, violent scenes are difficult to broadcast. Children (especially boys) like action heroes with special effects or animations, but those have been always controversial. (Even my generation liked those action heroes when we were preschoolers ...) We are not so open to sex as compared to other Northern European countries. Japan is not a strict religious country, usually, it's kind of generous. Compared to other aging countries like Korea or China, they probably are a little bit stricter when it comes to sex. Sometimes we create programs from Japanese traditional stories, using puppets and picture-book styles and so on (cf. ill. 3). Our families get smaller and smaller. We don't usually live with our grandfather or grandmother, so we don't have many opportunities to listen to those kind of stories from older people. TV has a really important role to pass on these stories from generation to generation.

David Kleeman (American Center for Children and Media, USA)



It's pretty much impossible to characterize children's television storytelling in America, because the

range of storytelling genres and purposes is huge, from the explicitly educational to the explicitly mercenary (and then some). Like the proverbial blind men and the elephant, it depends on where you touch – on the channel and target audience.

Channel flipping, you might encounter an archetypical sitcom on Nickelodeon, a buddy story on Disney, an indescribably odd animated adventure on Cartoon, a heart-tugging documentary on HBO Family, and a game/reality show on PBS. For preschoolers, an "interactive" series on Nick Jr. could be up against an educational superhero on PBS Kids, a social-emotional learning tale on Disney, and a live presenter showing kids' drawings on Sprout.

It's easier to say what American kids seldom see, like live-action dramas (especially one-offs, except TV movies like *High School Musical*, cf. ill. 4). Non-fiction shorts rooted in kids' everyday experiences – like items from the worldwide exchange – are virtually extinct.

Years ago, a local public broadcasting executive told me, "we don't need

more children's TV; we have *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers*". Fortunately for the children of our geographically vast and culturally diverse land, we now understand that kids come to TV with very different needs, interests and motivations. We're doing better at meeting their expectations, but there are still gaps in our collection.

Alejandro Escobar (Producer, Colombia)



In Colombia, we need to differentiate between storytelling made for children, and the storytelling children watch. Although I don't have the exact numbers, the ratings for quality children's television that is being made nowadays (most of it in the public sector thanks to development funds), and the number of children watching violent and sexually-driven popular TV shows like soap operas, reality TV and news must be very different. I'm sure the second number is much larger.

Talking about children's television in Colombia (the quality one, I mean), the environment, diversity and conflict resolution are the most common themes addressed, and puppets and documentary-type programs prevail. My daughter and I love *Canticuentos*, a compilation of songs written in 1975 which almost every child in Colombia knows. Its author Marlore Anwandter never wanted to be popular, but her songs took a life of their own, and their implementation in children's TV is long overdue. Apart from this, a lot still needs to be talked about diversity and conflict resolution, especially in a country with our history. We need to create a generation of empowered children, who are smart, happy and full of love. The stories that need to be told are the stories that promote these feelings in the audience. What I feel is lacking in the children's television production today is the creation

of strong and real children characters, that's where the work is now.

There is a huge pool of myths, tales and traditional characters in Colombia. Our country is a mixture of races (Africans, Europeans and Indians), who live in a variety of geographical conditions, and they have created a big amount of stories. Lots of them were created to teach something, or to transfer cultural values, and still to date are well remembered by the people. Also there are a couple of examples of Colombian children's literature and songs, like Rafael Pombo or the *Canticuentos* I mentioned earlier that are also alive in everybody's mind.

Firas Dehni (Producer, UAE/Syria)



There's no doubt about that Arab children's TV makers are still strongly influenced by the traditional way of storytelling inspired

by the book *One Thousand and One Nights*. The strong horizontal dramatic thread of the story is clear and simple. The genius master trick in the whole thing was the effect of suspense. Which is not easy to imitate at all.

The second source for children's TV production in our region (Middle East and Northern Africa) is the famous *Kalila Wa Doumna*, deeply rooted in history, of still unclear origin (probably Arab or Persian). Here, fables are acted out and told by animals with strong moral, social and educational values.

The third source is the beloved storyteller type. The storyteller still exists in the ancient cities of the Arab world such as Damascus as requisite of the old times.

In these 3 oceans of traditional heritage Arab children's TV makers are still floating. Although the 3 sources are genius, unique and inspiring, it seldom moves TV people in the region to try to find new ways of storytelling.

Here's the way it goes in some ongoing productions (with exceptions of course): A grandpa, or grandma (storyteller), sits surrounded by the lovely grandsons and -daughters. The children are so eager to hear the beautiful stories of the elders. The grandpa/ma starts telling the story using the phrase: "Once upon a time", the children's eyes are getting curious when the story starts, and they are getting more and more excited, then comes the boring flashback. In the flashback, the story continues with characters of "flesh and blood". At the end of the episode, we go back (through a less creative fade) to the peaceful and lovely group that is gathering around the grandpa/ma.

The most popular technique in the 70s and 80s was the beloved Chroma key, but since the 90s and through the revolutionary development of computer technologies, people started producing high VFX and CGI. Technically developed, but with less developed content, the children's TV productions in the region are still going on. Big Arab satellite TV networks such as Al-Jazeera and Spacatoon surely try to find up-to-date communication channels to reach the young generation and they achieved small steps in this field. This young generation indeed needs modern ways of thinking, action, trust and respect. It might be a shy beginning ...

Preben Vridstoft (TV2, Denmark), Arild Halvorsen (Fabelaktiv, Norway), Nils Stokke (NRK, Norway)

Vridstoft: It's typical for the Scandinavian way of storytelling that it's often the parents or adults that make the mistakes. Grown-ups cannot solve the problem and children step in and through friendship and cleverness, children save the world for the adults. It is, so to say, typically Scandinavian that children are not afraid of a threat – look at Pippi Longstocking (cf. ill. 5). She



can beat the police officers and send the official from the child protection agency away. She cleans the floor by ice skating on sponges. She makes pancakes and she has a horse that lives inside her house together with a monkey but she also has a treasure full of gold. So, Scandinavian kids can take care of themselves. Their parents are weak, even handicapped sometimes.



Halvorsen (laughs): It is a bit typical for Scandinavian storytelling that one of the parents, often the mother, is dead or ill, or she's in a wheelchair or something.

The parents hide a dark story from the past, and the girl in the main role has to fight her way back to the community, to get some credits. Or she looks for a new wife for her father, because he's so weak. But the child (it's often a girl) does all that good stuff for him and finally he finds a new way of living.

Vridstoft: It might also be typically Scandinavian to not be afraid of showing the humor or even the darker sides of children. We did shows where the kid, 13 years old, steals motorbikes and rides them and steals the handbag of an old lady and then later says that that's how he learned how to grow up. So if there's anything we don't hide it, we show it. Even the bad aspects.



Stokke: We have many stories about friendship and stories about kids who conquer challenges in their daily life. We mostly see stories set in

a contemporary setting, there are few historical dramas made today. There aren't too many stories about the supernatural or pure adventure either, like *Harry Potter & Co*.

I don't think there are stories I couldn't tell, as a principle. But of course, stories about abuse, violence, etc. would be really, really hard to make. They would have to be extremely carefully produced and be aired in a bigger con-

text. Also, stories where children are worse off than when the story started are difficult to make. But in the end it almost always comes down to how the story is told and what the audience is left with.

Stories from Aesop's Fables, by Astrid Lindgren, by the Norwegian authors Asbjørnsen/Moe and the more contemporary Torbjørn Egner never go out of style. We see both reruns of old productions and remakes of these authors' work. Many of their moral and values serve as an inspiration for contemporary children's drama, too (cf. ill. 6).

Margret Albers (Children's Media Festival GOLDENER SPATZ, Germany)

Animation series amount to an important portion of the children's programme in Germany, especially



in the preschool segment. Older children and teens can choose among a variety of live-action series – first and foremost supernatural stories, school/boarding school stories and crime series.

Sorely lacking are stories about the contemporary, everyday life of children that also deal with difficult but

relevant aspects of their lives like loss, conflict in families, pressure to perform etc. There are no taboo topics, it's just a question of storytelling. I'd suggest taking a look into the children's film scene of the Netherlands, there is an amazing spectrum of emotional colours, especially in their recent children's movie production: *Tony Ten* tells a divorce story with considerable lightness using a style of magical realism or *Kauwboy*, a captivating drama about the loss of a parent which has already received many awards (among others, the Young Audience Award by the European Film Academy).

These kinds of children's movies are only rarely made in Germany, and sometimes they take a long time upon completion, sometimes up to 8 years. This implies, there is a lot of idealism and self-exploitation involved, from all included. Initiatives by lobby groups, politicians, sponsors and channel representatives to promote this "special children's film" raise the hopes that this important programme facet – which brought us in Germany films like *Wer küsst schon einen Leguan?* (*Second Hand Child*), *Blindgänger* (*The Blind Flyers*) or *Wintertochter* – will not die out.

In the current children's programme

which is dominated by series, short films are underrepresented. This is a pity because on the one hand the short form offers opportunities in content and form that would simply not be possible in a serial format. On the other hand, short films are a forum for young aspiring filmmakers to produce for children as the target audience and to gain experiences in this field. Some of the outcomes are exceptional, for example, *Two and a Half Heroes* (GOLDENER SPATZ 2011; PRIX JEUNESSE 2012, see experts' opinions in this issue) – but not yet broadcast in children's TV. Since 2005, remakes of fairy tales, especially those of the Brothers Grimm, take centre stage in the holiday programming of the German public broadcasters ARD and ZDF. Adaptations of children's literature that is well-known across generations show that despite globalization cultural spaces are quite small: Films based on stories by the popular German author Erich Kästner really only worked in Germany. Across the borders, e.g. in France, Kästner isn't known at all. ■

Dr. Elke Schlote (IZI)