

# Where do new ideas come from?

## HOW INNOVATIONS IN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION DEVELOP

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**This article identifies the prerequisites for creative production in children's television in expert interviews with producers and editors from innovative programmes.**

If "creative" describes all forms of human activity that are new and valuable (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010), then many of the people who produce and are responsible for children's television are creative. It is in the nature of the medium that with every story, with every image, with every sound, something new is created that was not there previously in the same way. Many programmes also offer content that is valuable for children and has the potential to promote their development. At the same time there are gradual differences in the extent of creativity. Much in children's television is "more of the same", to use the apt words of a colleague giving his impression of the current MIPJunior's<sup>1</sup> programme catalogue. What is on offer within mainstream children's programming is to a large extent very much characterised by similarity and by repetition of the familiar and reliable. However, there are always programmes that are different, that stand out from the crowd because of their new, creative ideas: formats with unusual approaches, characters that have not already appeared dozens of times in this form, and programme concepts that surprise us with their distinctiveness.

In an explorative study we addressed the question of how these innovations in children's television came about. 16 expert interviews with producers and editorial staff behind the outstanding innovations formed the basis of the study.

Additional research looked into the creation of 9 further highly innovative programmes. The third source was a 2-day workshop with editors who revealed the development of programmes in detail using concrete examples – both particularly successful productions and those plagued by crises. The research questions defining the analysis were: How do novel ideas and programmes come about? Which structural conditions enable these innovations? The following article summarises the main results.

### CHALLENGES ARE NEEDED

In all the interviews it became clear that the starting point for innovation was always a concrete challenge. It was mostly a request by a TV station to come up with a new format. Programme innovations also emerge due to changes in levels of knowledge and the underlying duty to society.

Not least the "Sputnik crisis" led to the realisation within public discourse in the USA that there was a need to promote education for preschool children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The funding made available for this was used to conduct research, and a programme was developed that was revolutionary and creative for its time: *Sesame Street* (Fisch & Truglio, 2001).

In response to the findings that in cities in Germany now over 50% of under 5-year-olds have at least one parent who is not a German native



Ill. 1: A concrete challenge as starting point for innovation: the programme *JoNaLu* aims at promoting the language development of children with and without a migration background

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speaker (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2011), and that this is one of the biggest problem areas in primary education, a programme was specifically created to promote language learning for children both with and without a migration background: *JoNaLu* (ZDF, Germany, Ill. 1).

*Annedroids*, a programme about an 11-year-old girl who builds androids and robots, was at first meant to have a boy as the protagonist until the creator J.J. Johnson (Sinking Ship, Canada) learned of the findings regarding images of girls on television at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2008 and took the opportunity to rethink the basic concept for his main characters.

A third area of ongoing inspiration for programme innovation is consciously experiencing everyday life with children: Richard Bradley, producer of *Horrible Histories*, for example, was asked by his son to finally make an interesting history programme (see Bradley in this issue). J.J. Johnson, the producer of *Dino Dan*, was so struck by one of his young actors' enormous fascination with dinosaur research that he made a dinosaur programme (see also *TeleviZlon* 26/2013/E, interview with J.J. Johnson and Christin Simms). Noticing what fascinates children in

their everyday lives – or even what does not fascinate them –, is probably one of the most intensive but also underestimated drivers of creativity in children's television.

## GOOD IDEAS NEED TIME

Each of these creative programmes has gone through a development phase ("incubation phase"). In most cases the creative professionals have had these concepts and images in mind for years.

As a child Satoshi Tajiri, the creator of *Pokémon*, spent hours playing with insects, cataloguing, taking care of them and "training" them (Dreier et al., 2000, p. 74).

Stephen Hillenburg, the creator of *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Ill. 2), worked as an oceanographer in a museum and dreamt up ways of bringing the underwater world off the coast closer to children, including with a sponge and his friend, the starfish (Götz, 2014).

However, it is not just the basic ideas but also, of course, the concrete concepts that require time for development, testing and changing if innovation is not only to be thought but also to be realised. A good 2 years of research went into developing the programme *Sesame Street* (Fisch & Truglio, 2001);

for *Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten* (*The Show with the Elephant*) (Ill. 3) there were 3 years between the first research assignments and the completion of the programme. Creativity does not come from nowhere but combines elements in a novel way. However, innovation cannot take place without foundations or an idea of basic components. While on the whole successful creative professionals feel time pressure is actually a challenge (see for example, Bocquelet, Graves & Perez on *The Amazing World of Gumball* in this issue), lack of time during the research and development phase for allowing thoughts, characters and well-founded information (e.g. as regards the current state of knowledge) to mature, clearly slows the process down.

## THE MOMENT OF INSPIRATION

Barely any of the interviewees had the pivotal moment of inspiration, the illumination (see Holm-Hadulla in this issue), for the new creative element in the programme or even the programme idea while sitting at their desks. This always happened outside the normal working atmosphere in more of a relaxed mood.

For instance, it was while doing yoga that Bryan Konietzko came up with the creative idea of enabling the characters of *Avatar: Master of the Elements* to control the elements of nature through particular learnable movements.

This fits in well with neurobiological results that indicate that the ability to connect areas in the brain that are far apart from one another (association cortex) is at its peak in a state of calm, undirected thinking (Andreasen, 2005). Often it was also an unusual experience that enabled 2 distant synapses to connect, delivering the critical new thought:



Ill. 3: Good ideas need time: the conceptual development of the preschool programme *The Show with the Elephant* took 3 years

Irene Wellershoff (head of the youth fiction department at ZDF, Germany) came up with the idea for the character "Koffer" ("Suitcase", Ill. 4) from *Siebenstein* when she was choosing a suitcase for her husband in a shop after work and the sales assistant said, "Well, you've chosen our shelf warmer there." A comment that is actually inappropriate for a sales assistant, but it gave Irene Wellershoff the key idea and the suitcase then became a warm and dependable character in the show.

Some of the most interesting creative moments of inspiration come from living with children and the ability to recognise them in their wholly distinct way of being and to watch them closely.

The author Marcus Saueremann came up with the idea for *Der Kleine und das Biest* (*The Little Boy and the Beast*) (Ill. 5), when he was out for a walk with his daughter and the big, fluffy family dog she was handling extremely competently (Götz, 2011). In the programme the parents' divorce has turned them into "beasts" and they become fluffy monsters who then have to be looked after by their child.

The analysis of the Eureka moment in the 20 or more situations described produces the following theory: decisive creative illuminations in children's television occur

- a) when a very creative person
- b) with an attitude of restlessness, and potentially searching for something
- c) who is in a relatively relaxed mood
- d) has an unusual experience
- e) and is able to perceive this and to use this as inspiration for his/her question.

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Ill. 4: A funny and inappropriate comment of a sales assistant gave Irene Wellershoff the inspiration for the character "Koffer" ("Suitcase") from *Siebenstein*

This fits wells with current findings in creativity research, for a split second before a thought is perceived, it is already present in the brain (Libet, 2004). We cannot produce flashes of inspiration; we can only allow them or block them. Creative thinking as thinking outside the rules does not take place as an act of will. It is rather an admission of assurgent ideas (Brodbeck, 2006, p. 8).

### FOCUS ON THE CREATIVE CORE IS NEEDED

Unlike in the typical phases of creative production (Holm-Hadulla, 2010), an essential characteristic in the innovation process in children's television is that the creative professionals who carry the main responsibility have formulated the vital core of their idea for themselves. In most cases this meant core phrases that for the creative professionals intuitively became a guideline for all further creative decisions.

Jan-Willem Bult (Wadada, Netherlands) describes how the key phrase for his professional work came out of observing his son who was busy taking a washing machine apart and was doing so competently: "Children in the centre" (Bult, 2007). This phrase then has consequences for the many creative decisions that must be made with regard to detail: the camera perspective is kept constantly at the children's eye level; the stories

the implementation. Driven by their own outstanding ideas, oriented by the essential idea that they have distilled for themselves from these, the creative professionals look for creative means through which they can implement their vision aesthetically. In this, too, we find recurrent elements:

#### Space and courage to experiment

Assuming that babies and children perhaps have ways of communicating that are hidden from adults (see Macqueen on *Baby Jake* in this issue), the intention was to find a tone that was as close as possible to real baby communication. With this in mind, Billy Macqueen and Maddy Darrall asked a young family to record the everyday communication of their baby over a 3-month period.

#### Consistent implementation

The essential nature of *Tom und das Erdbeermarmeladebrot mit Honig* (*Tom and the Bread with Strawberry Jam and Honey*) is the perpetually recurring combination of particular things – bread, jam, honey – which the protagonist then shares with others. This essential idea of perpetual recurrence was then extended into "Tom

each focus on one child and narrate from this child's perspective, etc.

### CREATIVITY IN THE IMPLEMENTATION

Many of the creative achievements in innovative programming are down to the detail of

mathematics". Every story, every story cycle is based on a similar system. Even the frames of the programme and the characters' musical accompaniment follow a similar principle and can therefore be combined completely in their own way (see Manns in this issue).

#### Recognising opportunities and eagerness in the implementation

Some of the creative achievements in children's television emerged unplanned during the production process and were due to surprising viewer activity. In *Small Potatoes*, for example, youngsters and adults enquired whether it would be possible to turn them into a small potato character using their photo. The enquiries multiplied extremely quickly, and the production company Little Airplane found a practical way in which to individually attend to the fans' enquiries (see Selig in this issue).

What they all have in common is the courage to go off the beaten track and expend energy and performance on this. Travelling creative paths also has something to do with intrinsic motivation, industriousness and the will to achieve.

### Creativity in communicating your own vision

An extremely important aspect in the production as regards the definition of the product is communicating your own vision in such a way that others can reconstruct and develop it further. It is traditional, and in this sense "normal", to use the written form and the form of verbal communication in discussions. In creative work, though, it



Ill. 5: Marcus Sauermann came up with the idea for *The Little Boy and the Beast* while taking a walk with his daughter and the big family dog

Screenshot from *The Little Boy and the Beast*  
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is also worth trying out other methods. Part of the essential nature of *Avatar: Master of the Elements* is controlling the elements. This happens through movements borrowed from different Asian martial arts and their underlying philosophy. In order to communicate the details to the animators in South Korea Bryan Konietzko and Michael DiMartino filmed the martial arts consultant in the corresponding fight scenes and traced key moments (Konietzko & DiMartino, 2010, p. 124).

Appropriate communication can become particularly relevant if a production is thrown into an aesthetic crisis.

In an international production the direction dropped out of a programme overseen by editor Benjamin Manns (SWR, Germany). The illustrators in different countries quickly developed their own styles and interpretations of the characters. The phenomenon was very difficult to communicate using words. Benjamin Manns therefore took all the illustrations, cut heads and gestures out of each one and mounted them together. The inconsistency was visible on first sight. The same character had been drawn in very different ways. These mounted images made it easy to provide clear guidelines for the design and formulate the “Dos and Don’ts”.

These professionals have in common that firstly they have a clear aesthetic vision, and secondly they take each of the departments involved in the creative process seriously and find appropriately structured forms of communication. Because of the clear guidelines, comprehensible instructions and tips can be given. This is what gives rise to the walls and borders, so to speak, which at the same time create the space in which creativity can arise.

## WORK ORGANISATION

### A team with a clear division of labour and mutual appreciation

When describing how the respective innovative programmes came about, the producers and senior editors emphasise at various points the importance of working together as a team. In the analysis it becomes clear that

successful creative professionals have constructed a working environment in which there are, on the one hand, clearly delimited areas of competence and allocations of tasks. In each case, 1 or maximum 2 people are in charge of implementing the aesthetic vision, and they guide the others. On the other hand, successful innovative productions are often those with a team of people who relate to each other well and appreciate each other’s work. The necessity of this for creative production has been proved in the research on creativity. Pressure, social stress and fear, above all fear of making mistakes, prevent creative production (Preiser, 2006; Vogt, 2010).

### Evaluation as the challenge for more creativity

An important phase of creative production is evaluation, i.e. checking how far a product – in this case a programme – fulfils and achieves what was hoped for. In children’s television this reflective process is usually restricted to a conversation with colleagues. Sometimes criticism in the press, individual parent letters, fan mail or competition awards are also taken into consideration. Audience rates are also taken as a measure of success, these being the only feedback from the actual target group. Only in very few exceptional cases does qualitative and scientifically supported feedback from children form part of the evaluation phase, even though this is what makes the most difference to it. Where this did take place, however, such as with the German children’s programmes *JoNaLu* (ZDF), *KiKANiNCHEN* (KiKA), *ENE MENE BU* (KiKA, see Holler in this issue), *Checker Can* (BR) or in the development phase of *The Show with the Elephant* (WDR), important concrete tips could be given regarding where something had worked exactly as intended, and where there were still opportunities for optimisation and challenges for more creativity in the approach or in the details. ■

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The MIPJunior is the largest children’s programmes fair, taking place once a year in Cannes, France.

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