

Refugees on TV: What children and adolescents would like to see

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For the IZI/LfM study series “How children and adolescents understand the topic of refugees”, 147 children and 166 adolescents in Germany were asked regarding their perceptions of media coverage and their information needs.

“There are refugees who are good, who don’t cause troubles. There are also refugees who are just mean and they don’t follow our rules,” was what 10-year-old Bill from Dresden told us in the interview in response to the question of what he knows about refugees. In a short report on RTL (German private broadcaster), he saw how “this aggressive refugee threw around a metal bar” and how refugees in a refugee home had “started beating each other up”. His description referred to a trailer for the programme *Spiegel TV Magazin* (RTL). In this trailer, wobbly images of a scuffle between refugees and a security guard are shown. Several of the men, including a member of the security team, are holding metal bars in their hands. The subtitle is “Refugee riots”, and an off-screen voice says, “Exclusive pictures from the refugee home Kassel-Calden. Refugees beat each other up. A security guard was also attacked. [...] Find out who was fighting whom and why tonight on *Spiegel TV*.”

As with Bill, children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of what refugees are like and how they act are influenced by pictures in the media and excerpts from current reports. In Bill’s case, the 10-year-old, who generally has a

positive attitude toward refugees as he emphasised in the interview, developed a new perception from the trailer, which also had a certain provocative content based on the text. Even if the actual *Spiegel TV Magazin* report was much less inflammatory, more moderate and included more factual information, the trailer has a clear, dominant interpretation (Hall, 1980): Violent refugees riot without any recognisable intention in a refugee home and attack the security guards. Based on what the 10-year-old saw, he drew the conclusion: “If we give them a refugee home to live in, then they destroy it, [...] and they just can’t do that.” Children like Bill construct their ideas of refugees based on the excerpts they watch on television, sometimes even negatively connoted internal images of refugees. These images do not always correspond to reality. For example, 10-year-old Nicola watched “some news show for adults” and then she knew “that in Spain or something a refugee shot with a gun [...]. Then he and his friends killed a lot of people.” When asked for more details, she said that “at least 15 adults and kids died”, that everything happened “at a concert”, and that refugees were responsible for these acts: “The refugees, they shot everyone with a gun.” The analysis made clear that she was actually referring to the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015. 2 topics were blended in her perception of refugees: In 2015, for months the main topic of media coverage was refugees, and this was not

eclipsed until the reports on the terrorist attack in Paris in November. These attacks were not clearly separated from the reports on asylum policies, however, for example when there was public speculation on whether the terrorists in Paris were Syrian refugees or whether they took advantage of the situation to pretend they were refugees (see also Hemmelmann & Wegner in this issue). This means that reports establish connections which adults may be able to separate, but which children blend together. For 10-year-old Nicola, the topics and images of the attack on Paris were mixed with her ideas about refugees.

THE STUDY

These case examples demonstrate that adolescents need programmes that are suited to their reception abilities, discuss their questions, and enable them to construct an appropriate picture of the actual events. But what does that mean? In the series of studies “How children and adolescents understand the topic of refugees”, a study by the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) and the Media Authority of North Rhine-Westphalia (LfM), 147 children (6 to 11 years old) and 166 adolescents (12 to 18 years old) from Germany drew, described, and told which questions they would like to have answered on television about refugees and which stories they want told.

EVALUATION OF TV COVERAGE

Children and adolescents evaluated the programmes they had seen on the topic from their own individual perspectives. Certain typical assessment criteria were repeatedly mentioned in their statements.

What they like

What the younger children praised is that there are children’s programmes on the topic that give them age-appropriate information and provide them with knowledge “because if you watch the adults’ news then you don’t even understand some of the words they use” (Camilia, 10 years old). Children especially liked programmes that showed portraits of children or adolescents and that link the individual stories to the everyday life of children without refugee backgrounds so that they could learn more about the life of refugees in Germany. The programmes not only gave targeted information about refugees, the children also had the feeling that through the programme they “had contact” with them, as 8-year-old Janina said. Adolescents enjoy news programmes and the multifaceted and detailed information they can get from them so they “are in the know” (Simon, 14 years old). They particularly appreciated programmes that included several different perspectives and not only the opinion of the broadcaster, e.g. by “asking people on the street what

their opinions are” (Secen, 13 years old) or by “having interviews with refugees” (Cecilia, 12 years old).

What they criticise

Children and adolescents found it negative that images of violence and war with “brutal” or “bloody” pictures were included and that the reports did not refrain from showing wounded or suffering children and adults. A typical point of criticism given by adolescents was that the reports focussed too much on the negative aspects. 15-year-old Daniel, for example, did not at all like the fact “that all of them were badmouthed, but not every refugee is a criminal.” Hermine (16 years old) complained: “There are

WHAT CHILDREN AND YOUTH CONSIDER APPROPRIATE PROGRAMMING

The children and adolescents were given the opportunity to imagine an appropriate (children’s) programme on refugees and then to draw and describe what they would like to know about the topic.

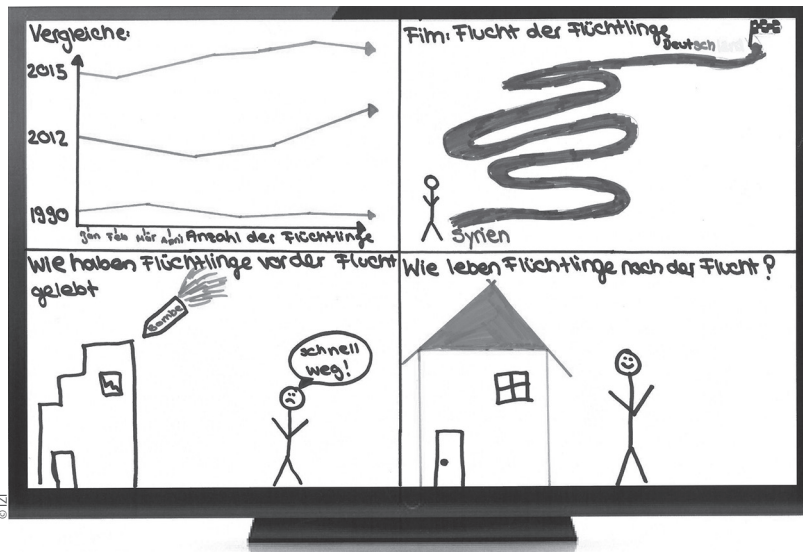
Background information and detailed explanations

In terms of content, children and adolescents wanted background information that answers their many questions about how everything fits together. They want details on various key topics,

as without these details they cannot understand what they have learned so far or link it to what they already know about the world.

When children reported what they already knew about refugees, many of them already knew that one of the main reasons for flight was war and destruction. But from their perspective, there is a lack of precise explanations

about the causes and circumstances behind the war scenes they had seen. Salina (10 years old) would like to know “how this kind of war is built up, how it all started.” 16-year-old Benedikt asked himself, “why they’re at war.” Here it becomes clear that even older children and adolescents are lacking information they need to put together a coherent picture of the world using their individual pieces of knowledge.



III. 1: 14-year-old Alina wants children’s programmes that offer facts and background knowledge on flight, war, and the life of refugees in Germany

reports when refugees were radicalised in Germany, but it was never (or only rarely) reported when refugees help others.” What the adolescents also criticised was that often the same topics were repeated over and over again. Besides this, they found the reporting incomplete or one-sided. Peter (14 years old) was of the opinion that “the news doesn’t tell you everything”.

Many of those interviewed wanted to know more about the situation in Germany, “what’s going to happen here next” (Nathalie, 14 years old), e.g. how we are going to handle the large number of refugees.

Background and details on facts related to the reception of refugees in Germany, e.g. “why some get asylum and some don’t” (Rebecca, 11 years old) are also things that children would like to have explained in more detail.

Some were also worried about possible dangers that are linked to receiving refugees – for example Claire (9 years old), who wondered whether many terrorists might be among the refugees, or “whether they could also become terrorists because they had such a bad past.” Children have also been exposed to the dominant images of media coverage: People in boats, rescue scenes, refugee treks or people in improvised camps at the border. “I want to know how they go there, I mean, how they did it, for example in inflatable boats, what it was like and such” (Jakob, 11 years old).

These in part overwhelming images gave rise to questions by children and adolescents that they wanted to have answered in detail. They were looking for explanations of how people can flee like that, how exactly the refugees coped with it and “how they were able to survive” (Georg, 11 years old).

A typical request from many children and adolescents was to receive information and details about the refugees’ home countries, for example, “what it looks like there, before and after” (Yannick, 9 years old). They were interested in the culture and the (previous) daily life of the refugees in their home countries. One of the things Selina (8 years old) wanted to know was “what they play there”. 8-year-old Johannes was interested in “what they eat there [...] and I want to know about their festivals or traditions”. Here we saw the desire to learn about who the refugees are, what their history and (cultural) identity is, and thus be able to understand them

better. In current media coverage in Germany, information about the countries of origin is often left out or hardly present (Herrmann, 2016).

That means: Children want to know what is or was happening, how the individual events are linked and what the consequences are. Many therefore wanted everything to be reported step-by-step, like 14-year-old Alina suggested in her drawing (Ill. 1). This makes it possible to better understand the events.

Adolescents want to see their own positions reflected

The responses of the 12- to 16-year-olds revealed that they believe critical attitudes on refugees are rarely discussed on television. Some of the adolescents were sceptical or critical of refugees and would like to see this position in media coverage (see also Götz in this issue). 13-year-old Secen had the impression that there “are a lot of refugees in Germany” that he is not against in principle, “but they expect a lot [...] and don’t do anything”. That is why he wanted this problem to be discussed on television and wanted reporters to sometimes also ask questions like, “Are there too many refugees in Germany?”. Due to the feeling that the media “change or twist facts” (Madiha, 16 years old) or “make up stories” (Dominik, 15 years old), they also wanted truthful and honest answers to questions like, “what a refugee gets and why they sometimes get more than Germans” (Luisa, 16 years old) or “how many refugees really need help” (Linda, 14 years old). Adolescents wanted their ideas and subjective feelings that “refugees seem to get too much or use

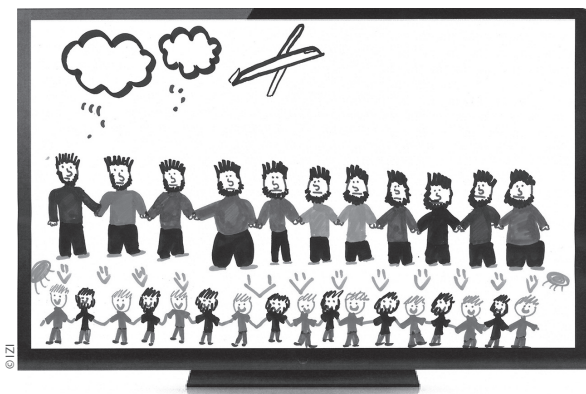
fraud to get benefits” to be discussed on television.

Central cross-thematic issues: Refugees’ perspectives

Regardless of the topic, it was important for children and adolescents to hear exactly how the refugees feel and how they were handling what they experienced and their new situation. Edward (9 years old), for example, would like to know “how they are doing here if they’re alone and part of their family is still there.” Especially the younger children interviewed had detailed concerns about the emotional state of the refugees after their difficult flight and the new, foreign environment. Stefan (10 years old) asked himself “whether they are happy to be here in Germany”. 11-year-old Vincent would like to have them explain “if they would rather be careful or completely hide”. And Luise (7 years old) was interested in “whether they are afraid of us [...] if they don’t know us”. Other children were also empathetic and wanted to know everything: “whether in the refugee homes they get to eat what they want” (Merle, 11 years old), “what hobbies they have” (Kira, 11 years old), or “whether they have a celebration like Christmas [...] and whether they like the snow” (Irina, 10 years old). The children’s many detailed questions are based on their need for orientation and their desire



Ill. 2: Hannah (11 years old) wants a news programme in which refugees themselves present information about the refugee topic



Ill. 3: Annabell (14 years old) wants refugees to not have to live in war zones anymore (upper row), she hopes that “Germans and refugees will live together in peace” in Germany

to understand the situation. To do so, they look for common aspects of situations, things, rituals, and circumstances that they are familiar with from their everyday lives. 9-year-old Tassilo, for example, even wanted to imagine for a moment he was a refugee so he would know exactly what it was like: “I’d like to be a refugee, but just to see what it’s like.”

Give refugees a voice

When thinking about how programmes should be made, often the suggestion was made to include refugees directly in the reporting and thus learn about them first-hand. The children and adolescents interviewed had various suggestions for how refugees could be given a voice. 11-year-old Hannah wanted “news with refugees integrated” (Ill. 2). In this format, refugees themselves would moderate and present news about the topic of refugees. Frederico (14 years old) would like a reporter to accompany a refugee for a week and “experience everything he has to do”.

Alternatives to negative reports

The children were not only looking for specific information about topics, however, they also wanted to see positive alternatives to what they saw in re-

ports: their hopes for refugees and living together. In her favoured programme, Jumina (13 years old) wanted to see a refugee “who goes to a school where he’s not excluded or discriminated against”. Besides positive stories about willingness to help, integration, and tolerance, several of the children and adolescents

drew future utopias on their televisions in which the refugees could return to their home countries, for example, because “their countries are at peace and everyone is happy” (Camilla, 13 years old) or in which “Germans and refugees live together in peace” (Annabell, 14 years old, Ill. 3).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Most people in Germany have obtained their knowledge about flight and refugees from the media. Children and adolescents have almost all of their internal images on the topic from television. It became clear in the study that children and adolescents mix media images and social discourse with individual topics and patterns of interpretation. They are very interested in the topic and look for information and answers to their various questions. When it comes to quality programmes for children and adolescents, there is a challenge and an opportunity to take their age-specific needs and questions seriously. Individual facts and elements of information from reports for adults usually do not help them. Ideas and assumptions arise that do not always correspond to reality or that give rise to entirely new questions. If television reception is understood as an active process of knowledge acquisition in

which children and adolescents make sense for themselves of the material shown and use it to construct their knowledge of the world, then they need clearly structured information. This should not be entirely made up of facts but should also explain the background of the topic in order to make the circumstances clearer. From the perspective of children and adolescents, however, it is also important to include the views of those who are the focus of the reports – the refugees themselves. Trying to understand and empathise is a key way for young recipients to adopt knowledge about the world. This also includes showing realities that have been neglected up to now in (children’s) programmes and explaining how, for example, the refugees lived in their home countries. Their desires make it clear: Instead of repeated descriptions of problems, children and adolescents want to see how difficulties can be overcome or what opportunities there are for living together with refugees in Germany. 10-year-old Joseph puts it in a nutshell: “That we also hear good things about the refugees, so we don’t have to worry so much because really we only hear bad things.”

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