

# logo! and the refugee topic: “Not scaring anyone, but not looking through rose-coloured glasses, either”

A CONVERSATION WITH MARKUS MÖRCHEN\*

*How does the German children's news programme logo! explain the refugee topic and what have the main issues been so far?*

**Mörchen:** The refugee topic has been with us for several years, and in 2015/2016 it became more important. Even at the start of 2015 we had the feeling that something big was coming. It was the first phase of this refugee wave: the tragedy that was going on in the Mediterranean Sea. During this time, we asked questions like “Where are the refugees coming from?”, “Why are they fleeing?”, and “How do they feel when they're fleeing?”. We primarily concentrated on explaining why people start on such a journey – where they're not sure whether they'll survive. And we showed what is being done to help them.

Based on this topic, we showed a lot of individual cases. Our reporter Tim Schreder traced the paths of the refugees from the outmost boundaries of Europe – we were in Melilla (Spain), Sicily and Malta – to Germany (Ill. 1). It was important to us to show that not only war leads to flight but there are also other reasons that are just as good. On the coast of Melilla, for example, Tim met a boy from Morocco. Some of these young people were ready to risk their lives to reach Europe in order to lead a better life there. In the film, the viewers find out that they usually don't have a home or a job, and Europe seems to them to be something like paradise. But of course, we mostly reported on war refugees, especially those from



Ill. 1: logo! reporter Tim Schreder visits young refugees in Passau/Germany

Syria, because they made up the majority of the refugees and we noticed by the children's reactions that they were most concerned with this topic. They wanted to know what it's like to live in a war zone and watch your own home be destroyed – and then have to flee in the end.

When more and more children were forced to flee alone, their stories became our focus and were followed with a great deal of empathy from our viewers. An example of this is Karim, whom we got to know in a refugee camp in Passau. He was then 8 years old and had lost sight of his parents while fleeing from Afghanistan. He now lives with a foster family in Germany (Ill. 2). When our reporter asked, Karim told us about how he was threatened,

hit, and hurt while fleeing, what he felt like after he had reached Germany and that all he has left of his family is a single photograph. Especially when we tell these kinds of stories, it's important for us to follow up. We owe that to our viewers: Children don't just forget things; they keep asking and are very empathetic. That is why we later visited Karim a second time with his foster family and will try to keep telling his story in the future, too.

*How has the topic changed over time?*

**Mörchen:** In the second phase of the refugee wave in 2015, everything changed a bit. It was when the refugees arrived here in Germany. The “welcoming culture” that was described again and again was predominant.

At the same time, though, there was what could maybe be called the “unwelcoming culture”. That means that in society there was more and more discussion about the dangers and limits of taking in so many refugees. Because this discourse did not go unnoticed by children, they also showed a great deal of interest during this phase. In this context, *logo!* had to explain a lot and give the children background knowledge. Important basic questions from the viewers were: “Why can’t we accept all the refugees?”, “What does asylum mean?”, or “What is deportation?”. The children also wanted to know how they themselves could help refugees or what they should do when they are afraid. We tried to answer many of the questions.

#### *How do the editors handle it when different rumours or fake news come up?*

**Mörchen:** The longer the discussions about refugees lasted, the more rumours and clearly intentional false reports spread. At some point that also became a topic for us because the children confronted us with it.

We therefore check prejudices like, “Refugees take away our jobs” or “If they all have smartphones then they must have money”.

Up to now, we have done this a lot online but also in our TV programme, and we will continue to expand it. This is a new journalistic task that has arisen. Why refugees have almost nothing with them when they flee but can still afford a smartphone is something we explain, for example, in a film and online on the *logo!* fact check. There we show how the mobile phone is absolutely necessary for survival for contacting relatives and planning their route when fleeing (Ill. 3). We also show that not all refugees were poor before their flight, but they had to leave a lot behind. Unfortunately, children also repeatedly confronted us with stories about refugees, and these stories later turned out to be false. Either because the stories or images were taken out of context or because they were completely made up. That’s why we think it’s important to continually point out the dangers of fake news. We explain how to recognise fake news, for example, that you can’t

believe everything you hear, read or see in the media and that there are easy ways to debunk this kind of false information. We also explain why some people intentionally spread false information – whether it’s to make money or to gain political influence and stir up fear. What is important for us is that children get a feel for what they can believe and when they should be careful and skeptical.

#### *What other challenges do you face when it comes to this topic?*

**Mörchen:** Probably like all other editors who are currently dealing with the topic, we also see the xenophobia and hate that people want to express in our forums, guest books, and similar outlets. This has reached dimensions we had never seen before. Every day we ask ourselves how we should handle it. Of course, we also get direct accusations against us as media-makers. We take that very seriously and always try to get a full picture of all sides and opinions, tell things that are uncomfortable to hear and describe fears. We continually analyse our stances: Is it possible

that we’re too much on the side of the children who mostly want to help and only secondarily give thought to what comes next? How, for example, should we explain the topic of deportation? Is this something good or something bad? How should we handle lies and hate? Can we ignore it? Do we have to have a position on everything? The answer: We don’t know (yet). Every time we decide anew



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Ill. 2: Reporter Tim Schreder meets the Afghan refugee boy Karim, who came to Germany alone and now lives with a foster family



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Ill. 3: The *logo!* fact check explains: Smartphones are not luxury goods for refugees, they are necessary for contacting relatives and for orientation during the flight

and, by doing so, are in the midst of a relatively broad discussion.

**Journalistic distance or humanistic attitude?**

**Can you give an example in which *logo!* took a clear position on a refugee topic?**

**Mörchen:** An example in which we consciously showed that we do not agree with everything happening around the refugees is a film about the events in the town of Heidenau in Saxony/Eastern Germany. When there were xenophobic riots against the refugee home there, our reporter Tim Schreder reported on it. He described the situation and said that in the hall which could be seen in the report, people were staying, including families, children, and young adults. They fled to Germany in need because they hoped to receive help. Instead, however, there were people who protested violently against them and wanted to attack them. The police need to protect them so nothing happens to them. And then our reporter positioned himself by saying, “Seeing this, that it is happening here in Germany, to be honest, that just makes me sad.”

Of course, you can ask the question whether this crosses the limits of

journalistic distance, especially since it is a news programme. Is this something that can be broadcast because it also represents the opinion of many children? Because they also can’t understand how you can attack people who are looking for protection? We believe that we are actually obligated to do this: Our programme assignment obligates us to a humanistic attitude, and it is right to show that in our programmes.

**Are there certain guiding thoughts that *logo!* uses to try to explain the topic of refugees to children?**

**Mörchen:** We have come up with rules for ourselves, but we are still in the middle of a process. As we said, it is important to us to portray many opinions, sides, and facets. We want to question clichés more. We also want to keep questioning our own stances and, if necessary, adapt them to changing realities. We don’t want to do any scare-mongering, but we also don’t want to show the world through rose-coloured glasses. Besides that, we are aiming for a change of perspective. We don’t only want to show refugee children in need of help and being helped by stronger people anymore, as we had to do at the start of the refugee crisis. Instead, we want to show strong girls and boys with migrant backgrounds who are also role models. We think it’s

important to show similarities in terms of forms of societies and values – so far, reporting in Germany has mostly emphasised differences. However, we also want to talk about contradictions and offer children the chance to form their own opinions. And, whenever possible, we want to focus on solutions instead of – as is typical for the news – almost only on problems. This is one of *logo!*’s principles anyway, though, and due to the refugee crisis it has become more important.

**Since December 2015 *logo!* news can also be seen online with subtitles especially for refugee children. Why?**

**Mörchen:** ZDF asked itself at an early stage how it can make a small contribution to a large integration project like the one facing Germany now. The English and Arabic subtitles are meant to help refugees learn German more easily and thus be able to integrate better. In addition, the option is intended to help foreign children understand what is happening in Germany. Of course, other children can also use the option, for example to improve their English. We asked children who go to an intensive class and speak almost no German what they think of the option. Their response was overall very positive. One girl said: “It’s great that now we can watch a programme that German children watch, too.” And one boy said he wanted more programmes with subtitles, especially the news. So there is still a lot to do ...

The interview was led by Genia Baranowski.



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