

Refugees on children's television

TYPICAL CONTENTS AND APPROACHES

Kirsten Schneid

This media analysis examined the contents and ways of handling the refugee topic by German children's television based on 26 programmes.

Starting in the late summer of 2015, the refugee topic dominated the media and led to a sustained, intensive political and social debate. Editors of children's television were and are presented with the challenge of offering their young audience information on the topic of refugees while highlighting the specific questions and needs of children. How are the topic and background information explained to children in children's television programmes? And have the ways of narrating and content foci changed over the course of time? These questions were examined in the framework of a media analysis by the PRIX JEUNESSE foundation in co-operation with the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI). The qualitative analysis looked at typical narrative forms along a research grid designed using a pre-test.¹

We analysed 26 German children's programmes, most of which were broadcast for the first time during the period of intensive reporting on the topic, that is, from the late summer of 2015 until January 2016. The analysis revealed: German children's television concentrated primarily on conveying facts and background knowledge, and its strength is in the personalisation of the topic; for other areas, far fewer and – if they existed at all – rather stereotypical ways of implementation were used.

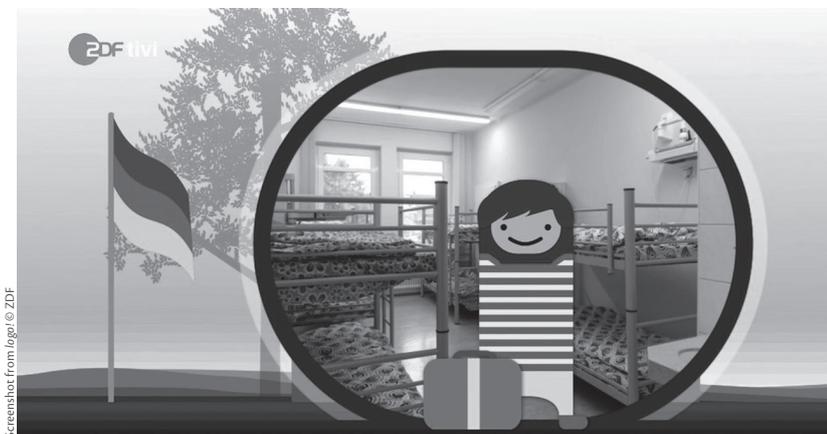
WHAT TOPICS CHILDREN'S TV COVERED AND HOW THEY WERE REALISED

Facts and background knowledge on the topic of refugees

One of German children's television's traditional strengths has been in conveying information (cf. Holler et al., 2013). Especially in the phase in which

the largest number of refugees arrived between the late summer of 2015 until January 2016, television reacted to the refugee topic with an extensive range of information. Established programmes focussing on factual reports and knowledge for children such as *logo!* (ZDF), *pur+* (*pure+*, ZDF), *Checker Tobi* (BR), *motzgurke.tv* (SWR), *neuneinhalb* (*Nine-And-A-Half*, WDR), *Erde an Zukunft* (*Earth to Future*, KiKA), *Löwenzahn* (*Dandelion*, ZDF), and others reported on the topic, in some cases as special broadcasts. A typical form of conveying knowledge on the topic is stringing together facts, as is often done in the introductions to educational programmes, for example in *pur+* or *Checker EXTRA*. The presenters' explanations are often visualised with real images shown quickly one after the other.

Another frequently used format are explicitly explanatory items that are meant to clarify terms or contexts. The children's news programme *logo!* often uses this type of presentation and even before the autumn of 2015 had regularly offered information on the topic of refugees with pointed explanatory items. For example, terms like asylum were explained or background knowledge on boat refugees or "What do refugees cost?" (Ill. 1) were presented. At the height of the refugees' arrival, *logo!* significantly intensified these offers. Educational formats such as *pur+*, *Checker Tobi*, or *motzgurke.tv* also integrate explicitly explanatory items in order to make information or terms better understood. Often this is done by the presenters or narrators explaining while the explanation is visualised with graphics, in part mixed with real



Ill. 1: In explanatory items, terms are explained and background knowledge is presented; here on the topic "What do refugees cost?" in the programme *logo!*

images. The presenters, who are males in the majority of the educational programmes (e.g. in *Erde an Zukunft*, *Checker Tobi*, or *pur+*), are thereby the ones doing the explaining. They present themselves as someone knowledgeable who can explain the issues. They also work as reporters who research the topics in the field, gather information by talking to those affected and experts, and then explain how this information fits into the overall context.

One way of conveying information is presenting direct encounters with refugees. This method is slower, but information learned in this way is more intense. An example of this is *Die Sendung mit der Maus* (*The Show with the Mouse*, WDR), in which the reporter Christoph Biemann accompanies a Syrian refugee family over a longer period of time. The focus is on one of the children in the family, the girl Tiba (Ill. 2). The brief reports offer information on many different topics: Why did the family flee, how did they travel, where do the refugees live, what are the typical customs of people in Syria? For example, it is shown in detail how the family lives in the refugee home or how the father washes himself before prayers.

Presenting refugees as individuals

One way that is typically chosen by children's television and is often successful is personalisation, which turns the mass of refugees, who are frequently referred to in a derogatory tone as "the refugees", into people with individual stories. In German children's television, personalisation is mostly done using profiles of refugee children or adolescents. When introducing the young refugees, often young men are chosen who came to Germany alone and who explain their reasons for fleeing and why they fled without their family.

Journal formats like *pur+* integrate brief documentary blocks in which refugees are introduced. Other formats such as *neuneinhalb* concentrate fully on one person in each episode (*neuneinhalb*:



Ill. 2: *The Show with the Mouse*: Reporter Christoph Biemann accompanies Tiba and her family over a longer period of time and offers the viewers information on why the family had to flee, how they traveled and how they adapted to their new life in Germany

Young refugees – Morteza lives without parents in Germany). The refugees are given space to tell their stories and show the viewers how they are living at the moment. Out of the large, anonymous mass, individuals emerge with a name and their own story, in which the viewers can imagine themselves and sympathise. The reasons for flight, suffering, fears, and desires for the future become understandable.

In the intensive phase of reporting starting in the late summer of 2015, mostly refugees from countries at war are shown. People who left their homes because of political or religious persecution are almost never portrayed. One exception was the *logo!-extra* programme in July 2015, in which one profile gave insights into why people want to leave their countries when there is a lack of future prospects. In the Spanish enclave Melilla, the reporter Tim met a Moroccan adolescent and asked him about the reasons other Moroccans flee to Europe. The young man takes the initiative himself and then asks the reporter, who is about the same age, what his life in Germany is like: Whether he has a flat, a job, a car. He thereby makes it clear that these

things, which he thinks are elements of a dignified life, are essentially impossible for him to attain in his country.

The refugees are usually shown in Germany in their portrayal. Exceptions are the example described above of the reporter who went to Melilla and the special programme *Checker EXTRA* (BR), in which the reporter Willi travels to Lebanon and meets a girl named Rama at a refugee camp there.

The forms in which the stories are presented vary: In some programmes the refugees tell their stories alone when asked (example *neuneinhalb: Refugee profile Mohammed*, Ill. 3). The descriptions are also often given in the framework of interviews or in a conversation with the presenter. In part, the refugees' descriptions are added to by the presenters' comments and put into perspective. The refugees are also introduced in the form of documentaries. In these, they tell about themselves and their experiences. People in their environment also get a chance to speak and talk about the experiences or relationship with the refugee who is the focus of the portrayal.

It is also typical for the personalisation of refugee children and adoles-

cents to make connections to the daily life of children without a refugee background. Topics are chosen that are also important for children who are not refugees, e.g. their own room, how a school day is structured, which subjects they like, whether they have already made friends, etc.

A standard pattern in the portrayals is to discuss some of the suffering the refugee has gone through and to emphasise this suffering by the presenters' consternation. Especially during the phase in which the highest number of refugees came in the autumn/winter of 2015/2016, the focus of the content when introducing refugees is on their suffering and the difficult experiences they had in their home countries and when fleeing. The refugees typically describe their suffering themselves after being prompted by an invisible interviewer in the background or in a discussion with the presenters. In some cases, the descriptions are illustrated with real pictures, sometimes also the refugees' personal pictures. The seriousness of the situation for the people being portrayed can also be transmitted by the form of the presentation. For example in *pur+*: *Fleeing without parents*, the young Syrian Abdullah describes the reasons and history of his flight without the viewers being able to see his face. The viewer learns that Abdullah does not want to be recognised because he is afraid for his family, who is still in Syria.

The refugees' suffering is conveyed to the viewers not only by their descriptions. The presenters also sometimes express their dismay. For example the *logo!* presenter Tim: In a *logo!-extra* episode, he describes how his encounters with Karim, a boy who had fled from Afghanistan, had moved him so much that he wanted to meet him again to see how he was doing (see also the interview with Markus Mörchen in this issue). And he expresses his relief when he sees that he is doing well with a foster family. Here the presenter leaves the neutral position of a reporter and

confesses his emotions, which he shares with the viewers.

The seriousness of the situation can be felt in the special episode *Checker EXTRA* (BR). In a refugee camp in Lebanon, the reporter Willi meets a little girl, Rama. She quite literally takes him with her into her world and lets him participate in her daily life. By directly experiencing how the reporter goes through the girl's difficult daily routines, it becomes very clear to the viewers how drastically wars can negatively change a young person's life.

Giving refugees a face and a name

The docusoap *Die Jungs-WG* (*The Boys' House Share*, ZDF) has chosen another way to make an impression on viewers. In a project in Italy, the boys get to know Arona, an African refugee. He tells them what it means to risk his life fleeing over the Mediterranean Sea and what values he believes are most important after this experience. The boys are deeply moved by this encounter. They cry when Arona tells them to put themselves in the situation of a refugee who had to leave the life he knew behind him. In brief playbacks, the boys say:

The topic "refugees" now has a face and a name for them; they can empathise. One boy says: "If you really listen to one person and his story and you sit in front of him, then it all becomes so real. It really touches you. You can imagine what it's like a lot more."

Very few portrayals of refugees filmed at the height of reporting do not mention the refugees' difficult experiences. One of the rare examples is the brief portrayal *Lana from Syria* from the children's news programme *logo!* (Ill. 4). Here viewers see how well Lana has adapted to her new home. She describes what she likes about the German language. Her classmates are also interviewed and talk about the tricks they used to understand each other when Lana was not able to speak much German.

Opportunities and ways to live together

What prerequisites need to be fulfilled to live together peacefully? The children's programmes also deal with this question. The programmes that were shown between the autumn of 2015 until the start of 2016 discuss the topic in various forms, usually in brief segments. Especially the programmes that were



Screenshot from logo! © ZDF

Ill. 4: An example of positive reporting is *Lana from Syria* from the children's news programme *logo!*: Lana has well adapted to her new home and has established a new circle of school friends

created with a bit of distance from the height of the migration in 2015 place a focus on living together; these were then broadcast in the autumn of 2016. In the autumn and winter of 2015/2016, the topic of integration was typically discussed by adults active in integration work. Mayors had the chance to describe how they promote the interaction between refugees and the local population (*logo! extra: Refugees in Germany*). Adults explained their idea of what is necessary for everyone to live together peacefully – for example the director of an initial registration facility in *pur+*. In *logo! extra* the director of a school for young refugees described how the children sign a “contract” with the school that sets down what the school offers the refugees and what they expect from the refugees in return. A theoretical discussion of the key elements of successful integration is offered by an episode of KiKA's educational show *Erde an Zukunft: Refugees – How should we deal with all these people?*. The presenter Felix together with a presenter from Deutsche Welle (DW)² describes “building blocks” – the key points needed for successfully living together – before he then goes out of the studio in a “practice test” on the topic of integration and does research with discussions and encounters.

Not only adult experts but also children and adults without a refugee background are interviewed and report how personal encounters with young refugees changed their attitudes. For example, in *pur+: Fleeing without parents*, a German adolescent talks about how direct encounters disproved all negative prejudices that he had heard about refugees.

Another typical method is to show actions children are taking to work with refugees – for example by organising a tearoom in a refugee home (*motzgurke.tv: Refugees – They can go somewhere else*). Children with and without a refugee background tell how they became friends. This also discusses how refugee children themselves become helpers and assist newly arrived refugees in taking the first steps in their new country. Showing actions to help refugees is also an indirect way of giving ideas for how the viewers can become active; in some cases, the helpers shown give reasons for why they are active or are presented such that viewers can see the fun they have by helping.

When young refugees talk about integration in the children's programmes, this is often done in the framework of discussions with the presenter in which they talk about their current situation or in documentaries that show the

young refugees in their daily lives. Here a typical aspect presented is how they value the opportunities they have in their new country. The refugees shown are usually very focussed on the future and aspirational and are able to clearly express this. In an impressive manner, for example, in the documentary *Schau in meine Welt: Liiban* (*Look into my world: Liiban*, HR) the 13-year-old Somali Liiban expresses his appreciation for the fact that in Germany he has educational opportunities that his country of origin, Somalia, could not offer him. He turns directly to the camera and makes a clear statement to the viewers: “I want to say something: German kids have to go to school and work hard!”

Talking about problems and fears

In the children's programmes that were analysed, only rarely were integration problems mentioned. Almost only examples of successful integration were presented or the requirements for successful integration were discussed. One of the few exceptions was the educational show *Checker Tobi: The refugee check*. Here, the presenter talks to a young Syrian boy about “violent refugees”. The boy condemns the violent actions and clearly says that those kinds of actions cannot be ascribed to all Syrians. In this case, the assessment of this integration problem is done by someone affected.

A programme that indirectly discusses the challenges of integration is the episode *Tolerance* in the fictional educational programme *Löwenzahn* (ZDF). Two people who are forced to live together learn that tolerance requires a learning process.

What are rarely discussed are fears that children without a refugee background have on the topic of refugees. In several programmes, general resentment of foreigners is talked about, often followed by explanations of the reasons for the fear of the unknown. Children's specific fears are almost never discussed,

however. In KiKA's *Webtalk*,³ fears are brought up in the context of viewers' questions, but the studio guests can only very briefly answer them.

New focus: Living together with the refugees

A change in how integration was presented can be seen in the children's programmes that were created after January 2016. Here, the focus is increasingly on the phase of "settling in": How do the refugees and Germans get along with each other? How exactly do they live together? Examples of living together are shown that discuss similarities and differences and how they come to terms with these differences. In a report in the educational programme *pur+*: *My new brother is a refugee*, Mila, a German girl, gets a "new" brother when Mohammed, an 18-year-old Syrian, moves in with them. As the girl tells her story and in conversations between the two, the viewers learn how they get along and what problems they have. When they cook together, one topic is pork: The family continues to cook it, and Mohammed just picks it out – something that works well for everyone. The presenter Eric concludes the programme with the question of whether living together works well here because both sides are open but on the other hand they also hold to what is important for them. He asks the young viewers to react. Another example for the changing focus in reporting is the 8-part series *Berlin und wir!* (*Berlin and us!*, ZDF) that has been broadcast on KiKA since October 2016. Here, 4 young people from Berlin meet 4 refugees. They get to know each other by doing things together. The activities are specifically chosen to get to know more about the refugees: What do they like, what are they afraid of, what do they think about religion, what customs do they have? For example, they go grocery shopping and cook together. When they eat together, the typical cultural eating habits are discussed naturally.

Controversial topics such as religious questions or ISIS are not left out. At the same time, the series provides entertaining looks into teenage realities while conveying knowledge about cultures that have become a current part of society because of the immigrants, and it does so in a way that appeals to the target audience (see also the interview with Margrit Lenssen in this issue).

CONCLUSION

German children's television offers extensive reporting on the topic of refugees. Especially since the late summer of 2015, the topic has been discussed on many programmes and in various forms. The focus of reporting was first on conveying knowledge. The background and terms linked to the topic were explained, and the (usually male) presenters of the established programmes were the ones who did the explaining. Knowledge on the topic was also conveyed by personalising refugees, typically by presenting the stories and current situations of refugee children and adolescents. The refugees' suffering and their difficult experiences were key here. The programmes created after January 2016 increasingly focused on the topic of living together: How do the new arrivals and the people who live in Germany get on with each other? What are similarities, what are differences, how are compromises made?

Questions that are almost never brought up on children's programmes dealing with refugees even though they would offer many connections and possibilities to promote media literacy include: How can you handle the flood of information on the topic and the sometimes drastic pictures? Other than in KiKA's *Webtalk* in January 2016, which briefly discussed the challenges of such a flood of information, these topics are not dealt with. Future prospects are also seldom shown in connection to the topic of

refugees in children's programmes, and when they are, then it is in the form of playful thinking like the "intelligent future machines" in *Erde an Zukunft*, a machine that draws an ideal picture of an open and welcoming society.

The children's programmes rarely take an explicit position on the topic of refugees. Implicitly, however, with the selection of topics and the refugees shown, a position is promoted: In general, a positive picture is shown of how society is dealing with the refugees. Problems are rarely discussed, and the refugees portrayed are often strong children or adolescents who accept the support offered voluntarily and gratefully and use this support for their future. ■

NOTES

¹ The research questions here were: How are facts and background information conveyed? How are refugees personified? Are connections made to the daily life of children without a refugee background? Are traumas/experiences/suffering of children with a refugee background discussed? Are the fears of children without a refugee background discussed? Are problems but also opportunities and paths of integration discussed? Are tips given for how to become active? Is the topic of similarities and differences discussed? Is media literacy explicitly furthered? Are future prospects developed? Is an explicit position taken?

² Deutsche Welle (DW) is Germany's international broadcaster.

³ In the KiKA *Webtalk*, discussion groups, anchored by a presenter, talk about certain issues which can be viewed on the internet.

REFERENCE

Holler, Andrea, Götz, Maya, Egerer, Anne, Geiger, Veronika, Nastasia, Diana et al. (2013). *SpongeBob oder Willi wills wissen? Kinder berichten, was sie aus dem Kinderfernsehen lernen*. *TeleviZion*, 16(2), 14-17.

THE AUTHOR

Kirsten Schneid, B. A., is the Project and Festival Co-ordinator for the PRIX JEUNESSE foundation, Munich, Germany.

