

“Content that can be quite demanding”

AN OVERVIEW OF CONTENT OFFERED BY GERMAN CHILDREN’S TELEVISION PROVIDERS IN THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Genia Baranowski

The article gives an overview of the content offered by German children’s television providers in response to the impact of the coronavirus crisis on their target group.

What can we offer children when their situation suddenly undergoes a massive change? What can we do when children’s day-care centres, schools and playgrounds are closed? As the coronavirus pandemic made itself felt in Germany, these questions arose not only for parents, but also for television providers. This resulted in schedule changes and content based on different concepts. The following article will discuss some of these approaches,¹ partly from the perspective of those responsible for TV programming.

THE “MOUSE” AS AN ANCHOR AND A MEANINGFUL ACTIVITY

In March 2020, the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) responded to the school closures with, among other things, a time slot dedicated to primary school children. For several weeks, every weekday from 9 to 12, the station broadcast *Der etwas André Unterricht* (Ill. 1), presented by André Gatzke and primary school teacher Pamela Fobbe. The components of this programme were selected with a view to the changes in children’s lives resulting from the coronavirus crisis, says Brigitta Mühlenbeck, head of family and children’s programming at the WDR. The goal was to meet parents’ need to keep children meaningfully occupied in front of and with the television during school clo-

tures. The WDR therefore deliberately selected educational programmes such as *Wissen macht Ah!* or *Planet Schule*. A core element of the programming was the daily broadcast of the format *Die Sendung mit der Maus* (*The Show with the Mouse*). According to Brigitta Mühlenbeck, studies have shown that the “Mouse” fulfils an anchoring function in many households, and has thus created a reliable, familiar framework for children. In times when children’s normal reality has been so severely challenged, the editorial team has concentrated on showing the situation of “real” people. Another key idea behind the programme planning, Mühlenbeck continues, was to provide children with advice, the premise being: “We won’t dramatise the current events, but we won’t trivialise them either.” Humour also played a part, she says, “which ultimately culminated not just in the screen persona of André Gatzke, who sometimes plays the part of a cheeky, mischievous schoolboy, interacting with teacher Pamela Fobbe,” but also in the form of Ralph Caspers. In *Die Sendung mit der Maus* he humorously answered questions from children. Another programme dealing with the current events relating to the crisis was the WDR news magazine *neuneinhalb*. WDR also offered (and still offers) various additional material on the subject of the

coronavirus online, e.g. on the website of *Wissen macht Ah!*. Here Dr Mo responds to children’s questions, e.g. “Why can’t I go to school at the moment?”

“That worked very well,” says Mühlenbeck about the overall concept. Throughout Germany, *Die Sendung mit der Maus* alone, shown from Monday to Friday on WDR television, achieved an average market share of 28.2% among children aged 3 to 13. On the programme’s website, daily visitor numbers increased roughly threefold in the coronavirus period, and the intensity of use of the “Mouse” app rose by 60%.

The WDR’s primary school timeslot was part of the overall provision within the ARD, which aimed to offer all age groups of children affected by the closure of schools and day-care centres selected public service television on a daily basis. As another example, the Südwestrundfunk (SWR) changed its morning schedule for a while in the middle of March 2020, wanting to offer young viewers “a home, security and orientation in exceptional times.”²



Ill. 1: In the time slot *Der etwas André Unterricht*, WDR put together shows from its regular programme with transitions presented by André Gatzke and Pamela Fobbe



Screenshot from *Tigerenten Club Spezial* © SWR

Ill. 2: The presenters of *Tigerenten Club Spezial* invite children to join in their riddles

Within the newly constructed programme slot, the *Tigerenten Club Spezial* (Ill. 2) was broadcast. The presenters led the way through a colourful programme with documentaries and series. Viewers could also send their questions to the studio, to be answered by experts. This was followed by the broadcast of *Planet Schule* and *Planet Wissen*. The programme was complemented by online videos to combat boredom, for example with craft ideas, and information on the current situation.

One of the choices made by Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (rbb) was to focus on fairy-tale-like entertainment for children. Under the theme “The rbb creates family time” the broadcaster began to show films based on fairy tales such as *Mother Holle* or *Rapunzel* on weekday mornings during the coronavirus crisis.

SPECIAL LEARNING PROGRAMMES

Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR) provided a special service for home learning, in partnership with the Bavarian State Ministry for Education and Cultural Affairs, with the slogan “Schule daheim” (“School at home”). ARD-Alpha set up a learning platform for students, broadcast in linear format, with appropriate content from the STEM subjects, humanities and languages. The content, clearly arranged by subject, is available online via the BR media library, alphaLernen.de, and the in-

formation portal of the Ministry. At first this initiative was only aimed at secondary school year groups, but later it was expanded to include supplementary teaching for primary school pupils. “It was very important to us that everyone should be able to find something, regardless of school type, class level or subject combination,” says Werner Reuß, head of educational television at BR, and responsible for the programme “Schule daheim.” The broadcaster already offered numerous learning videos online before the coronavirus crisis, but produced over 80 new units for the subjects maths and English as part of this initiative, taking into account the curriculum and the upcoming exams of the final-year classes. The materials for primary school pupils are not tailored to the curriculum in the same way, says Reuß. The reason is that a substantial part of the teaching at primary level is relationship work, and this is difficult to teach on television. In any case, he continues, the aim is not to completely recreate school, but to give opportunities for learning. In German lessons, for example, primary school pupils could watch a video explaining “where umlauts come from.” For the younger children, *Die Sendung mit der Maus* was one of the programmes included every day in the morning schedule.

Reuß is satisfied with the good response: “In peak times within this period, the linear content experienced an increase of around 400% over the normal programme. And the non-linear learning content was accessed over 1,000% more than usual” – despite the fact that these are not entertainment formats, but “content that can be quite demanding.”

Another format of BR engaged directly with the crisis. What is a pandemic? Why is the coronavirus so dangerous? In the children’s educational programme *Checker Tobi*, the eponymous Tobi investigated such questions in the “virus check”. The programme was broadcast in April 2020 on the children’s channel KiKA and has been available since then on the YouTube channel “Checker Welt,” in the BR media library and on the KiKA player.

The Zweite Deutsche Fernsehen (ZDF) also focused partly on online content: for example, it set up a “virtual classroom” in its media library, with “videos to make you smarter for all age groups,”³ e.g. on geography or history. Also to be found in the ZDF media library are previously broadcast episodes of the discovery magazine *PUR+*. The episode *Gefährliche Viren?* for example, explains what viruses are all about, and how pathogens spread, for example in a school class. One of the programmes that can be accessed is a spin-off of the *PUR+* comedy section “Darth Vader privat” (Ill. 3) dealing humorously with the lockdown and the restrictions on going out.

The ZDF children’s news programme *logo!* also provides informative items on the coronavirus online. And one of the KiKA’s broadcasts in April was a *logo! extra* show in which experts, including the German Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn, answered young viewers’ questions on the topic.

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EVERYTHING YOU NEED IN A CRISIS

Under the title “Gemeinsam zuhause” (“at home together”), KiKA, the joint children’s channel of ARD and ZDF, launched a number of initiatives, of which we can only outline a few here. According to the broadcaster, the programmes offered online and on television encompass everything children need to cope with the unusual situation. “Children sense the



Screenshots from Priv + © ZDF

Ill. 3: The comedy section “Darth Vader privat” (PUR+) deals humorously with the lockdown and restrictions on going out

uniqueness of this time. The absence of school, day care, grandparents and friends has made media central. We’ve adapted to this across all our platforms: informative and educational programmes have been added, fictional content has been increased, and #GemeinsamzuHause has been used to establish a label, under which tips and plenty of suggestions can be found,” says Dr Astrid Plenk, head of programming at KiKA.

In mid-March the broadcaster had already announced that after the preschool content *KiKANiNCHEN* the morning schedule would be expanded with series like *Yakari* (KiKA) and *Garfield* (hr). In addition, the children’s news programme *logo!* (ZDF) began to report on the current situation twice a day rather than just once.

On weekdays, starting on 18 March 2020, the KiKA began to run special editions of *Die beste Klasse Deutschlands – Spezial* (KiKA/hr/ARD). Instead of having classes competing in the studio, the presenters offer the children at home quiz questions and experiments, and encourage them to guess the answers.

Since the end of March 2020, KiKA has also been involved in the digital reading-aloud initiative “live gelesen mit ...” (“read live with ...”) (NDR/SWR). Here well-known children’s authors read aloud from their works. Each reading session is streamed and then made available online.

KiKA has also introduced new online and linear modules for preschool children, e.g. a song about how to wash your hands properly. These are just a few elements of a multimedia range of content which is clearly well received: KiKA’s digital content alone set new records in March 2020, with around 8.8 million visits.⁴

“MORE FUN TOGETHER”

In view of the closure of schools, the private broadcaster Super RTL reduced its preschool programme “Toggolino,” instead broadcasting various TOGGO series for older children.

“We used the phenomenon of ‘binge watching,’ which children may not know as a term, but which they experience intensively and love,” says Martin Gradl, Chief Content Officer at Super RTL. “That means we broadcast a series over a longer period of time in the morning, so that children could immerse themselves in a fantasy world without having to work out where they were again every half hour.” A further reaction to the crisis was the start of the TOGGO campaign to beat boredom, “Zusammen mehr Spaß” (“More fun together”). Since then children have been able to find, on toggo.de and in the TOGGO apps, videos, games and suggestions for getting creative. For example *Woozle* and *Simón*, the presenters of the educational format

Since 9 April on kikaninchen.de, preschool children have been able to experience various activities with their favourite characters from *Sesamstraße* (NDR): drawing with the Cookie Monster, singing with Ernie and Bert, and many other options.

Woozle Goozle, give ideas for crafts and activities to do at home, in video clips produced especially for this initiative. At *Täglich TOGGO* children can find, among other things, informative items on the current situation, such as answers to the question “Why is the disease called COVID-19?”.

CONCLUSION

To help children cope better with the effects of the corona crisis, television broadcasters in Germany have produced a multimedia response with a wide range of content. Not everything can be described in detail here. But what becomes clear is that the range includes information, entertainment, boredom-busting tips, and learning-related or at least educational content. And all of this at a time when the work of editorial teams has had to face major challenges, with team members working from home, and rules on hygiene and social distancing. Or, as Werner Reuß (BR) puts it: “We’ve learnt that extraordinary times not only call for extraordinary productions, but also make these possible.”

NOTES

¹ Due to the constantly changing situation, it was not always possible to predict, at the time of writing (mainly in April 2020), how long certain programme changes would be continued, or whether further content would be added.

² <https://www.swr.de/unternehmen/kommunikation/pressemeldungen/swrfernsehen-tigerentenclubextra-2020-102.html> [22.4.20]

³ <https://www.zdf.de/wissen/schulersatzprogramm-100.html> [28.4.20]

⁴ <https://www.kika-presse.de/pressemitteilungen/1107> [24.4.20]

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