

# Speaking the truth without instilling fear

## WAR IN UKRAINE: PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES TO OFFERINGS IN GERMAN CHILDREN'S MEDIA

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**This article provides an overview of children's programmes on German television, radio and the Internet on the topic of the war in Ukraine.**

"Could the war reach us here, too?" or "How can we help?": In the first weeks of the war in Ukraine, the ZDF editorial staff for the German children's news programme *logo!* received more than 3,000 questions like these, reported *logo!* editor-in-chief Constanze Knöchel. She and her team were not the only ones confronted with the challenge of taking up this difficult topic in a child-appropriate way. Other children's media also produced targeted offers, several of which are presented in the following, without any claim to completeness.<sup>1</sup> To more clearly show the concepts and perspectives, individual approaches are examined in greater detail and selected media producers were interviewed about their considerations.

### ***logo!* (ZDF): "Keeping secret would have caused more fear"**

As a daily programme, the German children's news programme *logo!* had to quickly react to the war in Ukraine. On 24 February, the editors collected questions from a primary school class in Mainz for the evening programme on the German public children's chan-



III. 1: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz answered children's urgent questions in a *logo!* episode

nel KiKA, recounted Knöchel. "The children were very worried and mostly wanted to know what the war meant for Germany and whether bombs could be dropped here, for example." In *logo!*, the events were then explained in a matter-of-fact way and the children's questions were answered by a politician. In the following time, the editors attempted to respond to the questions mentioned at the beginning with various content. "Besides what the war meant for our country, the children especially wanted to know how to help the refugees." In addition to the daily reports, background information was posted on *logo.de* and on the Instagram channel "zdf logo". For the *logo!* YouTube channel, video clips explaining topics related to Ukraine were produced. The special broadcast *logo!: Krieg in der Ukraine*

– *Eure Fragen (logo!: war in Ukraine – your questions)* tried to provide answers using animated and filmed videos, and experts' explanations. Even German Chancellor Olaf Scholz appeared in a *logo!* report to answer children's urgent questions (III. 1). "There was an immense need for information on all of our channels." A particular challenge was ensuring that the children's worries were not made infinitely worse while also not ignoring anything "because that would have caused more fear. That's why, for example, we did not show the horrible images and reports from Bucha but instead discussed the topic 'What are war crimes?'. Knöchel believes that this is what characterises a successful programme on this topic: Taking children seriously and speaking the truth without overwhelming them.

This also means meeting their need for breaks by reporting on other, positive topics.

In the meantime, *logo!* news is also available for refugee children from Ukraine in their native language on [zdf.de](https://www.zdf.de), as is the animated series *The Jungle Book* or an episode of the explorer programme *PUR+*. In the episode *Mein Leben nach der Flucht* (My life after fleeing), *PUR+* accompanies families from Ukraine and other countries as they start a new life in Germany.



Ill. 2: Even before the war started, *neuneinhalb – für dich mittendrin* (WDR) reported on the conflict in Ukraine

### OFFERS OF THE ARD<sup>2</sup>

The ARD children's programmes also informed children and their parents about the topic of war, especially the war in Ukraine, with additional offers when the war started. This was done in the linear programme on KiKA and Check Eins as well as in the ARD media library, where an informational page on the topic was created.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Neuneinhalb (WDR): Socio-political context**

"In our children's programming, the ARD editorial departments co-operated a lot within the network. In the first months of the war, all colleagues working on non-fiction areas got together in a weekly video conference to discuss their work", said Manuela Kalupke, editor in WDR's children's and family programme. The weekly ARD reporters' magazine for children *neuneinhalb – für dich mittendrin* (nine and a half – right in the midst of things for you) (WDR) reacted with special episodes. Already a week before the Russian invasion, the format broadcast an episode on the topic *Konflikt in der Ukraine – Was ist da los?* (Conflict in Ukraine – what's going

on there?) (Ill. 2) to help viewers make sense of the escalating situation. In the show, pupils from Oberhausen, Germany, met with children from Ukraine in a video call as part of an exchange programme. When the war actually began a few days later, a programme was broadcast as a supporting offer that showed what you can do if watching the news scares you. "We then kept the topic of the war in Ukraine on our programme's internet page, and every day we created news content on the current developments in a photo gallery. We also collected children's questions on the war on the WDR children's radio programme *KiRaKa* (since April 2022 *MausLive*), integrated these on our internet page, and used them to gather ideas for our work." This led to programme focuses on Check Eins, for example, and additional journal episodes such as *Krieg und Hunger* (War and hunger) or *Was ist ein Öl-Embargo?* (What is an oil embargo?). "In particular the first programmes on the war were some of the most frequently viewed programmes this year." Kalupke explained that the programmes did not constantly discuss the Ukraine conflict, however, so as not to overwhelm the children.

#### **"Don't leave the young target group feeling helpless"**

In general, *neuneinhalb* always aims to help viewers understand the socio-political context and to think about the question: "What does this have to do with our lives?" This approach was also taken with the topic of the war in Ukraine. It is important to take children seriously, answer their questions honestly and give them reliable information on the basis of constructive journalism. If unconfirmed information is circulating online, as was and continues to be the case in the war in Ukraine, then providing reliable information can often be a challenge. Another aspect that is important when reporting on the war is not to leave the young target group feeling helpless. "Ideally, we show the viewers options for action, for example how they can help." In addition, certain images such as children in distress or things that could cause too much fear are deliberately not shown or discussed.

Another informational child-appropriate offer was produced by WDR with the online format *MausBlick* (Mouse perspective), among others. In short clips, children's questions such as "Are all Russians bad?" are answered by experts. The videos are part of a topic



Ill. 3: In *#Ukraine – Mein Land im Krieg*, children use a war journal to tell about their life in the war and as they flee

page on [wdrmaus.de](http://wdrmaus.de), where other information is also available about the war and ideas for what to do if the news makes the children feel afraid. On the parents' page of *Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten* (*The show with the elephant*), adults can find helpful tips for talking to children about the topic. Other ARD formats that are worth mentioning here include the special series *#Ukraine – Mein Land im Krieg* (*#Ukraine – my country at war*) (Radio Bremen/SWR/hr/rbb, Ill. 3). In the documentary series, children from Ukraine use video messages to talk about their daily life in the war and as they flee. In the special series *#Ukraine – Wir für die Ukraine* (*#Ukraine – We support Ukraine*) (rbb/MDR/hr/KiKA), children around the world talk about how the war moves them.

### **CheX! – Die Checker Web-Show (BR): Believe in children's capabilities**

"What's going on in Ukraine?" or "How did the war start?" – presenter Tobias Krell, aka Checker Tobi, talks about these and other questions in the web show *CheX! – Das Ukraine Spezial* (*CheX! – the Ukraine special*) (BR) in 8 short clips. "We wanted to

give explanations to kids who are familiar with the *Checker* format and identify with it", Krell stated in an interview. In order to react quickly and at short notice, everything else was essentially set aside, questions were collected and work was done instinctively, as is often the case on the show. "We can react so quickly with the web show because we don't have to organize any filming locations or activities." In contrast to other web shows, in the clips a personal statement was made along the lines of "If you notice that this scares you or you don't feel comfortable with it,

then get someone to watch with you" (Ill. 4). There were no taboos in terms of content, however. "In our work as editors, we are drawn to difficult topics and terms like 'nuclear bomb' or 'NATO' so we can explain them in a way that children understand without getting scared."

In the clips, viewers can tell that even Checker Tobi and the experts do not always have a final answer, for example with questions like "Will the war come to us?" For Krell, this honesty is "almost the most important thing". "As journalists, we have the job of giving children the most objective



CheX! Ukraine Spezial mit Checker Tobi | Was mache ich, wenn der Krieg mir Angst macht? #8

Ill. 4: In *CheX! – Das Ukraine Spezial*, child psychologist Anna explains what the viewers can do if news reports about the war make them feel afraid



III. 5: In the ARD media library, refugee children can find children's programmes from ARD that are translated or have subtitles

description possible. It would be absurd to leave things out because that would be lying to the children, even if it is well-meant. Instead, we always try to trust the children and give them credit. We don't want to protect them but convey a message: Many people are afraid, and we are too." The presenter finds the diversity of programmes on the war in Ukraine a sign of success "because many other children's formats dealt with the topic". What is important in this is that parents are also considered. "Many parents wrote to us that they were grateful that we were able to provide explanations for some things that they were at a loss, either. That is an amazing compliment." All special episodes of *CheX!* can be found on the topic page in the ARD media library. For children who fled to Germany, a separate page was created in the ARD media library.<sup>4</sup> Well-known children's programmes are offered there for which no translation is necessary as well as formats with Ukrainian dubbing or subtitles. The offers include *Sesame Street*, *Tiere bis unters Dach* (*Animals up to the roof*), knowledge clips from *Sendung mit der Maus* (*The*

*show with the mouse*), or *Ich kenne ein Tier* (*I know an animal*) (III. 5). *Planet Schule* (*Planet school*) and *Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten* (*The show with the elephant*) show short clips to learn German in a fun way. The multi-part tutorial *Fit mit Felix* (*Fit with Felix*) makes it possible for them to do sport. In the *SWR Kindernetz* (*SWR children's network*), they can find episodes of the political podcast *DIE & DU* (*Them & you*) (*DASDING/SWR*) on the topic of Ukraine. Here there are also tips on what to do if the news makes you feel afraid, information on the situation and links to other informational offers. Additionally, media scientist Dr. Maya Götz explains in short videos how parents can talk to their children about the war.

### KiKA: Information and assistance

Besides the formats already mentioned that KiKA broadcast or provided once the war started, the broadcasting station reacted with additional offers for information and assistance on all of its platforms. On 24 February, after the children's

news programme *logo!*, a special broadcast *KiKA AKTUELL: Angriff auf die Ukraine – Eure Fragen* (*KiKA news: attack on Ukraine – your questions*) was aired and met with a "strong response" from the viewers.<sup>5</sup> In the following period, the public children's channel continued to increase its offers, which can only be outlined here. For example, on *kika.de* there are short clips in which experts answer questions on the war in Ukraine and give ideas for how you can deal with being afraid of the war. According to the station, the counselling offer "KUMMERKASTEN" (Advice box) is not only a constant point of contact for children's worries and questions, at the beginning of March 2022 it also offered a chat on the war in Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> Selected media offers in Ukrainian are available online under "KiKA für alle" (KiKA for everyone). On a subpage of KiKa's website for grown-ups, parents can get information about how to deal with news that can scare children and find links to additional offers. Another notable contribution includes the wave of solidarity and willingness to help that was discussed



III. 6: Hessischer Rundfunk offers children's stories in Ukrainian in the ARD audio library

on KiKA Live, for example in the programme *Hilfe für die Ukraine* (Help for Ukraine).

The magazine programme *Team Timster* (KiKA/rbb/NDR) broadcast a special programme showing the daily media routines and media usage of Ukrainian refugees.

### Public broadcasting audio programmes

When it comes to radio or audio contributions, within the ARD audio library there is a section "Für Kinder: Meine Fragen zum Krieg" (For children: my questions about the war) in the children's area. Various ARD content on the topic is collected there. This includes the children's podcast *Mikado* (NDR Info). The episode *Hilfe für die Ukraine* (Help for Ukraine) looks at the question of how the people are doing who had to flee Ukraine and who is helping them, for example. In its fifth episode, the podcast *Big Bäääm - #Wissen ohne Filter* (Big bam - #knowledge without a filter) (MDR TWEEENS/MDR Wissen) brought in 2 experts to answer the question "War in Ukraine – How can we react?". In *Limonadenbaum* (Lemonade tree),

the SWR 2 children's book podcast, the episode *Krieg – für Kinder erklärt mit Kirsten Boie* (War – explained for children with Kirsten Boie) presents an interview with the children's book author.

Contributions from *radioMikro* (Bayern 2) can be found not only in the section mentioned above, but also at [br.de/kinder](https://br.de/kinder). On a topic page with the title "Krieg in der Ukraine – Hier gibt's Infos für dich!" (War in Ukraine – here is information for you!), the call-in programmes "Was passiert in der Ukraine?" (What's happening in Ukraine?) and "Wie kann man den Krieg beenden?" (How can the war be stopped?) can be heard, for example, including the answers given by Henryk Jarczyk from the BR politics editorial team. Episodes of the podcast *Frag mich! Die Nachrichten und ich* (Ask me! The news and me) (Kinderfunk, BR24) deal with topics such as "Unwahre Nachrichten und wie man sie erkennen kann" (Fake news and how to recognise it).

As already mentioned, at the outset of the war the children's radio programme *KiRaKa* (WDR 5) called on children to send in their questions. On the *KiRaKa* website "current reports

– with news in the podcast and background information, but also content on demonstrations for peace, aid campaigns or the reactions of other countries" were published.<sup>7</sup> In addition, *KiRaKa* started a Ukrainian language course to "make it easier to get into contact with refugee children".<sup>8</sup> When *MausLive* (Mouse live) replaced *KiRaKa* in April 2022, the programme continued the course. The new audio children's news from the well-known character "The Mouse" (from *The show with the mouse*), *Maus Zoom* (Mouse zoom) also picked up the topic more frequently, for example at the end of August with the episode title *Warnung vor pro-russischen Fake-Websites* (Warning about pro-Russian fake websites).

### hr reading sessions: Distraction and language acquisition

To offer Ukrainian refugee children "a piece of their home country and a sense of safety, and to distract them from the stress of recent weeks",<sup>9</sup> Hessischer Rundfunk (hr) produced 16 reading sessions that are freely accessible in the ARD audio library. For this purpose, hr had original,



Ill. 7: TOGGO offers classics such as *Peppa Pig* or *SpongeBob SquarePants* in Ukrainian

traditional stories and fairy tales, but also German children's literature translated into Ukrainian. The narrator is actress Marta Kizyma. To help them learn German as well, 3 stories were produced in both languages, Ukrainian and German (Ill. 6). The podcast *Update* by radio Kaka-du (the children's radio station of Deutschlandfunk Kultur) discussed the war in Ukraine repeatedly, both in the news as well as in a conversation with an illustrator of children's books who draws pictures for children on the flight, for example.

### Additional offers

Public broadcasters were not the only ones who picked up the topic. Radio TEDDY also discussed it several times and gave tips online for how parents can talk to their children about the events.

With *TOGGO fun for everyone*, Super RTL started an ad-free offer for children without any knowledge of German on toggo.de. It first included non-dialogue formats, but now it also includes classics such as *Peppa Pig* or *SpongeBob SquarePants* in various languages (Ill. 7). "With this, we want to integrate children who do not

speak German, and offer them entertainment without borders", stated the station's media department in response to an enquiry. According to the statement, the children's and family station TOGGO Radio produced several contributions on the topic of the war in Ukraine for the children's news programme *Täglich TOGGO* (*TOGGO daily*) and attempts to place relevant topics like price increases or heating in this context.

### SUMMARY

In the course of the war in Ukraine, a large spectrum of media offers was created that does justice to the children's increased need for information, includes parents and offers both support and distraction. These diverse offers could only be outlined here. In the discussions with the media producers, one challenge became particularly clear: the difficult balancing act between not hiding things related to the topic from children but at the same time not scaring them.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As of: September 2022.

<sup>2</sup> ARD is a joint organisation of Germany's regional public-service broadcasters.

<sup>3</sup> Online since 11.04.2022, <https://www.ardmediathek.de/ukraine-krieg-fuer-kindererklart?isChildContent> [30.9.22]

<sup>4</sup> Start: 17.03.2022, [https://www.ardmediathek.de/kinderseite\\_fuer\\_ukrainische\\_fluechtlinge?isChildContent](https://www.ardmediathek.de/kinderseite_fuer_ukrainische_fluechtlinge?isChildContent) [30.9.22]

<sup>5</sup> <https://kommunikation.kika.de/presse-informationen/pressemitteilungen/2022/ukraine-konflikt-sendungsänderung100.html> [30.9.22]

<sup>6</sup> <https://kommunikation.kika.de/presse-informationen/pressemitteilungen/2022/sonder-wochenende100.html> [30.9.22] <https://presse.wdr>

<sup>7</sup> [https://presse.wdr.de/plounge/wdr/programm/2022/03/20220308\\_kinderprogramm\\_ukraine\\_krieg.html](https://presse.wdr.de/plounge/wdr/programm/2022/03/20220308_kinderprogramm_ukraine_krieg.html) [30.9.22]

<sup>8</sup> [https://presse.wdr.de/plounge/wdr/programm/2022/03/20220317\\_angebote\\_ukrainisch.html](https://presse.wdr.de/plounge/wdr/programm/2022/03/20220317_angebote_ukrainisch.html) [30.9.22]

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.hr.de/presse/radio/hr2/2022/lesungen-fuer-ukrainische-kinder-lesungen-fuer-ukrainischekinder-100.html> [30.9.22]

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