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Children write about war

Children's messages posted on Internet forums of TV channels' websites: a German-Dutch comparison

A comparison of children's messages posted on Internet forums of children's television programme websites in the Netherlands and Germany showed that a significant number of German children opposed the war in Iraq; this was primarily because they had a fundamental objection to war. By contrast, it became clear that there was considerable heterogeneity both in the opinions voiced by Dutch children and in the arguments they presented to support these opinions. The name Saddam Hussein also featured far more frequently in the arguments of Dutch children.

Children regard the media not simply as something to watch, browse or surf through, but also as a means of voicing their opinions to others and asking individual questions. The Internet, for example, offers a unique form of political participation (Rudolf-Jilg, 2001), web portals of television programmes being an extremely attractive space. They are not only the best-known websites (KIM, 2002, p. 45), but, for children, they have become a place to post questions, concerns and opinions (Beckmann, 2002). Also, during the military action in Iraq children voiced their opinions on these websites.

In Germany many of the larger web portals of children's television channels dealt with the topic of the war.

The web portals of KI.KA² at *www.kika.de*, and of ZDF³ at *www.tivi.de*, for example, offered a wide range of services ranging from facts and information to advice for children who were worried. They featured a guest-book in which children could enter their opinions: 1,948 messages were entered into this guest-book in the first week after the war had begun. Moreover, on some of the children's programmes of ARD and ZDF⁴, the presenters specifically encouraged children to write e-mails to them. 938 e-mails were received in a matter of days. *www.toggo.de* the portal of Super RTL⁵ featured a page where children could enter their questions about the war. 2,800 children took advantage of this in the first week.

At *www.kindernetz.de*, the SWR⁶ children's channel website, children were able to post their opinions about the war in a forum. In the first week after the war had begun, 201 messages were posted.

In the Netherlands, programmes such as *NOS Jeugdjournaal* (children's news) provided updates on the war every night. The state children's channel *Z@ppelin* broadcast two programmes in the first week and *School*

TV Weekjournaal explained the background of the war in Iraq to children at school. All the programmes invited children to express their opinions about the war and to ask questions at *www.jeugdjournaal.nl* and at *www.teleacnot.nl/sites/stvw*. In the first week of the war 2,252 messages were posted by Dutch children, 1,391 of which dealt with the topic of the war.

In a joint study carried out by IZI and the Dutch Expert Centre Youth and Media children's contributions from the two countries during the first week of the war were investigated by means of quantitative content analysis (cf. Früh, 2001) and the results were compared. Since the evaluation of the German sample revealed considerable differences between the specific forms of communication, that is e-mail, posts on web forums and questions, only the posts of children on web forums were compared. In total 1,391 Dutch and 2,149 German messages were examined. The main research questions were:

- What are German and Dutch children's positions on the Iraq war?
- What reasons do they give for their positionings?
- What emotions do they express?

Table 1: Number of statements containing emphasising elements

Comparison Netherlands–Germany	Netherlands	Germany	χ^2 (Sign.)
Use of emphasising capitals	175 (13.8 %)	300 (14.0 %)	0.0
Use of emphasising punctuation marks (e. g. !!!!!)	277 (21.9 %)	399 (18.6 %)	5.5 (**)
Use of superlatives	212 (16.7 %)	1 (0.0 %)	379.6 (***)
Level of significance: (*) $p < 0.050$; (**) $p < 0.010$; (***) $p < 0.001$			
Multiple responses possible			

- What demands do they make/what solutions do they suggest?

According to the research objectives, a code-book was developed and used for both samples. Although this quantitative analysis allowed comparison of certain trends, there was also a risk that it would obscure the varied arguments and opinions presented by the children. For this reason, some original messages posted by the children have been included in order to clarify and recontextualise the quantitative trends.

The children's opinions: short and concise or long and discerning

In both countries the web forum posts differed greatly in terms of length and amount of detail. They included short, concise messages and long messages whose complex lines of argumentation reflected the depth of children's and pre-teens' preoccupation with the topic:

Girl (Netherlands):

"I'm really against the war. Bush is just doing it because of the oil in Iraq. And lots of people have died already. And ALL of the people who've died are innocent people. The Netherlands aren't doing anything. Balkenende isn't helping at all! I think he's a bad president. The political parties (SP, GL, PvdA, D66), they should do something! But the CDA⁷ isn't doing anything. We have to change this, we need to go on demonstrations. Every second that you're reading this more people are dying. War is senseless."

Girl (Germany):

"The USA just tells one lie after the next! It's true that Saddam Hussein isn't good either, he's a dictator, but at the moment he's not such a big threat to humanity that it justifies a war!!! Bush just does whatever he wants to anyway! He's ignored the UN resolution, bombed Baghdad, and then has the cheek to say that he's 'liberating' the Iraqi people. For him the fact that he will have more power if he takes over Iraq and the Iraqi oil wells is more

important. Come on, everyone, get up and demonstrate!!! Show the supporters of the war that they can't just do what they want! Show them that what they're doing is wrong! Because war is war and peace is peace, and you can't fight for peace by going to war!!!"

The messages posted by Dutch and German children were of a similar length.⁸ However, in their messages, the Dutch children used more unusual punctuation marks and superlatives that hardly ever occurred in the contributions made by the German children (see Table 1).

For or against the war? More German messages clearly expressed opposition

In their posts the children gave their opinions on the war in Iraq. The most common point of view in both countries was explicit opposition to the war (see Table 2).

Girl (Germany):

"I think war is awful. Too many innocent people die, whether it's people in Iraq or the British and American soldiers."

A greater percentage of girls in both countries were opposed to the war than boys. Opposition to the war was greater in Germany, with 83.9 % of posts on German web forums explicitly voicing anti-war opinions compared to 67.4 % in the Netherlands. In both countries there were children who both supported and opposed the war. However, this opinion was sig-

nificantly more common in the Dutch messages than in those posted by German children.

Girl (Netherlands):

"On the one hand I don't think it's good that there's a war and on the other hand I do. I'm in favour of the war because I think we have to get rid of Saddam Hussein! He's a monster! But on the other hand I'm against the war because it makes people frightened, and Saddam might attack America, too! I don't like the idea of that at all!!"

There were also messages from children who supported the war, once again significantly more often from Dutch than from German children.

Boy (Netherlands):

"Hooray! Iraq's being attacked! At last the world is getting rid of this dangerous man. I think Saddam's weak for running away. Now lots of innocent people are going to die, even though they haven't done anything. But there's no other way. It's good that the USA and Britain have declared war on Iraq."

Reasons for their points of view

German children opposed war in general

In their messages most children and pre-teens gave reasons for their opinions. The most common line of argument in the messages from the German children was a general emotional opposition to war, expressed 632 times, that is in 29.4 % of the mes-

Table 2: Positionings of Dutch and German children in web forum posts

	pro war	against the war	pro and against the war	no position
Netherlands	116 (8.3 %)	937 (67.4 %)	122 (8.8 %)	216 (15.5 %)
Germany	41 (1.9 %)	1,803 (83.9 %)	31 (1.4 %)	274 (12.8 %)
Total	157 (4.4 %)	2,740 (77.4 %)	153 (4.3 %)	490 (13.8 %)
$(\chi^2 = 218.2; \text{Sign. } 0.000)$				
Multiple responses possible				

Table 3: Reasons given for positionings in children's web forum posts

Comparison Netherlands–Germany	Netherlands	Germany	χ^2 (Sign.)
War is dumb.	63 (5.0 %)	632 (29.4 %)	347.0 (***)
People are injured or die.	323 (25.5 %)	724 (33.7 %)	25.2 (***)
Children are injured or die.	29 (2.3 %)	143 (6.7 %)	31.8 (***)
Bush ist dumb, stupid, ...	160 (12.6 %)	181 (8.4 %)	15.7 (***)
Hussein is a dictator.	133 (10.5 %)	21 (1.0 %)	167.8 (***)
Hussein is dumb, stupid, ...	138 (10.9 %)	101 (4.7 %)	47.0 (***)
The UN (and others) were not asked.	48 (3.8 %)	14 (0.7 %)	44.0 (***)
Iraq disposes of dangerous weapons.	45 (3.6 %)	29 (1.3 %)	18.2 (***)
Bush only wants power.	46 (3.6 %)	22 (1.9 %)	27.8 (***)
Iraq is a dictatorial regime.	37 (2.9 %)	15 (0.7 %)	26.3 (***)
Bush acts single-handedly.	35 (2.8 %)	43 (2.0 %)	2.1
USA/Bush only want oil.	29 (2.3 %)	117 (5.4 %)	19.4 (***)
USA delivered weapons to Iraq.	27 (2.1 %)	6 (0.3 %)	28.6 (***)
USA only want power.	18 (1.4 %)	15 (0.7 %)	4.4 (*)
This provides Iraq with a better future.	22 (1.7 %)	13 (0.6 %)	10.1 (**)
Buildings are destroyed.	21 (1.7 %)	34 (1.6 %)	0.0
The environment is destroyed.	12 (0.9 %)	11 (0.5 %)	2.3
This is no future perspective.	7 (0.6 %)	3 (0.1 %)	

Level of significance: (*) $p < 0.050$; (**) $p < 0.010$; (***) $p < 0.001$
Multiple responses possible

sages: The children were against the war because they thought it was simply “stupid” (see Table 3).

Girl (Germany):
“Hi there! It's stupid the war's started!!!! I hate war !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! What about you??????? Bye.”

In this respect the messages of the German children differed from those of the Dutch children, who only expressed such arguments in 63 messages (5.0 % of the total). In the Dutch messages the reason most often cited for children's points of view was that people would be injured or killed. In 25.5 % of the messages Dutch children wrote that this was the reason why they had doubts about the war. This argument was put forward both by the children who were against the war and by those who supported it. By contrast, the same argument was cited much more often by German children. They gave it as a reason in 724 of the messages, but almost without exception as a reason for opposing the war. The argument that “children die” as a reason why they opposed the war, was also found, without exception, in more of the

messages from German children. Thus the quantitative analysis showed that there was a tendency for German children to argue against the war due to a basic emotional opposition to war and the fact that people in Iraq, including children, were dying.

Dutch children mentioned Bush and Hussein more often

Dutch children mentioned George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein significantly more often in their arguments. In 12.6 % of the posts they mentioned the US President as the reason for the stance they had adopted. By contrast, he was mentioned in only 8.4 % of the German messages. The difference was even more marked when the occurrences of the name ‘Saddam Hussein’ were analysed. In 133 (10.5 %) of the Dutch messages the children explained their position with the statement “Hussein is a dictator”, and in 138 (10.9 %) of the posts the opposition was more emotional, along the lines of “Hussein is stupid and hideous”.

Girl (Netherlands):
“I do support the war, but they should only punish the people who run the country and not the rest of the population!!! But Sad-

dam Hussein, or anyone as hideous as him, has to be caught!! You have to imagine how many people he's already hurt (tortured, imprisoned, shot), that's why I think it's good that America's doing something about it!!!!”

In only 5.6 % of the German posts was Saddam Hussein cited as a reason for the children's stance. This difference can probably be explained by the fact that not only was the Iraqi dictator mentioned by Dutch children who opposed the war, but also by those who supported the war, while the latter attitude was almost non-existent among German children. However, the extent of this difference also indicates a basic tendency in German children's perspectives on the war (see Götz in this issue).

Dutch children's arguments were more varied

When the two countries were compared, another significant difference became apparent, namely the diversity of the politically oriented lines of argument. In the German messages the most common argument was that George Bush wanted Iraqi oil. This argument was presented more often by German children (in 5.4 % of the messages) than by Dutch children (2.3 %). However, German children rarely cited other reasons.

Boy (Germany):
“I too think war is stupid. Civilians can't do anything about it if Bush wants to get the oil and starts a war because of that. But it's them who are suffering most ...”

Although the arguments posted on web forums by Dutch children were also basic, they comprised a far greater variety of individual political or economic arguments (see Table 3). Arguments such as “the UN wasn't consulted”, “Iraq has dangerous weapons”, “Iraq is a dictatorship” or “But the USA itself supplied weapons to Iraq”, were far more common. One reason for this discrepancy is almost certainly the fact that the Dutch children's opinions on the war

Table 4: Explicitly stated emotions in children's web forum posts

Comparison Netherlands–Germany	Netherlands	Germany	χ^2 (Sign.)
Sympathy for Iraqi people	260 (20.5 %)	93 (4.3 %)	225.6 (***)
Sympathy for Iraqi children	49 (3.9 %)	53 (2.5 %)	5.4 (*)
Fear of being affected oneself	28 (2.2 %)	10 (0.5 %)	22.1 (***)
Fear that personal acquaintances are affected	23 (1.8 %)	17 (0.8 %)	7.2 (**)
Fear/Anxiety that own country (or Europe) could be affected	8 (0.6 %)	44 (2.0 %)	10.7 (**)
Fear of World War III	11 (0.9 %)	27 (1.3 %)	1.1
Anger	19 (1.5 %)	110 (5.1 %)	28.7 (***)
Hope that own country will not be affected	19 (1.5 %)	15 (0.7 %)	5.2 (*)
Hope that oneself will not be affected	6 (0.5 %)	3 (0.1 %)	
Sadness	14 (1.1 %)	24 (1.1 %)	0.0
Sympathy for Iraqi soldiers	5 (0.4 %)	10 (0.5 %)	0.1
Sympathy for American soldiers	9 (0.7 %)	10 (0.5 %)	0.9
Pleasure	3 (0.2 %)	5 (0.2 %)	

Level of significance: (*) $p < 0.050$; (**) $p < 0.010$; (***) $p < 0.001$
Multiple responses possible

were much more varied, thus they needed more diverse arguments.

Emotions expressed in web forum posts

Many children wrote about their feelings. In evaluating the messages, where emotions did not form part of the reasons given for children's opinions, codes were established for explicitly voiced emotions ("angry", "sad", "frightened", etc.). In both countries the most commonly expressed emotion was sympathy. However, in the Dutch messages this emotion was expressed almost five times as often.

Girl (Netherlands):

"I feel so sorry for the children in Iraq! Imagine you lived in a country where there was a war. It must be really awful to sit in an air-raid bunker because you can hear all the bombs dropping! Not enough to eat, more risk of getting ill ... just think about that when you're lying around enjoying the sunshine!!!"

It is of course difficult to determine the reasons for this difference in emotions expressed. One possible reason is a difference in the media coverage of the war in the two countries. Another is that whereas many German children seem to have formed their

opinion according to the emotion they felt, Dutch children expressed their despair without necessarily citing this as a direct reason for the viewpoint they held.

Contrary to what might have been expected, fear was not one of the principal emotions expressed by children in their posts. The Dutch children wrote a little more often about their fears of becoming involved in the war, or said that they were worried about someone they knew.

Girl (Netherlands):

"Yeah, I do find the war in Iraq frightening. If we don't watch out one of the missiles will go off in the wrong direction!!!! Aaaaaahhh, that would be scary."

Girl (Netherlands):

"Hi everyone, Nadinia here. I'm against the war. I think what they're doing is really stupid. I come from Kurdistan and all my family still live there. Now I'm really scared because I don't know what's going to happen to my family."

An emotion expressed more often in the messages of the German children was anger. In 110 messages (5.1%) the children wrote that they felt angry whereas this emotion featured in only 19 messages (1.5%) posted by Dutch children (see Table 4).

Child (Germany):

"I'm mad at Bush and everyone else who's dropping bombs."

What the children believed should be done

In their messages the children and pre-teens wrote down what they wished would happen, made demands, and presented solutions. The most common suggestion in both countries was for the armies to cease military action immediately. "Stop the war!" was a common comment in both the German and the Dutch messages. Demands for the warring parties to "Make peace" and "Find a different solution" could be found in the messages of both countries. Nevertheless, there were significant differences between the countries as regards the other solutions suggested. For example, the Dutch children suggested in 221 (17.4%) posts that "Hussein should make himself scarce, be captured or be killed". In particular, those children who saw both positive and negative aspects to the war wrote that the Iraqi dictator should disappear in some way. This was a desire expressed in only 69 (3.2%) of the German children's messages. The desire for George Bush and Saddam Hussein to shake hands and hold talks was also expressed significantly more often by the Dutch children, as was the demand for Iraq to surrender its weapons (see Table 5).

Summary

Children used the opportunity offered by websites of television broadcasters to propagate their perspectives and viewpoints. Despite the geographical proximity of the two countries, there were a number of significant differences between the comments made by Dutch children and those made by German children.

In the German messages the children positioned themselves more often against the war. The reason they gave for their stance was often a general emotional opposition to war, and their

Table 5: Children's proposals in web forum posts concerning the future course of the war (in per cent)

Solutions/Demands in comparison Netherlands–Germany	Netherlands	Germany	χ^2 (Sign.)
Hussein should disappear, be captured or killed.	221 (17.4 %)	69 (3.2 %)	207.8 (***)
Peace: stop the war, make it as short as possible!	182 (14.4 %)	282 (13.1 %)	1.0
Bush and Hussein should shake hands and talk to each other.	84 (6.6 %)	33 (1.5 %)	62.5 (***)
Peace: find another solution!	81 (6.4 %)	123 (5.7 %)	0.6
Peace: make peace!	52 (4.1 %)	116 (5.4 %)	2.9 (*)
Iraq should disclose its weapons.	20 (1.6 %)	8 (0.4 %)	14.3 (***)
More weapon control!	10 (0.8 %)	11 (0.5 %)	1.0

Level of significance: (*) $p < 0.050$; (**) $p < 0.010$; (***) $p < 0.001$
Multiple responses possible

knowledge that people were dying and suffering. By contrast, there were more statements in the Dutch messages which expressed arguments both for and against an attack on Iraq and more children wrote that they supported the war. The reasons they gave for their opinions were more diverse than those of the German children, particularly in the case of the politically oriented arguments. Dutch children also expressed their sympathy for the Iraqi population and articulated their fears more often, while in the German messages anger was the most common explicitly asserted emotion. Overall the German children mentioned Saddam Hussein significantly less often in their arguments. In the messages of the Dutch children, however, he was much more significant, both as a reason for their opinion and in the demands and suggested solutions. Further step-by-step analysis is needed to discover what reasons lie behind the individual differences.⁹

One thing which is already very clear from this study is the extent to which the children became involved with the war in Iraq. They considered the topic critically, had their own opinions and points of view on it, and wanted to communicate them to others. Children's television, which they feel takes them seriously, is an important medium for them. In writing to a children's channel website they became politically active and involved in fighting for peace. This is neither unique nor new, as 1991 saw the impressive "children's letters for peace" sent by children to *logo!* (Müller,

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NOTES

- ¹ With the co-operation of Charlotte Brekelmans, Ole Hofmann and Wiebke Landschulz.
- ² The children's channel of the two German public service broadcasting organisations ARD and ZDF.
- ³ *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (German Television ZDF)*.
- ⁴ These programmes were *logo!*, *PuR* and *Kikania*.
- ⁵ One of the private broadcasters in Germany.
- ⁶ *Südwestrundfunk*, a public service broadcaster, member of ARD.
- ⁷ *CDA Christen Democratisch Appel* is a political party in the Netherlands.
- ⁸ The messages of the Dutch children comprised an average of 35.3 words, those of the German children 34.3 words.
- ⁹ A corresponding content analysis of the television programmes, verifying the hypotheses derived from this project on the basis of the media offers, has not as yet been finished and will be published on another occasion.

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