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# The Iraq War on children's TV

## How international broadcasters dealt with the war

**Producers of children's television programmes worldwide dealt with the topic of the war in Iraq in different ways. Some made their programmes into "war-free" safe havens for children, while others tried to inform children through specially prepared programmes and so offered them support in coping with the war.**

The advent of war in Iraq confronted the producers of children's television programmes with various difficult issues, for example: How should the topic of the war be handled? Should the war be dealt with in children's programmes? What format should programmes about the war adopt? Should violence be shown? What anxieties do children have? Can we provide children with some kind of support?

In order to gain an insight into how producers of children's television programmes dealt with the war, the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) conducted a survey in co-operation with the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONALE. This survey was conducted in May 2003 on an international basis, using a semi-structured questionnaire issued to television broadcasters. In addition to the questionnaire, certain programmes dealing with the war broadcast by the television stations surveyed were analysed to determine typical programme formats and contents.

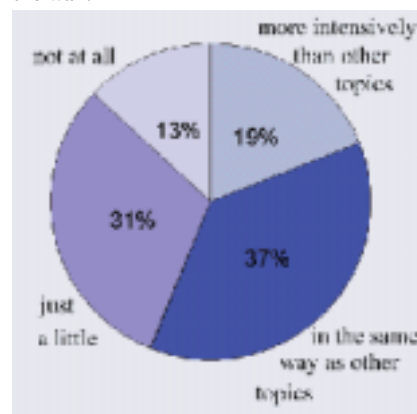
32 broadcasters from a total of 23 countries took part in the survey. The producers were from European countries as well as from Canada, the USA, South America, Asia and Africa (see Table 1). The objectives of the survey were firstly to discover broadly how each broadcaster believed children's television should deal with the subject of war and to find out to what extent children's television programmes focussed on the topic. Secondly, questions were asked about the programmes which were produced on the subject of the war, for example, whether they were part of the regular children's programming schedule or broadcast as special programmes, what format they adopted and whether there were particular guidelines for their content. The survey also investigated the indirect influence which the media coverage of

the war had on children's television, for example due to the cancellation of children's television programmes to make way for extended special news reports. The final research objective was to establish whether and in what way children's opinions and questions were voiced in the programmes and how the topic of anxiety was dealt with. The questionnaires were subjected to a quantitative analysis. However, due to the manageable number of broadcasters surveyed, a qualitative analysis was also possible.

### Children need information to help them deal with the war

The survey showed that the producers of children's television programmes had differing basic opinions on how the topic of the war in Iraq should be dealt with (see Fig. 1). Some 20% of broadcasters focussed heavily on the war, paying more attention to it than to other topics. They explained that by doing so they were simply reflecting the omnipresence of the war in the public domain. The war was the subject of conversation in schools, at home and among children, and in the media in particular children were confronted with pictures and reports of the war. Problems arose when children watched news programmes designed for adults and read newspapers, for as Ragna Wallmark from Sweden explained: "Children do not understand what they are seeing, so

Fig. 1: Broadcasters' basic approach towards the topic of war on children's television: how intensively must children's television tackle the war?



they become frightened.” She believed that broadcasters thus bore a degree of “responsibility and must try to provide the children with explanations.” A number of the producers concurred with this opinion, believing that their task in dealing with the war was to supply their young audience with information. “We do not want to scare children but provide them with information so that they can better cope with the war and put it into perspective,” as Catherine Castille of the Belgian broadcaster Ketnet reported. This point of view was echoed by Ian Prince, editor of the BBC children’s news programme *Newsround*, in an interview in the London Times. He said: “Very often, we find that if we can help children understand more, they will worry less. If you don’t cover these stories, then rumour and Chinese whispers take over in the playground. It is better to be straight with young people, so long as we take care not to speculate”<sup>1</sup> (see also the article by Prince in this issue). For Layaly Badr of Arab Radio and Television in Egypt, another reason for focussing so heavily on the war was her country’s proximity to the war zone and its solidarity with the people there. “We are Arabs,” she said, “Iraq is part of our nation.” Thus, she explained, the war was covered on children’s television because “children should be aware of what is going on around them.”

### Children should not be overloaded with information about the war

In addition to those who focussed heavily on the war, more than a third of television stations also chose to feature the war in their children’s programmes, but to a lesser extent. The individual broadcasters ensured that the war received the same amount of coverage as other topics. One of the broadcasters that adopted this approach was the Mongolian Nation-

al Television (MN). The Head of Children’s Education Department at MN said: “We consider it important to inform Mongolian children about the war and to let them know that innocent Iraqi children (...) are struggling to survive the effects of the war. However, there are also other topics which, to be totally honest, are equally important and which are closer to our daily lives, for example a weather disaster caused by the heavy snowfall or illnesses such as SARS.” Friederike Barth, Head of Children’s and Family Programming at Südwestrundfunk (SWR) in Germany, also notes that on the one hand, “it is necessary to explain appropriately the topic to children,” but argued that on the other hand there was no sense in overloading children with information on the topic and paying too much attention to it. She believed this would create the risk of “arousing fears or intensifying existing fears.” For this reason, SWR concentrated on providing a balanced selection of topics and the right amount of war coverage in its children’s programmes.

### A lack of opportunity or resources for reporting on current events

About one third of television stations reported that they paid the war relatively little attention. One reason was that in some cases children’s programmes had to surrender their slots to the relevant news sections, which then broadcast coverage of the war. Frequently, however, the broadcasters simply did not have the means to react to current events such as the war in Iraq. One producer who mentioned this was Judith Gay, Director of the Department for Children’s, Youth and Family Programmes at Radio-Canada. “We would like to have the opportunities and the means to put a show for kids about the war rapidly on air,” she said. In particular, broadcasters which tend to show mainly

Table 1: TV stations that took part in the survey

Country	Television Station
Austria	Österreichischer Rundfunk ORF
Belgium	KLENET/Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroep VRT
Brazil	Canal Futura
Brazil	TV Cultura
Brunei	Radio Television Brunei RTB
Canada	Radio-Canada
Canada	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation CBC
Chile	Televisión Nacional de Chile Canal 7
Denmark	Danmarks Radio DR
Egypt	Art-Teenz Channel/Arab Radio and Television ART
Finland	Yleisradio Oy YLE
France	France 2
France	France 3
Germany	Buena Vista Deutschland
Germany	Fox Kids Germany
Germany	Kinderkanal KI.KA (ARD/ZDF)
Germany	Südwestrundfunk SWR
Germany	Westdeutscher Rundfunk WDR
Germany	Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen ZDF
Great Britain	British Broadcasting Corporation BBC
Hungary	Magyar Televízió MTV
Iran	Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting IRIB
Israel	Israel Educational Television IETV
Italy	RaiSat Ragazzi
Kenya	Kenya Broadcasting Corporation KBC
Korea	Korea Educational Broadcasting System EBS
Mongolia	Mongolian National Television MN
Romania	Societatea Română de Televiziune TVR
Sweden	Utbildningsradio UR
Sweden	Sveriges Television SVT
Switzerland	Schweizer Fernsehen der deutschen und rätoromanischen Schweiz SF DRS
USA	Noggin/The N



Fig. 2: Animation from the children's news programme *logo!* (ZDF)

fiction programmes were very limited in this situation. Beatriz Rosenberg of TV Cultura in Brazil stated: "We believed that the war in Iraq was an important topic. However, we had no live programme or indeed any other programme on which we could feature the topic."

### Children's programmes as a "safe haven" for children

A limited number of broadcasters intentionally avoided the subject of the war in their children's television programmes. Their reason for doing so was because "war is something for adults" and "the children can't do anything about the war," according to Jussi Pekka Koskiranta of YLE in Finland. Beny Kiser of SF DRS in Switzerland had a similar opinion, maintaining that it was precisely because of this that "it is not the business of children's television programmes to deliver information." Kiser continued that children watched the news programmes for adults with their parents in any case, thus making

it even more necessary for children's television programmes to provide an alternative in times of war. This opinion was shared by Buena Vista in Germany which along with other members of the Disney Group saw itself as a "violence-free zone". The Disney channels offered a "safe haven", explained the Director of Programming Ralf Gerhardt, where children were able to shelter from the omnipresent media coverage of the war. In doing this, Gerhardt continued, Disney was satisfying the desire of the parents of its target audience, who did not want "their children to get in touch with upsetting pictures of the war on the other channels."

### TV programmes broadcast reflected the basic positions of the producers

Those television stations which saw their children's programme as a "safe haven" for children totally avoided the topic of the war in their children's programmes. "We didn't mention the war at all," affirms Eszter Farkas-

Laki, summarising the position of Hungarian television.

### Different ways of dealing with the topic of the war

Some of the broadcasters that paid little attention to the war in their children's programmes because they did not have the means to do so looked for other ways in which they could incorporate the topic. The news department at TV Cultura in Brazil, for example, produced special reports on the war for children. These short reports were broadcast as part of the regular news programmes on the first four days of the war. The Swedish broadcaster SVT showed the award-winning animated film "Torneheksen" made by the Norwegian Film Institute. Bella Stjerne who is responsible for children's and youth programming at SVT explained: "The film deals with the consequences of the war from a child's perspective and answers some of children's questions about the war." The US broadcaster Noggin/The N also indirectly addressed the war in one of its programmes. Within the framework of its series *A Walk In Your Shoes*, Noggin/The N produced an episode in which an American boy changed places with a boy from Amman, Jordan, so that they could each experience the life of the other. In this episode the Iraq War, which had not yet started when the filming took place, is discussed, along with its horrific consequences. Those responsible for children's programming at Channel 7 in Chile embraced topics related to the war such as tolerance, love and understanding for one another. The channel produced short clips on these topics in which children who spoke different languages were shown holding each other's hands and appealing for peace. The majority of the producers who said that the topic of the war should receive the same amount of attention

as other topics integrated the topic into their regular children's schedules. Those that had a news programme mainly used this as a space to deal with the topic; a few also produced special programmes on the war, in the form of talk shows, interactive programmes or documentary reports. A small number of television stations broadcast only special programmes on the war.

Almost all the television stations which focussed heavily on the war had a regular children's news programme, the primary vehicle for dealing with the topic. In addition special programmes were offered, mostly in the form of talk shows or interactive programmes.

### Guidelines on coverage of the war

A large number of the programme makers developed guidelines for the contents of children's programmes about the war. Their main concern was to show neither violence nor the consequences of violence. As Reza Saidabadi of the Iranian broadcaster IRIB explained: "One of our guidelines was not to show any scenes of violence in our children's programmes. Instead, we showed more acceptable scenes illustrating the consequences of the war." Moreover, many specifically ensured that although they showed pictures of war, they did not include shocking pictures. "We showed neither blood nor dead people, but we did show people (children) in hospitals," said Joachim Lachmuth of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in Germany. Other broadcasters decided not to show any wounded people. In addition to guidelines on the images used, some television stations, such as TV Cultura in Brazil, included guidelines on the language to be used in their children's programmes. "We also paid attention to the language. We tried to explain everything that was happening in Iraq

in simple language," Beatriz Rosenberg commented on her approach. The Brazilian broadcaster Canal Futura also believed that among other things it was important not to broadcast any detailed information on American weapons technology. Finally, one of the guidelines set out by the American channel Noggin/The N was to explicitly avoid creating any link with the events of September 11. "We did not want to show any pictures of the planes flying into the World Trade Center or of the towers collapsing," explained Alyssa Cooper, Executive in Charge of Production at Noggin/the N.

### Format and content of reports on the war

Those television stations which decided to deal with the subject of the war in Iraq in their children's programmes were then faced with the decision on how exactly to report on the war in children's programmes. The following sections present some examples<sup>2</sup> in order to outline the different programme formats and contents producers selected for their programmes about the war.

News reports were chosen as the main format of war coverage on children's television and were similar to those used in adults' news programmes. This is mainly because the same pictures were used in the children's programmes, as during the Iraq War pictures were difficult to obtain (cf. Krüger, 2003, 401 ff.). Thus children's programmes broadcast the same images as the adult news programmes, for example Baghdad being bombed at night, the preparations of American troops on their aircraft carriers, George Bush's official speech at the beginning of the war, or Saddam Hussein in conferences with his advisors. The difference between children's and adults' reports was that the material was re-edited for the children's programmes, i. e. the pictures

were used in a different constellation and new audio reports were created specifically for children.

In addition to news reports on the current situation in the war zone, reports providing background information on the war were also a common element in children's programmes. These background reports typically included comprehensive explanations. They explained the complex context of the war using original material specially prepared for children. A formula often adopted was the use of animated pictures to explain more clearly a number of different concepts.

### Animated pictures used to explain more clearly the background to the war

On *logo!*, the children's news programme of Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) in Germany, animation was used to illustrate how the journalists operated who were embedded at the front with American military personnel. The programme explained that the journalists had to allow the US military to censor their reports, with the *logo!* presenter commenting: "What the military doesn't like simply isn't shown." This was illustrated with the animated figures of a journalist and a US soldier sitting in the desert watching a report the journalist had produced. The US soldier was using the "thumbs down" sign to show that he was not happy with the report (see Fig. 2).

### Special reports on topics relevant to children

Reports on topics relevant to children were another way in which broadcasters incorporated coverage of the war into children's television schedules. These reports focussed mainly on children whose daily lives were directly or indirectly influenced by the war. They featured children in



Fig. 3: Iraqi children playing football before the war broke out (SVT)

Iraq, children whose Iraqi parents had fled the country and who were now living in Germany, France and other places, as well as American children living in Germany whose parents were in the US military. In one programme, for example, American children who attended an American school in Germany were interviewed about how the war influenced their daily lives.

The reports about children in Iraq gave insights into how the war affected these children's daily lives. The Swedish broadcaster SVT, for example, produced a documentary about two Iraqi brothers and their family shortly before the war started. The two boys were first filmed attending classes at school, something which, it was explained, few children did any more, as many had already fled in anticipation of war. Then the two boys were accompanied home to their parents and siblings. At their home the boys' parents outlined how the family had prepared for war. The father explained how he had hung plastic in front of the windows of the house in the hope that the family would thus be protected from poisonous gas attacks. In addition the family had stored three baskets of groceries in the corner of their living room so that they would have provisions for when war broke out. Finally the report showed the two brothers playing football with their friends in the sombre surroundings of where they lived (see Fig. 3).

The reports on children whose parents had fled Iraq and had been living in Europe for many years (children in Sweden, Germany and France were featured in the reports) showed the children sitting in their living rooms watching the news about the war at home. Both France 3 and ZDF underlined in their reports the fact that the children were worried about their relatives in Iraq. One report showed the children ringing up their relatives to ensure that they were well. After this the children were asked how they felt about the war and whether they were worried about their grandmother who still lived in Iraq (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Phoning relatives in Iraq (ZDF)

#### Different methods used to include children's views on the war

The programmes on the war used various different methods to include what children in the countries surveyed thought of the war. Danish television produced a 3-minute "Vox Pop" (vox populi – the people's voice), which featured children and teenagers giving their opinions. Sweden's regular SVT news programme invited two pupils aged 12 and 13 who attended a Stockholm secondary school to appear on the show. The first boy actually came from Iraq and the other still had relatives living there. On the programme they talked about how they saw the war, how it affected them and what they were worried about. The Austrian pro-

gramme *Confetti TiVi* went on location to ask children about their opinions and questions concerning the war, then these statements were featured on the programme, with the presenter exploring the issues in a discussion with an expert. On the German ZDF programme *logo!* numerous statements made by children in e-mails, letters and the like were selected and read out in the studio, where the presenters commented on or answered them. Indeed, some of the *logo!* programmes were based solely on the issues contained in the children's statements. Finally, children were allowed to speak out during some reports on demonstrations and events held to demand peace. They were shown demonstrating and asked why they were participating and what they thought about the war. The children's news programme on France 3, for example, broadcast a discussion event at a school; children gathered in their school hall, where they were able to ask a panel of experts questions about the war (see Fig. 5).

Another programme format used to feature the war on children's television was expert discussion panels in the studio. Among those who discussed the war with presenters in the studio, giving their expert opinions, were a psychologist, a military expert, an expert on children and the media and a peace pedagogue. Other specialists, such as an expert on international relations or news journalist Steffen Seibert of the ZDF were interviewed at their workplaces on specific themes concerned with the war. Seibert, for example, explained the prob-



Fig. 5: Experts answering schoolchildren's questions (France 3)

lems of media coverage of war from the point of view of a journalist. The psychologist gave advice on how to deal with children's anxieties, and the military expert commented on the events of war and gave careful prognoses on how the conflict might progress.

### Indirect effects of the war on children's programmes

Besides the inclusion of special programmes on the war, children's television was also indirectly affected by the war in Iraq. As many broadcasters considerably expanded their news programmes and also reported live on some events, in some cases children's programmes were cancelled. Many broadcasters reported that this was often the case in the first few days of war. For example, Friederike Barth from Südwestrundfunk (SWR) in Germany reported that the entire children's schedule was cancelled on the first weekend of the war in Iraq. This also happened at Radio-Canada, "because our news department reported on the war all day and also in the evening," said Judith Gay. In individual cases this caused negative reactions, for example in Finland. "One of our morning programmes was cancelled due to the war," reported Jussi Pekka Koskiranta of YLE, "and the parents were extremely annoyed about it."

Buena Vista Germany was also indirectly affected by the war. In order to ensure that the channel was a safe haven for children, as programme director Ralf Gerhardt reported, all programmes broadcast were checked to ensure that they contained nothing that could be directly or indirectly linked to the war. This meant that, for example, some episodes of popular programmes were cancelled. "This was because the content, or some of the content, was in some way related to war or military institutions, i. e. cartoon characters were playing video

games in which soldiers were killing one another, or cartoon characters were wearing uniforms ... or the action took place on an aircraft carrier," explained Gerhardt. This approach was highly valued by the audience as "ratings worldwide have shown that in difficult times television stations such as the Disney channel, Fox Kids and Cartoon Network attract more viewers."

### From safe haven to supportive information source

The producers of children's television had differing basic opinions on how to deal with the war in Iraq. These ranged from intentionally paying more attention to the war with the aim of giving children detailed information to protecting children from the facts of war and providing distraction by offering alternative, "war-free" programmes. Two basic positions were evident:

- On the one hand, there were children's broadcasters who intentionally offered no programmes about the war. The programming policy of the broadcasters defined children's programmes as a shelter and safe haven for children seeking to escape the events of the war. As they believed children would obtain their information from news programmes for adults in any case, these broadcasters endeavoured to provide an alternative to the war.
- On the other hand, there were broadcasters who felt obliged to act as a source of information and as intermediaries for children and thus specifically addressed the topic of the war in children's programmes. They believed that information specifically prepared for children should be provided to the young viewers in order to help them to deal with the war. At the same time they wanted to give chil-

dren the opportunity to express their opinions on the war; they took them seriously as their countries' future decision-makers and prepared them for this role.

The typical programme formats used to report on the war on children's television were war reports specially designed for children and background reports also specifically produced for children, with explanatory sections which used animation to clarify issues. There were also reports on topics relevant to children such as the daily lives of children in Iraq, as well as expert discussions and programmes which used various different methods to include children's opinions and questions about the war. In addition to featuring special programmes on the war in Iraq, children's television schedules were also indirectly affected by the war, as many programmes were cancelled to make way for expanded news programmes for adults. ■

Translated by John Malcolm King

### NOTES

- 1 *Frean Alexandra: Threat of war leaves children in fear.* The Times (London), March 8, 2003.
- 2 *The programmes considered in the analysis stem from the broadcaster France 3, the Austrian public broadcaster ORF, the German public broadcaster ZDF, from Swedish television SVT, from Danish and Dutch public television. Apart from Danish television, these television stations all feature regular children's news programmes that then focussed on the war.*

### REFERENCE

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