

Learning from television from the point of view of children: children in Germany much more content-focused than children in other countries

Munich, June 2012 – children learn from television – but the question is what. An international study gave children the opportunity to say what television programmes they “had really learnt a lot from”. While studies usually investigate what elements of programme content children remember, this was the first time, internationally, that a different strategy was used and children were allowed to speak for themselves.

1412 children (aged 7 to 10) in Germany, the USA, Scotland, Ireland, Argentina and Cuba drew and described occasions when they “had really learnt a lot from television”. The result: children’s ideas about what one might learn from television do not necessarily correspond to adults’ ideas about “educational programmes”.

The programmes most often mentioned are cartoons, followed at some distance by educational programmes for children and sitcoms. In some cases, however, children also describe how they have learnt something “really important” from a wide range of other genres – from feature films and documentaries for adults to scripted reality formats. Here a comparison between countries shows marked differences.

In the USA over half the children mention cartoon series such as *SpongeBob* as programmes they have learnt from, and the situation is very similar in Argentina. In Cuba the proportion of children who have learnt something from cartoons is even higher, though here the series *Elpidio Valdés* about the national hero of the same name is mentioned more often than the US cartoons.

Things are different in Scotland and Ireland. Here we find various BBC formats, *Horrible Histories* and *Deadly 60* (both CBBC), and documentaries for children. When children in Germany are asked about programmes they have learnt a lot from, almost half of them name educational programmes produced especially for children (*Willi will’s wissen* (BR), *pur+* (ZDF)). These are distantly followed by educational programmes for adults (most often *Galileo* (Pro7)).

What is learnt from television?

Children derive **factual knowledge** from television. 7-year-old Leonie, for example, learnt from the programme *Willi will’s wissen* “that mountain water is naturally purified”. She draws the presenter, Willi, next to an alpine stream in the mountains. Here children gain nuggets of knowledge which, thanks to the combination of image, story and facts, are particularly easy to remember.

Behaviours and patterns of action are another area in which children believe they learn something from television. In fictional stories in particular, they think about what they would have done at a given moment, as in a role play (this is known as para-social interaction), and draw conclusions from this about what is morally right or wrong.

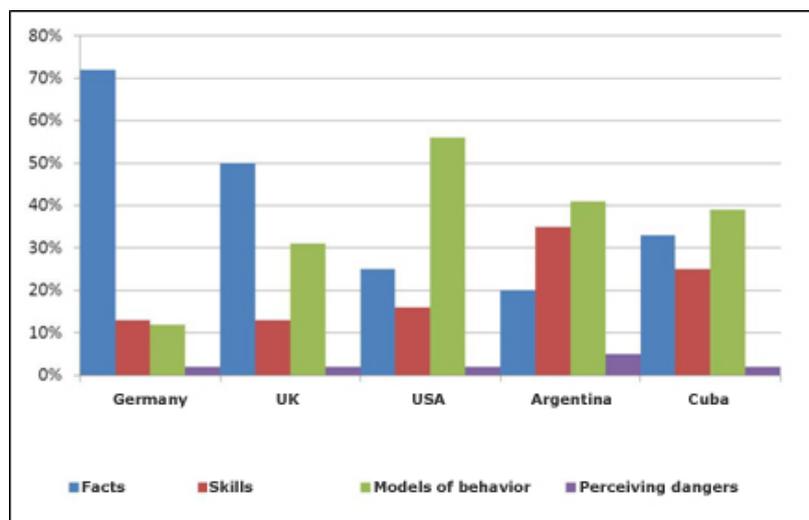
Skills are another smaller area in which children believe they learn something from television. They feel, for example, that they can learn to sing and dance from talent shows, and that they can learn to draw and create things from art and craft shows such

as *Art Attack*. In reality these programmes only provide inspiration, since skills cannot be learnt merely by watching, and instead require practical implementation.

In isolated cases children also learnt something from television shows about **perceiving dangers**, risks or threats. The 10-year-old Argentinian Pablo, for example, who followed the story of a train accident in the news, thinks “that it’s very dangerous to travel by train”. Particularly in those areas where children lack direct experience or the ability to assess a danger themselves, images from television shape their mental images. Corresponding care is required here.

Comparison between countries: *SpongeBob* in the USA - *Willi will’s wissen* in Germany

In every country there is a wide range of things which children see themselves as learning, and of programmes in which they locate these lessons. At the same time, national differences do become evident. Germany is well ahead of other countries when it comes to learning facts (see diagram).



The value of offering a wide range of programmes

Programmes such as the US-produced *SpongeBob* (Nickelodeon) or the sitcoms *iCarly* (Nickelodeon) and Disney's *Hannah Montana* or *Phineas and Ferb* are shown in every country. And in every country, children learn behaviours and lessons for life from them. In those countries where children are provided with attractive and humorous educational and documentary programmes which are made especially for children, these are very well received. From the children’s point of view, great benefit can be derived from strategies such as those used in *Horrible Histories* (CBBC), a programme in which bizarre historical facts are presented with Monty-Pythesque humour, or in *Willi will’s wissen* (BR/KiKA), in which a young man curiously investigates everyday questions such as “Where does the pipe in the loo go?” or “How does the mail get to Mexico?”.

No doubt there is also benefit to be derived from questions of identity, such as those which are humorously evoked, always from a child’s point of view, in *SpongeBob*. At the same time it has to be a goal of society to provide children with a full range of programming, offering them an appealing way to access knowledge and helping them to understand the world they live in.

Those countries with a strong public broadcasting system, Germany and Great Britain/Northern Ireland, clearly have an advantage over countries such as the USA, Argentina or Cuba when it comes to the range and depth of content available on children’s television.

Once again, the high level of awareness and knowledge shown by children in Germany became clear in comparison to other countries. German children were for example significantly better informed when it came to the events in Japan in March 2011, and knew more about the connections and the background – not least because of the children's news programme *logo!* (ZDF).

The present study

Children (n=1412) aged between 7 and 10 were surveyed in Germany (n=297), the USA (n=301), Great Britain/ Northern Ireland (Scotland and Ireland; n=446), Argentina (n=168) and Cuba (n=200). The survey took place in spring 2012. The results were presented for the first time at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2012. This year the theme of the oldest and best-known festival of children's television in the world was "Watch, Learn and Grow with Children's Television". The International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television provided a framework of informative events in which scholarly findings were presented in a practically relevant manner.

The PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL was held in the BR broadcasting centre from 1 to 6 June 2012. 500 participants from 67 countries took part, watching the best children's television programmes together, discussing each of the 87 finalists in international discussion groups, and choosing their winner.

Contact:

Dr Maya Götz,
Head of IZI, International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television,
Rundfunkplatz 1
80335 München
Maya.Goetz@brnet.de