

# TELEVISION

International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)

Special English Issue No. 12/1999/2: "The Teletubbies"

Maya Götz

## Children are enchanted, parents concerned

**Research findings from Germany reflect a worldwide trend: children have fun with the *Teletubbies* and their parents have problems with this new programme format.**

The *Teletubbies* are loved by children throughout the world, but parents regard them with benign astonishment or with outright disapproval. In Germany, at the latest since transmissions began on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1999, the *Teletubbies* had been part of the public discussion, and hardly any German newspaper missed a chance of publishing a critical article on this series. The monthly GfK data of the ARD/ZDF Children's Channel (*Kinderkanal*) show that the series enjoys top ratings and makes the corporation market leader during the day. And last not but not least, the – at times empty – *Teletubby* shelves in the stores are proof of the surprisingly great success, which – at least to this extent – are a mystery, and not only for the experts.

What makes the children so enthusiastic about this series, of all programmes? How do they make use of a programme which is so redundant and lacking in content? How do parents assess the *Teletubbies* reception by their children? What importance for children attaches to the strange language or the homosexual symbols that Jerry Falwell denounced?

To be able to offer some initial explanations the IZI investigated these questions in a study. As reception research is extremely difficult with this very young target group and the programme format (at least in Germany) is new, a broader exploratory phase was first necessary in which various proven methods were employed. Subsequently parents' assessments and the reception situation in the children's everyday life was examined.

### 1. *Exploratory phase*<sup>1</sup>

Morning circle discussion in kindergarten and primary school (42 children);  
Play and painting activities in the kindergarten (39 children);  
Case studies in families with children who enjoy watching the *Teletubbies* (5 families);  
Evaluation of the viewers' letters and pictures to the *Teletubby* Magazine (month of August);  
Questionnaire sent to parents by Internet in the Forum of Family & Co;  
Sifting through 800 press reports in the months of February, March and April 1999.

### 2. *Analysis of natural reception situations of children between the ages of 1 and 6*<sup>2</sup>

Parents whose children enjoy watching the *Teletubbies* were persuaded to take part. Using a video camera placed beside the television set they filmed 2-3 "quite normal" *Teletubbies* reception sessions per child. The parents were contacted through the kindergarten and the Internet, especially over the Internet Community Urbia.de. In this way 114 recordings of a very largely natural reception situation of 40 children are available. The *Teletubbies* instalment seen in each case is "stamped" into the recordings as a small picture, so that it is possible to follow both the child and the programme it saw.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. *Questionnaire sent to parents by Internet, analysis of the AOL Chatforum*.<sup>4</sup>

The IZI provided a questionnaire for the parents in altogether 11 Internet forums<sup>5</sup> in the subject area of family, parents and young children. The questions were deliberately left open and were directed at three areas: experience with the *Teletubbies* in everyday life, observation of children during *Teletubbies* reception and assessment of the programme by the parents. 248 responses were received to this questionnaire.

The provider AOL set up a chat forum on the subject of the *Teletubbies* on its opening page. Within three days 346 statements were received here, which were evaluated with regard to their positions and arguments.

Below, the results will be compiled to open up perspectives on what makes the children so enthusiastic about the *Teletubbies*, what positions parents tend to take on them and which arguments they advance. In the light of the examples of language and the depiction of gender, the differences in the importance attached by parents and children become clearly and theoretically understandable.

## 1. What makes children so enthusiastic about the *Teletubbies*?

### *The characters and their movement rituals*

The characters are the focal point of the children's fascination for the *Teletubbies*. This is what they draw and name and what attracts their attention on first contact. What makes the characters interesting is not only their unmistakable colours and recognisable features, but above all their tubbiness and their movements. The unusual movement patterns accompanied by funny noises and the causes of their movements, which involve fixed rituals, are mentioned and copied most frequently. When asked to do so, children also talk about the *Teletubbies'* stories, but here, compared with other children's programmes, they remain extremely brief and always focus on the characters.<sup>6</sup> The fascination is probably to be found less in the content of the stories told than to a large extent in the characters themselves. The *Teletubbies* and their *Teletubbyland* are cleverly chosen and certainly form the basis for the programme's success. In addition to the "high teddy potential" (Groebel, 1999) and a physical appeal which makes you want to touch them (Brudny, 1999), there must be something else very special about the *Teletubbies* for them to be so successful and to gain whole groups of new viewers.<sup>7</sup>

### *The reception situation*

The children are extremely active during reception. They talk a lot, particularly when adults are present, explain and comment on the scenes. Apart from language activities, they also display movements with surprising frequency as a part of the reception. The children wave, dance and jump about on the sofa or lie down on the floor to wave their legs in the air.

Typical moments of the *Teletubbies* reception are shown which are displayed to varying extents in almost all the children in the study group in one of the recordings. On the basis of short scenes in the video recordings these typical moments are illustrated using the cases of Anne (3 years), Lara (2½ years), Lars (3 years), Tim (4 years) and Tobias (6).

### ***Explaining/noticing/commenting:***

#### *The children say something about the content of the series.*

Anne (3) is very enthusiastic about the *Teletubbies*. When the programme begins and she hears the opening bars, she rushes into the room visibly excited: "My, my Teletubby, ouch, ouch, mine." She dashes to her television chair and knocks into the table leg, but even that cannot diminish her pleasure. She begins a sentence, then breaks off, laughs at the baby and imitates his gestures. Anne explains: "The baby in the sun, it's always laughing. Bab, ba, ba, ba." She attentively follows the camera panning over the hills in *Teletubbyland* and says, "Look, now, you'll see them in a second."

The children talk during reception. Quite often they notice something, comment on it and draw their parents' attention to it. They frequently explain the connections to the parents or other adults present, but sometimes they say it to themselves when alone.

### ***Speaking together/singing together:*** *Children speak or sing the text parallel to the programme.*

Lara (2½) sings and dances the entire opening sequence. After that she sits down on the couch. When the bear and the lion finally come, she crooks her hand in front of her face and joins in the passages: "I am the bear, the bear am I, my fur is soft and fluffy." The more often the bear says this, the more accurately she can speak the words.

Many children join in speaking and singing the recurring texts with enthusiasm and learn the rhymes and numbers within a short time.

**Following:** *Children watch as if glued to the screen.*

Tim (4 years) sits in a large armchair, eating his supper. He is concentrating hard on the action, smiles and waves to the *Teletubbies*. When the film insert with the children comes, he looks at the girls as if spellbound who are playing with balloons. Sometimes he even forgets to carry on chewing. On one occasion he remains with his mouth open for over 15 seconds.

This concentration could be observed in many children while the film inserts were being shown. Whereas children under 1½ years use these scenes for other activities, the older ones seem to be spellbound. Especially films in which children actively do something arouse their attention. Performances by adults (eg Mrs Ulkig or Nena), however, are followed less intently. In the repetition the concentration does not change and they watch the stories in their entirety with the greatest interest for a second time.

**Answering:** *Children take up the requests in the programme to answer and talk with the television set.*

The 'tummy tale' begins and two girls call "Hallo". Anne (3 years) answers, "Hallo." The English girl comes closer and again says, "Hallo" and Anne answers again, but this time more softly and completely engrossed in the action, "Hallo." The girl asks, "Do you want to see what we're doing?" and Anne replies, "Yes." Once more she looks at her mother, then directs all her attention to the television and, spellbound, follows the two children with the dog. At the end the girls say, "Goodbye," and Anne answers in a soft voice, "Goodbye."

Tim (4 years) sits in his television armchair, quietly and attentively following the programme. When Po waves straight into the camera and greets the viewers with "Eh-oh!" he waves back with a loud "Eh-oh!".

In the series the *Teletubbies* and in the films the children and the adults directly address the viewers. This often happens and in a relatively predictable sequence. Usually addressing the viewers is restricted to greeting and saying goodbye. The children's articulated reply to these requests is probably part of para-social interaction (Horten/Wohl, 1956), which is found here in a ritualised context.

**Predicting/anticipating:** *After seeing only a few programmes children possess enough media knowledge to be able to anticipate the communication forms and actions.*

In the first scene after the opening song the interior of the igloo can be seen. The door opens, but no one is there. Anne (3 years) says, "Here comes Dipsy, he's coming into the house." Laa Laa and Dipsy enter the room. Anne explains, "Dipsy, and Laa Laa and Po and Dipsy." The three *Teletubbies* come into the foreground and greet the viewers with "Eh-oh!". Anne replies, "Eh-oh!" Tinky Winky comes into the picture, stands beside the others and shows them a Tubbytoast and says, "Here!", to which the others answer, "Oh, there." Anne again realises what is happening and says, "Toasti." Tinky Winky says, "Tubbytoast, Tubbytoast." Anne jumps up and down in her chair enthusiastically and, turning to her mother, calls out, "Tubbytoast, Tubbytoast!"

At the beginning of the scene Anne already knows what will happen next. The door opens and at least one Teletubby will come into the igloo. Soon after that this anticipation, although in a different order, is confirmed by the series. A brief action sequence follows, which Anne immediately understands and whose continuation she can anticipate. She articulates this with the child's form of 'toast'. But when the figures again confirm her anticipation, she is delighted and jumps up and down for joy.

Predicting and anticipating are built into the narration of the programme. The development of the story is extremely slow and predictable. The camera shots resemble one another. If this is also a shortcoming of the series for media experts (cf Hake in this journal), it does delight the children. After only little viewing experience they develop the competence to anticipate the scenes. They not only have to follow the scenes, but they can already anticipate them.

**Joining in dancing/moving:** *On the basis of the fixed sequences and the catchy music, children develop their own choreography or move freely to the music.*

Lara (2½) sits on the sofa with a slice of cheese in her hand. The beginning of the series, which she speaks out, can be heard from the television. When the rhythm of the opening music sounds and the *Teletubbies* run down the hill, Laura jumps up. After glancing at her mother and father, sitting beside her at the table, she tap dances in time to the music, with her forearms bent and fingers spread out and

pointing towards the television. She turns round on her own axis and joins in singing the song. When the *Teletubbies* run around, she takes four steps backwards and forwards in front of the television. When the *Teletubbies* make their individual appearances she imitates the main movement pattern in each case. When the figures run away, she quickly runs round in a circle. The sentence is heard "Where have the *Teletubbies* gone?", and Lara, repeating the question, runs back to the sofa. She sits there quietly, imitating especially the sun and repeating particular parts. When the windmill turns to select a Teletubby for the tummy tale, she jumps down from the sofa, runs in front of the television and lies down on the ground like the *Teletubbies* to kick her legs in the air. Then she stands up, her arms akimbo, and pushes out her tummy, while she speaks the names of the figures. She runs back to the sofa, where she follows the stories with interest. When at the end the speaking tube comes up out of the ground, Lara again stands in front of the television, waves to the individual *Teletubbies* and then briefly bends her knees, as if hiding behind an imaginary hill. The *Teletubbies* jump into their hill, and Lara hops in the same manner. This sequence is repeated next day, although with a doll, and on the following day with a soft toy from 101 Dalmatians in her hand. Her mother says that she keeps this up for months on end.

Unlike what has been perceived hitherto in the discussion on the subject of television and children, movement is a frequently occurring part of the *Teletubbies* reception – almost always in the form of arm movements (eg waving), often as swaying from side to side to the music, and partly in dances and jumps. For Lara it has become a fixed ritual, like the singing and dancing games that she will love to join in at kindergarten later on. What is most surprising here is the diversity of movements displayed, as well as the fixed patterns she has developed herself in imitation of the Teletubby figures.

**Asking questions:** *At some points children ask themselves about deeper connections which they would like their parents to explain.*

Lars (3 years) is sitting on the sofa watching *Teletubbies*, while his parents are having breakfast. Lars turns to the breakfast table: "Daddy, why don't the *Teletubbies* have a penis?" His father is somewhat taken aback: "What? Well, er, because they're wearing clothes." Lars replies, "No." His father thinks for a moment, and then he offers another explanation, "Well, because they're not proper little men." Though Lars is not really satisfied with this answer, he turns back to the programme.

Children are moved by anything they cannot solve for themselves. In many sections the programme is self-explanatory. According to the descriptions by the parents and in natural reception situations, in the case of the *Teletubbies* there are relatively few questions, except in the animated cartoon *Animal Parade*, when the children often ask the names of certain animals (eg flamingo).

**Games during reception:** *The programme does not necessarily have to be the focus of attention the whole time. At some points the children run out or occupy themselves intensively with something else.*

Anne (3 years) is standing right in front of the television holding a Po doll in her hand. She addresses the *Teletubbies* directly: "Here is a Po as well. I also have a Po. Look, Teletubbies (loud), look, look, look." She repeats this several times in the next five minutes, saying it louder and louder. Anne has one concern: she wants to show her new doll to the Teletubbies. She only follows the action on the screen inasmuch as she addresses the Teletubby standing in the foreground each time. When Tinky Winky, without hearing her request, turns away she says, "I'll try later," and waits until another of the characters turns his front to her. A feeling of uncertainty because the *Teletubbies* do not answer her directly cannot be noticed, at least not in her face. Anne is engrossed in her play world.

In several reception situations the children start playing. Here with a doll in front of the television, sometimes with children present.

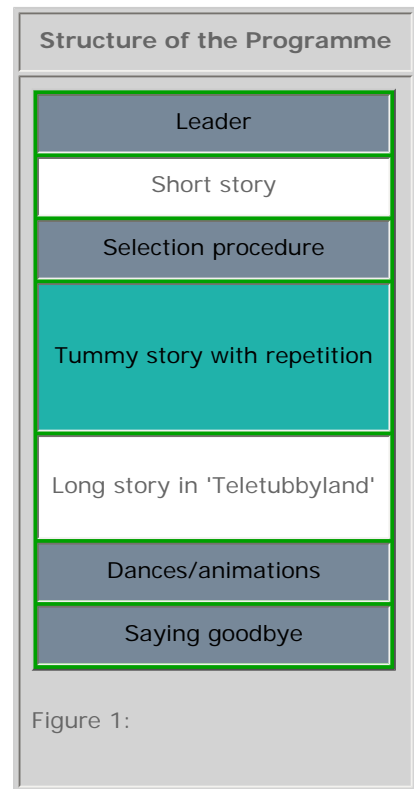
Tobias (6 years) and his sister (1 year) regularly watch the *Teletubbies*. The two often nudge each other gently with their noses and roll over the sofa together. Occasionally both attentively follow the programme. Then Tobias fetches out his Saban plastic figures and plays with them: "I'll fight, and you get angry. Quick! You have to rescue yourself." He briefly looks at the screen again and explains the connections to his mother. Then he is again absorbed in his game on and under the sofa. When his mother realises what he is doing she asks whether she should switch off the television, and Tobias replies very firmly that she should not.

Tobias and his sister use the programme for, among other things, playing together. The *Teletubbies* becomes an accompanying medium for some time and seems to be attractive, especially for older children, functioning much like a radio play. Several children divert their attention away from the television for a time, play at something else or even leave the room for a short time.

*The narrative structure with built-in learning forms*

The individual *Teletubbies* programmes follow a relatively fixed structure of eight elements (cf Fig 1). The elements 6 and 7, however, can only be found in some *Teletubbies* instalments. Nearly a quarter of the programme is almost identical from one broadcast to the next.

- *Element 1: Leader*  
(2 mins 30 secs)  
The sun with the baby in it rises and the *Teletubbies* introduce themselves with their distinctive Teletubby song.
- *Element 2: Short story in Teletubbyland*  
(1 min on average)  
In the bunker or in the hilly landscape the *Teletubbies* play little games with one another, with the rhymes that come out of the speaking tubes, with favourite objects or the equipment in the igloo.
- *Element 3: Selection procedure*  
(1 min 25 secs)  
Using a constantly recurring procedure the Teletubby is selected in whose tummy the film is to be seen afterwards with the children.
- *Element 4: Tummy tales*  
(2 x about 3 mins 30 secs)  
The films show children in everyday life aged between 3 and 6 years. Experiences from the area of the home, a visit to the parents' workplace, making things from paper etc, experiences with animals and nature or short films are shown in which adults read to children or sing with them. When the children say goodbye for the first time, the four *Teletubbies* in Teletubbyland call "no-mal" (= noch einmal = again) until the film has been completely repeated.
- *Element 5: Long story in Teletubbyland*  
(average 5 mins)  
Stories are told introduced by a male voice with the words "One day in Teletubbyland ...". Funny events result from everyday occurrences such as the wish for a Tubbypudding or playing outdoors, eg flying kites.
- *Element 6: Tubbydances*  
(about 2 mins)  
After simple and catchy music in four-four time the four *Teletubbies* dance altogether eight different dances.
- *Element 7: Performances in Teletubbyland*  
(about 2 mins 30 secs/bear and lion about 4 mins)  
The *Teletubbies* gather to follow one of the six different computer animations or a game of hide-and-seek by the bear and lion.
- *Element 8: Saying goodbye* (  
(2 mins 30 secs)  
The four *Teletubbies* say goodbye twice to the viewers and finally jump into their house hill after waving again. The baby sun sets.
- *Intermediate elements: Sun and pan across the hills*  
(up to 10 secs)  
Within and between the individual elements the face of a baby appears in the computer-animated sun.



During reception the *Tubbydances*, the constantly recurring *Teletubby* scenes in the elements 1, 3 and 8 or the intermediate elements are not followed with great concentration. In contrast to that, the children – at least the older ones – often stare at the screen as if spellbound during the tummy tales. In this case they usually sit quietly, whereas they frequently move during other elements. There is a connection between the typical moments of reception and the elements of the programme (cf Fig 2). This finding at first appears quite trivial, but is of basic importance for an understanding of the *Teletubbies* and in the end also for their success. The different elements suggest different use forms within the programme.

Hitherto it has been assumed that the ideal reception behaviour – if it has to be – should be that the child

follows the story being told with concentration and fascination, ie that it watches, understands and, if possible, remembers a programme. To catch the child's eye and hold its attention, colours, tones and the rhythms of the cuts etc are adapted to children's perception and ability to pay attention. In learning-oriented programmes a presenter takes over the guidance and explains to the viewers the connections in the world. In the area of fiction certain figures, the dramatisation and camera angles take over the function of explaining. Here the young recipients are given a relatively fixed position in which they are guided and taught by people acting in an educationally responsible way.

The *Teletubbies* offer something new here. What is shown is simplified and abstracted. The camera angle leaves plenty of room for the viewer and is not restricted by a commentary to focus attention. The calm rhythm of the cuts gives the viewer time to think about what has been seen, to follow it again and even, depending on the motivation and individual theme, to overtake the action. This makes it possible to experience competence and activates communication forms such as have not been possible hitherto in programmes with an educational intention, at least not with this consistency. In some elements, especially in the intermediate elements and the *Tubbydances*, the programme even turns the recipients away from the television, "the picture-magnet" (Böhme-Dürr, 1999). The children avert their gaze, play at something else or move around. What at first sight looks like a scripting mishap is a welcome break for the children. Precisely because the *Teletubbies* call for something different from the viewers than just following the continuing action, they are especially interesting for young children. Many parents are surprised at the long attention span and the emotional bonding of the children. It arises because the viewers are repeatedly addressed directly by figures in cleverly chosen colours that are physically attractive with interesting movements, and the structure of the programme again and again offers them different areas of reception. The *Teletubbies* is a magazine for the young viewers. It does not, however, consist, as is usual in children's television, of different stories which have to be followed, but of a collection of reception areas, which suggest different learning forms. Here the four *Teletubbies* form the links. They are not only the protagonists, but a framework for the other elements within the programme. Thus the viewers together with the *Teletubbies* watch the tummy tales or the performances in *Teletubbyland*. By all the elements being linked up with the *Teletubbies* in one form or another, the enjoyment of the reception situation is also transferred to the merchandising articles and thus accounts, among other things, for the enormous demand.

Typical moments in the reception situation	
Leader	Speaking/singing/dancing with the <i>Teletubbies</i> . Predicting/anticipating, answering
Selection procedure	
Saying goodbye	
Tummy tale	Following, answering (welcoming), noticing/with repetition recognising
Short story	Following, predicting/anticipating, noticing/explaining/commenting, speaking along with the <i>Teletubbies</i>
Long story in Teletubbyland	
Dances/animations	Dancing with the <i>Teletubbies</i> /moving/anticipating, other play, asking questions, noticing (Animal Parade), joining in speaking (bear/lion)

Figure 2

## 2. The concern of parents and adults

In view of this diversity of activities, the programme seems to be harmless, even promoting competence. Nevertheless, adults are divided in their opinion of the programme.

### *The positions of the parents*

IZI's Internet questionnaire attracted 248 responses. The age of the children whose parents participated was chiefly between 1½ and 3½ years. Even though the parents who were reached are certainly not statistically representative, it is possible to obtain an insight into their attitude. It can be divided into three positions:

- The first group is made up of parents, almost exclusively mothers, who reject the programme. They

frequently argue that sitting in front of the television set is no place for young children anyway, but when they do view they should see children's television "classics" such as *Die Sendung mit der Maus* or *Sesame Street*. These, they believe, best stimulate their children, and they report on the pleasure they themselves had and have from these programmes.

- A second, smaller group regards the *Teletubbies* critically and with a certain lack of understanding. These parents notice a difference between their own and their children's taste, and "in spite of this" they mostly allow their children to see the programme against this background.
- The third group thinks the *Teletubbies* is good and describes it as suitable for children, even more so than *Sesame Street* for television beginners. These parents greatly enjoy watching the programmes with their children.

In the AOL Chatforum it was also possible to discern this division into three groups. If we may generalise about the two random samples even only very cautiously, they do at least indicate that adults' opinions in Germany on the subject of the *Teletubbies* is divided. Arguments for this are not only fundamental ideas about what education should be, but also certain aspects of the programme. In the reasons given for the different assessments specific factors of the programme – like the special *Teletubbies'* use of language, the redundant narrative structure or something that can be paraphrased as "educational content" – are given as pros or cons. Table 1 shows the hit parade of the parents' arguments for or against the *Teletubbies*.

The argument advanced most frequently by the parents taking part in the IZI questionnaire for the *Teletubbies* is the children's observation during reception. The most frequently given argument against the *Teletubbies* is that sitting in front of the television is no place for children at this age. In this context "parking the children", ie television in a baby-sitting function, is mentioned and rejected. Educationally committed positions are set against pragmatic considerations of organising the household with several children. On a deeper level, the contributions are therefore often concerned about the definition of "a good mother" and about the extent to which television and in particular the *Teletubbies* can be reconciled with this idea.

Typically the parents who reject the *Teletubbies* argue on the basis of relatively firm ideas about educational content and how it is acquired. The parents with a positive attitude to the *Teletubbies* argued by attempting to understand their children's perspectives.

IZI Questionnaire, 248 responses by parents: 85 positive, 70 negative, 32 undecided, 61 not parents or not serious		AOL Chatforum, 346 responses by adults: 109 positive, 132 negative, 34 undecided, 71 not serious	
Positive	Negative		
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
The children concentrate during reception, are active, think and join in. (20)	In front of the television is no place for children (30)	1. The <i>Teletubbies</i> are free of violence. (33) They are more suitable than other children's programmes, here the <i>Power Rangers</i> are often mentioned. (33)	The used language is unsuitable and results in language problems. (50)
The <i>Teletubbies</i> are suitable for children, in some cases even more so than other children's programmes. <i>Sesame Street</i> often mentioned. (18)	The language used is unsuitable and might result in language problems. (26)	2. The language used is very suitable and is not dangerous for language development. (23)	The <i>Teletubbies</i> dulls the children's minds. (47)
The language used is very suitable and not dangerous, or even supports language development. (14)	The <i>Teletubbies</i> do not take children seriously and are too simple. (12)	3. The <i>Teletubbies</i> are fun and entertainment for the children without an instructive background. (11)	Sitting in front of the television is no place for small children. (28)

The programme is free of violence. (12)	The <i>Teletubbies</i> are merely a way to market children. (11)	4.	The <i>Teletubbies</i> are instructive and educationally valuable. (10)	The programme is not instructive and has no educational content. (21)
---	--	----	---	---

Accordingly it can altogether be said: the position of parents towards the programme *Teletubbies* is closely connected with the general idea of how to deal with children. Here the respective perceptions and assessments of childhood and society are projected into the programme.

#### *The adults' fear of language degeneration*

An argument that is repeatedly mentioned is the language used in the programme and its potential significance for the children. While some fear retrogression in language development, other parents deem it to be suitable for children and supportive of language. Both assessments interestingly relate exclusively to the language used by the *Teletubby* characters. The employment of language in the programme takes place, however, on three levels:

1. Adults' voices of serve as a setting for the programme. The speaker (Fabian Harloff) introduces the scene, speaks with the *Teletubbies* and describes the story. Songs and rhymes can be heard coming from the speaking tubes and they are presented by adults. Altogether they are simple short sentences spoken in standard German.
2. In the tummy tales the children are the focal point of the action. They speak as they move around, comment off screen on the scenes, using language in keeping with their current vocabulary and ability to articulate.
3. The *Teletubby* characters employ language in their own form. Besides the *Teletubby* expressions (Eh-oh, Tubbytoast, Tubbypudding etc) the Teletubbies use a special language. Firstly, there are language fragments to express their own feelings (Oh, oh, Oh, no, Laalila, Peidi-Peidi-Po etc). Secondly, words ("No mal" instead of "Noch mal" = again) and sentence constructions are shortened. Occasionally the Teletubbies speak short sentences in their entirety ("What is that?"), usually they simply leave out verbs and articles ("Ball back", instead of "The ball is back"). The Laa Laa also often attaches an "i" to the end of a word, and Po sometimes does not speak certain consonants.

The language used in the programme tends to be a game with language, in which various levels are interconnected. Parents notice the special way in which the *Teletubbies* talk, and many of them fear negative consequences for their children's language development. The basic assumption here is that the language used by the *Teletubbies* – and not that of the speaker or the children in the tummy tales – has a direct effect on language learning. They see their fears confirmed by what they observe in their children:

"My daughter's entire kindergarten is meanwhile in a state of language disintegration. Soon no child will be able to say 'hallo' any longer. Now I hear only "Eh-oh, Eh-oh" almost all the time." (Ilona 2<sup>nd</sup> July 99)

"My children (5 and 3 years old) love the *Tubbies*, but they quickly began to drop to their language level, whereupon the programme was immediately cut out of their television viewing." (Petra 30<sup>th</sup> June 99)

Others, for the most part undecided parents, emphasise the importance of the parents as an authority for corrections.

"Sanja (3 years) adores watching *Teletubbies*. (...) What really disturbs me is the simplified language. I have to constantly correct my daughter when she starts saying "Eh-oh" or "No mal, no mal" (for German *noch mal*) after watching a *Teletubbies* instalment." (Kirstn 2<sup>nd</sup> August 99)

The parents' observations all agree that children adopt certain expressions from the programme and use them in everyday life. This perception is interpreted differently and results in different educational measures.

*"Eh-oh, hallo and Grüß-Gott" – What children take over from the language of the Teletubbies into their everyday life.*

In the morning circle discussion 3- 6-year-old children are also talking about the way he *Teletubbies* express themselves.

Example:

Interviewer: Mm. They sometimes have a language of their own, don't they?

Julian: Eh-oh means hallo.

Interv: Eh-oh means hallo. What sort of things do they say then?

Torben: Bye bye means, er, means goodbye. And hallo, um, Eh-oh means hallo.

Children know the special way the *Teletubbies* express themselves and translate it into standard German: "Eh-oh means hallo." They also discuss the meaning in some cases, for example, the "Oh, oh", the sound the *Teletubbies* use to express surprise. This indicates that children do not confuse these expressions with their own language, but learn them like new words in their vocabulary.

Laura, 2½ years old, from Ingolstadt is an enthusiastic *Teletubbies* viewer (see above). In the video tapings of the reception situations she always sings the opening song. This ends with the words "The *Teletubbies* say hallo. (*Teletubbies* reply to the viewer:) Eh-oh." Lara sings, "Eh-oh, hallo and Grüss Gott" (a southern German greeting). Lara uses three different variants for greeting. According to her mother "Grüss Gott" is Lara's only Bavarian expression, as the family comes from Thuringia (in eastern Germany). Besides the greeting she already knows: "Hallo" (standard German), she also uses two new ones she has learnt: "Eh-oh" (*Teletubby* greeting) and "Grüss Gott".

Learning these words is probably closely connected with the redundant narrative form of the programme, the body-language of the figures and the children's previous knowledge. The children follow the story, interpret the non-verbal language and associate this with the new words. Very soon they correctly guess the meaning of the *Teletubby* vocabulary and explain it. It is also possible to learn foreign expressions in this way. Quite a few letters were received in which the positive importance of the *Teletubbies* was mentioned for children growing up with several languages. In one family with four children which has to spend several months in Spain because of the parents' job the *Teletubbies* are used to learn the first Spanish words.

The result was three young children who started to speak Spanish within two days, eg "Is that my pelota?" (Cornelia 29<sup>th</sup> August 1999)

Children acquire the *Teletubbies'* expressions and use them in everyday life. The expressions remind parents of an earlier development stage, so that they interpret this media behaviour (cf Paus-Haase, 1998) as 'baby-language', ie language that is not yet properly developed. A number of parents and educators see their educational endeavours thwarted. Other parents see no problem in this, describe it as a short-term phase or even think it helps their children.

The findings would indicate that the *Teletubbies* do not result in retrogressive language development, but in an expansion of the language repertoire. As these words are at variance with many adults' concept of a 'proper use of language', the children, by integrating *Teletubby* expressions, circumvent the prevalent idea of how children should progress in their language development. Learning the *Teletubbies'* expressions is therefore principally a problem for adults, who see their power of definition with regard to the words used by the child undermined.<sup>8</sup> As public service television in particular makes an effort to consider parents' ideas about children's television, the *Teletubbies* certainly marks a turning point. The argument that a programme should be offered that is especially attractive to children is here just as understandable as the feelings of some parents with firm ideas about education that the ARD/ZDF Children's Channel is no longer on their side.

*How do the children use the Teletubbies language?*

When children learn *Teletubby* words as additions to their vocabulary it has to be asked for what purpose they employ these words. Here are some examples from the study:

- A typical expression as the reason for a game

Kay and Chantal both refer to themselves in free play as Laa Laa. At first they play with two other children with a large ball. When the two other children turn aside, Kay says, "Come on, now we'll say, Laa Laa play with ball". Then both: "Laa Laa play with ball." They push the ball and run after it, squealing. A

role game ensues in which movement is the central motive.

In free play the switch into the Teletubbies' language becomes the reason for the game and a typical phrase from the programme becomes the framework for a movement-oriented game.

- *The Teletubbies' language as a secret language*

In the third form of a reformed school the language of the *Teletubbies*, or an interpretation of it, is becoming a secret language. In the breaks the four boys, who are firm friends, talk in a kind of baby-language which they call *Teletubby*. The four boys' parents are getting worked up about this, which, however, only welds the friends closer together. If girls or female teachers come to them in the break, they say nothing, and just giggle when the outsiders go away.

The media relation becomes a joke in the break, the secret language being used to form a group and draw a clear line between them and the others.

#### *The Teletubby way of talking as a defence mechanism*

In one case a mother reports how the *Teletubbies'* language has a negative effect on her 5-year-old son's ability to pronounce words. The boy is undergoing speech therapy. In the summer holidays he watches the programme with his sister, and his mother is aware of changes: "The words he speaks properly suddenly turned out to be wrong. (...) Now that he goes to day-care centre Andreas talks sensibly again. THANK HEAVENS! (...)" (Bettina 21<sup>st</sup> August 1999). When asked directly, the mother explains the connections: "Andreas got worse by parroting the Teletubbies. They don't talk properly either, and extremely indistinctly. Andreas imitated that." (Bettina 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1999)

A 5-year-old undergoing speech therapy "parroted" the Teletubbies' language in the summer holidays. The mother's problems are understandable. Probably everyday life in the family is characterised by efforts to encourage the boy to speak clearly, for which purpose they are also availing themselves of professional help. After Andreas saw the *Teletubbies* it is quite conceivable that he was thankful to adopt the *Teletubbies'* words into his vocabulary as they are easier to pronounce. Probably Andreas used the *Teletubbies* as a kind of den into which he could retreat to escape his mother's efforts (especially in the summer holidays).

Children employed the *Teletubbies'* expressions in a subjective sense. The phrases turn, for example, into the reason for a game, a secret language or a defence mechanism.

#### *The game with gender clichés*

The perception and assessment of gender presentation are not so directly aligned to educational concepts as to their own experiences. In the official version, the two larger *Teletubbies* Tinky Winky and Dipsy are boy-figures and Laa Laa and Po girl-figures. Unlike in the usual children's programmes, the girl-figures are not distinguished by any special features, such as bows in their hair or sexualised features. This does not mean, however, that they have no gender or are not based on gender rituals. Gitta Mühlen Achs, referring to Goffman, proves the special significance of body-language in media productions (cf Mühlen Achs, 1998, 1995). Dipsy and Laa Laa, in particular, adopt an existing ritualisation to indicate gender. Dipsy often stands with legs apart and displays expressively energetic gestures. Laa Laa, on the other hand, presents herself with ballet-like movements and a body pose which reveals her as a "typical girl". Po's movements, however, are far less graceful. She often stands with her legs apart or hops up and down. Tinky Winky gesticulates less than the other *Teletubbies* and his movements are somewhat clumsy. The favourite objects of the three smaller *Teletubbies* (Dipsy: hat, Laa Laa: ball, Po: scooter) are only partly gender-typical. Tinky Winky's red lady's handbag, on the other hand, is a "feminine" accessory. Whereas the figures Laa Laa and Dipsy correspond more to the existing stereotypes of girls and boys, in the case of Tinky Winky and Po the prevalent gender clichés are extended by play.

In the reception this leads to an astonishing development. For adults the figure Tinky Winky with his red handbag is confusing. Not only the Reverend Falwell, but also a number of mothers in the questionnaire feel rather disturbed by this combination. The idea that a member of the dominant group (men) would voluntarily acquire an accessory of the subdominant group (women) does not fit in with their interpretation pattern, unless in the context of a deviant "masculinity" (subdominant group men with homosexual orientation).

For children Tinky Winky is clearly a boy. They also agree in the case of Laa Laa, whom they all describe as a girl. For children it is Po whose sex is unclear. Almost all the children talk about her in play and stories in the

masculine form. If older children and primary school children are asked directly about this figure, they state that Po is a girl. A little later, when retelling stories, in exceptionally gripping instalments they again talk about her in the masculine form. Even girls in the 3<sup>rd</sup> form refer to her as 'he', as do the children who wrote letters to the magazine.<sup>9</sup>

Probably the use of the masculine form partly results from the gender-specifically neutral name Po and body-language that is unusual for media presentations. Television-experienced children are, moreover, used to all figures regarded as positive being naturally male, unless they bear obvious "feminine" features.

In the appropriation of the figures in the play-activities further exciting moments emerge. After the children have built a *Teletubbyland* with cushions, they play freely with the *Teletubby* dolls. After that comes the request to be *Teletubbies* themselves. The girls want to be Laa Laa above all, but also Po, Tinky Winky and, in one case, Dipsy. The boys' first choice is Po, sometimes Tinky Winky and Laa Laa, but Dipsy in only a few cases. In everyday life, too, the children's interest is not directed automatically to the figure of the same sex. Thus Anne (3) finds Tinky Winky the most interesting. The theme that guides her actions is to be tall and to prove her competency. An Italian boy loves Po most of all – Ricardo (3¼) lovingly feeds his Laa Laa doll.

Up to now the idea of two separate worlds has dominated reception research: one girls' media world focusing on harmony and common interests and a boys' media world specialising in fighting and separation (cf, eg, Paus-Haase, 1998, p 9). Those responsible for making programmes assume that for girls appropriation processes are possible, above all with the few girl and women figures and under certain conditions with the boy and men figures. For boys, on the other hand, it is taken for granted that the female figures offer them practically nothing.<sup>10</sup> In view of the stereotype role distribution on children's television this is understandable, but this is also a self-fulfilling prophecy. In children's everyday life the variants in experience with women and men have multiplied. The puzzling gender, the playful handling of sexual clichés, is nowadays already part of childhood. A mother's thoughts on this:

"(...) Anyone observing children sees that boys enjoy wearing make-up like their mothers and girls shaving their faces like their fathers, so Tinky-Winky carries a red handbag. My son and my daughter quarrel about which of them may carry my handbag. So what? That's normal." (K. Rykowski)

#### *The Teletubbies as part of the individual formation of meaning*

The reception and interpretation of the programme is part of the media appropriation and thus part of the individual formation of meaning. The perceptions, interpretations and actions with the media are permeated by individual themes, social context, biography and the specific medium in their intertextual involvement in the media market (Bachmair, 1996).

Parents see a medium which deviates in many ways from what they have experienced and know for themselves. They themselves grew up with the programmes *Die Sendung mit der Maus* and *Sesame Street* and experienced them as happy and harmless. In the public discussion, the subject of children and television was and is problematised, and warnings were and are given about damaging consequences. As the parents were able to experience the "classics" themselves and ascertain for themselves – often even contrary to the public debate - that they were harmless, it is possible for them to maintain their own standpoint here.

On the television market the *Teletubbies* is an unusual narrative form which can hardly be grasped by the previous understanding of an educationally intended, entertaining or exciting children's programme. Added to this is the expansion of the target group and the violation of a taboo associated with it on German television. Here the *Teletubbies* touches on deeper fears and attacks the "last safe bastion, early childhood" (cf Howard & Roberts in this journal). The press and commercial channels use the opportunity and report on the programme in the usual emotion-laden and deliberately critical style.<sup>11</sup> The private commercial channel SAT.1 even transmitted a page of teletext reporting on the growth in speech-therapy made necessary on account of *Teletubbies* consumption. Here people's potential fears are being exploited. (After all, the press and SAT.1 are mainly interested in keeping and gaining viewers.)

Parents would like to give their children the best possible start in life. What parents understand by this varies from individual to individual. On account of their own (television) experiences, they themselves find it difficult to properly assess the *Teletubbies* and seek guidance. They experience the public discussion principally as critical reporting.

In the reception situation parents experience their children gripped by a hitherto unknown degree of fascination. They use their previous interpretation patterns and describe their children's *Teletubby*-fascination using, for example, words such as drug addiction or hypnosis.

For pre-school children, some of whom are experiencing television for the first time with the *Teletubbies*, the problems of interpretation do not even arise. They take for granted the play with language and the gender presentation. The aesthetic design or the redundant dramatisation is often not a subject that concerns children, unless on first contact (cf Best in this journal). With this series their interpretation patterns, their aesthetic and narrative experience first come into existence, because a large number of children are beginning their television viewing time with the *Teletubbies*. By moving the time slot to the evening, the *Teletubbies* and the *Sandmännchen* will become for many the only thing they are regularly allowed to watch. So this pre-school programme will leave its mark, at least in Germany, on the television experiences of a whole generation of infants – certainly with far-reaching consequences.

## **The *Teletubbies*:**

### **a children's programme**

### **that touches on the nerve of time**

The *Teletubbies* touches on the nerve of time. They consistently touch on the children's "nerve" educationally and commercially with sensitivity, intuition and a little bit of happiness. But they also touch on the exposed nerves of the times. For parents it is not only the burden of having to deal with the subject of television and opportunities for consumption at an ever earlier age of their children, but what they chiefly lack is interpretation patterns to be able to understand and judge this programme format. At the latest with the *Teletubbies* it becomes clear to many that they can no longer naturally understand children's culture on the basis of their own childhood experience. This realisation would have come anyway as the children grew older, but now the first three years of life, which have become a myth, are also under attack. Other media take up these fears and – also only economically consistent – make their profits from more or less well researched stories.

To want to judge the *Teletubbies* in this complex web as good or bad always means evaluating the "nerve of time" as well. This television series is an innovation which involved risks for all concerned. It has succeeded, has brought in a lot of money for Ragdoll Productions, BBC-Worldwide, Itsy-Bitsy Entertainment etc and confronted families and kindergartens with the same problem: they have to find a way of interpreting, classifying and coping with the subject of the *Teletubbies*.

#### **NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> The play and painting activities in the kindergarten were initiated and carried out by Bärbel Kopp. The morning circle discussions and case studies in families took place in cooperation with Ole Hofmann, a graduate economist, who also analysed the contents of the 90 *Teletubbies* instalments in the first series.

<sup>2</sup> Carried out in cooperation with Ole Hoffmann, a graduate economist.

<sup>3</sup> In a certain way this setting recalls experimental research into media effects. The evaluation of this study takes place, however, against the background of a theoretical approach to qualitative reception research based on everyday life (cf Bachmair, 1996, Mikos, 1994).

Unlike the Australian study by Susan Howard and Susan Roberts (see announcement in this journal), the children see different consequences of the first series in their everyday life. For that reason alone, the main point of emphasis is not on the "effect" of individual aspects of a certain consequence, but is placed on typical moments in the *Teletubbies* reception in general.

<sup>4</sup> Carried out with the support of Maria Monninger, Dieter Grassberger, Bärbel Kopp and Wolfgang Vogt.

<sup>5</sup> [urbia.de](http://urbia.de), [eltern.de](http://eltern.de), [familie-online.de](http://familie-online.de), [family.acw.at](http://family.acw.at), [elternnetz.de](http://elternnetz.de), [elternwelt.de](http://elternwelt.de), [kidnet.de](http://kidnet.de), [hausfrauenseite.de](http://hausfrauenseite.de), [babyzimmer.de](http://babyzimmer.de), [rundums-baby.de](http://rundums-baby.de)

<sup>6</sup> In the morning circle discussion in kindergarten and primary school, a basket containing various merchandising products provides the opportunity to tell a story. Besides the *Teletubbies* there is Mouse and Elephant from the *Sendung mit der Maus* and Tiger and Piggy from Winnie the Pooh, Ernie and Bert from *Sesame Street* and Rudi the Raven from *Siebenstein* etc. The children are asked to take a figure out of the basket and to talk about the programme and the stories.

<sup>7</sup> In the questionnaire to the parents it becomes clear that the programme is turned on not only by children used to television, but also introduces many children to deliberate viewing who hitherto have only looked on.

<sup>8</sup> In other programmes, like Sesame Street, this problem does not arise. Here, too, words are taken over into everyday life. These include, in addition to Ernie's laugh, the numbers 1-30 or the sounds of the letters. This is in keeping with the parents' dominant idea of a sensible learning content. Primary school teachers have been complaining for many years about "children ruined by Sesame Street". For the first reading lessons calling the consonant "F" "ef" is a hindrance, and the children have to be told to be careful about this previous knowledge. If reading is still learnt from individual letters, then the letter "F" is given its sound value. The terms the children learn for the letters from Sesame Street is, however, for the prevalent idea unproblematic. For that reason parents, unlike primary school teachers, see no problem here, for the parents' power of definition is not questioned.

<sup>9</sup> In the letters many female writers refer to Po in the masculine form. Here a striking similarity emerges to fan letters written by 9- to 10-year-old girls to boy groups, indicating forms of para-social relations (cf Götz, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Albert Schäfer talks of an iron law of children's television: "In productions with heroines one always runs the risk of keeping the boys away from the television set" (quoted by Gangloff, 1999)

<sup>11</sup> One of the few exceptions to this is the journal Familie & Co, which tries to make parents understand their children's enthusiasm for the programme. (Familie & Co, No 6/1999)

## REFERENCES

- Bachmair, Ben: Fernsehkultur. Subjektivität in einer Welt bewegter Bilder. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 1996, 357 S.
- Böhme-Dürr, Karin: Bildmagnet Fernsehen. In: TelevIZion, 12/1999/1, S. 19-24.
- Brudny, Wolfgang: Die "Teletubbies". Verunsichern sie die Medienpädagogen? In: TV-Diskurs, -/1999/ Oktober, S. 67-73.
- Gangloff, Tilmann: Lauter Superhelden und Sexbomben. Schon in den Sendungen des Kinderfernsehens dominieren die Geschlechterklischees. In: Stuttgarter Zeitung vom 17.09.1999.
- Götz, Maya: Mädchen und Fernsehen. Facetten der Medienaneignung in der weiblichen Adoleszenz. München: KoPäd 1999, 400 S.
- Groebel, Jo: Stimmungsfernsehen, Wohlfühlfernsehen, ohne Angst vor Überzuckerung. Kinderkanal ARD/ ZDF Pressemappe zu den Teletubbies 1999.
- Horten, Donald; Wohl, Richard: Mass communication and para-social interaction. Observations on intimacy at the distance. In: Psychiatry, 19/1956/3, S. 215-229.
- Mikos, Lothar: Es wird dein Leben! Familienserien im Fernsehen und im Alltag der Zuschauer. Münster: MAKS Publikationen 1994, 475 S.
- Mühlen Achs, Gitta: Frauenbilder. Konstruktionen des anderen Geschlechts. In: Mühlen Achs, Gitta ; Schorb, Bernd (Hrsg.): Geschlecht und Medien. München: KoPäd 1995.
- Mühlen Achs, Gitta: Geschlecht bewußt gemacht. Körpersprachliche Inszenierungen. München: Frauenoffensive 1998, 142 S.
- Paus-Haase, Ingrid: Heldenbilder im Fernsehen. Eine Untersuchung zur Symbolik von Fernsehfavoriten. Opladen u.a.: Westdeutscher Verlag 1998, 322 S.

## AUTHOR

Maya Götz, Ph.D., is an academic member of the staff of the **IZI**, Munich.

[maya.goetz@brnet.de](mailto:maya.goetz@brnet.de)

[www.maya-goetz.de](http://www.maya-goetz.de)

## INFORMATION

Internationales  
Zentralinstitut  
für das Jugend-  
und Bildungfernsehen  
**IZI**

Tel.: 089 - 59 00 21 40

Fax.: 089 - 59 00 23 79

eMail: [izi@brnet.de](mailto:izi@brnet.de)

internet: [www.izi.de](http://www.izi.de)

**COPYRIGHT**

© *International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)*

[▶▶ to the top](#)