

# TELEVIZION

International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)

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

*Karin Hake*

## **The "Teletubbies" in Norway -**

### **A discussion about qualits**

There has not been any specific research on the "Teletubbies" in Norway and in other Nordic countries. The only research that exists till now are quantitative data from TV-meters, ratings and markets shares. From August till December 1998, the starting period for "Teletubbies", the "Teletubbies" obtained a rating of 6 percent among 3- to 6-year-olds in Norway.

We do not know what, if anything, very young children gain from viewing television in general and what they understand. There are some methodological challenges in research with children as young as two years old - the target group for the "Teletubbies". Probably one has to use observation, for instance video-observation, recording their viewing behaviour while watching. Interviewing children of this age is nearly impossible as their speech is rudimentary at best. It would, however, be of great interest, through a more qualitative oriented study, to gain knowledge about how children experience this programme and which elements they find most fascinating. Given this lack of research, we have not yet any evidence to support its producers' claims that the programme is educational for 1-year olds.

The discussion about the "Teletubbies" has been centred around quality and content. It is the Norwegian commercial channel TV2 that today broadcasts the "Teletubbies" in Norway. The public service channels in Norway and Denmark chose not to accept "Teletubbies" for broadcasting. The Head of Acquisition in the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, Children's and Youth Department, gives the following reasons:

- The world of the "Teletubbies" is an artificial one, without any elements from children's everyday life for identification. The live action sequences are very ritualistic.
- The language in the "Teletubbies" has an infantile character, not suitable to encourage toddlers' language development .
- The dramaturgy is very predictable.
- The programme would have to fit into the ordinary slots for preschool children. NRK gives today priority to preschool programmes for children between 3 and 7 years old.

This corresponds with an evaluation given by other TV- professionals as well: "Teletubbies" does not consist of any story, it has no development in action and no conclusion. The main content is a set of visual and accustic rituals. Ms. Ada Haug, the former Head of Preschool

Children's Programmes in the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, states that programmes for this target group should be "a mixture of a tool and a toy - a meaningful and entertaining asset to a child's development". She also states that the most important aim with the "Teletubbies" is the prospect of merchandising (The Second World Summit on Television for Children, London 1998). My own reception studies on preschool children's fascination of TV indicate that preschoolers above all are fascinated by dramatic and emotional stories which reflect their own daily life and by topics with which they can identify (Hake, 1999).

Nevertheless, in many countries, the "Teletubbies" have reached a great popularity both among children and parents. This brings us further into a well-known dilemma: The fact that children find a programme fascinating, or parents think they do, does not inevitably mean that the programme is educational or even good for them. Both "in-house" discussions and earlier studies have, however, shown that children sometimes may be fascinated by a programme although it is heavily criticised by adults. Although it is very important to take into account which form and content children find fascinating, we also have to take a close look at what quality standards producers, policy-makers and parents aim at. Children's fascination and adults' criteria of quality do not always correspond.

In an attempt to evaluate quality of programmes for young children, Lilian Katz (1993) operates with five different perspectives. Katz uses these perspectives to assess quality of "early childhood education". I have, however, transferred her perspectives to programme development and research. These five perspectives are:

1. From above as seen by visiting adults and observers.
  2. From below as seen by the children themselves.
  3. From the outside as seen by the parents served by the programme.
  4. From inside as seen by the staff who work in the programme.
  5. As perceived by the society and its representatives who sponsor the programme.
- (Katz, 1993 in Hake, 1998).

Parents and teachers may evaluate TV-programmes for children based on criteria as to what is "good for the children" or they try to put themselves in the place of a child and base their statements on that. Often if the world and daily life of children and youngsters deviate from a developmentally, psychologically and culturally conditioned norm, this may produce anxiety among parents and teachers.

Eli Åm, a child researcher, puts it like this:

*Do we have to simply accept that children and adults can perceive a TV- programme in highly different ways? (--) Is it possible to overcome this "dualism" between a child's perception and an adult's quality demands? What criteria are superior to the evaluation of the child? In other areas this is less of a problem. For instance, we do not consider sweets to be good for children except in small quantities, even if they do cherish the taste of chocolate higher than anything else! When it comes to children's perception of TV programmes it is not longer that easy to check the child's own evaluation. (Åm, 1991).*

Policy makers and society in general may be faced with a strategic dilemma: On which perspectives and on what evaluation criteria should they base their policy? How do we handle a potential dualism? Research that can reveal perspectives both from the child's and the parents' point of view, may contribute to a better understanding of quality standards for preschool-children's programmes. Producing TV for children is not only a question of

preventing "negative elements", but also of listening to what fascinates a young target group combined with ideas and a story that parents find important.

## REFERENCES:

- Katz, Lilian G. (1993): Multiple perspectives on the Quality of Early Childhood Programmes, in *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* Vol.1, No.2.
- Hake, Karin (1998): *Barn og unges fjernsynsverden*. ad Notam Gyldendal. Oslo.
- Hake, Karin (1999): "Beethoven - er han ikke smart?" *Femåringers fascinasjon av fjernsyn*. Rådet for anvendt medieforskning.
- Haug, Ada (1998): *Dumbing Down*. Paper presented at The Second World Summit on Television for Children, London 1998.
- Åm, Eli 1991 *Sesam for norske barn*. Norsk Senter for barneforskning, Report no. 21.

## AUTHOR

Karin Hake is media researcher at the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, NRK, Oslo.

## 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](#)