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What children's TV has to offer in the way of fun

Quantitative overview of "fun" programmes on children's TV

A random sample of children's programmes reveals that up to 25 % hone in on humour as their central theme, with private TV companies miles ahead of public broadcasters. Children's TV offers a large number of amusing programmes enjoyed by tweens and younger children alike.

Place a 12-year-old boy in front of the TV with his 6-year-old sister and they'll agree on the funny parts of the programme without any difficulty. Girls and boys of all age groups associate fun on TV with humorous and witty experiences, even if the younger sister is often too young to understand every different form of humour" (Super RTL: *Kinderwelten* 2000, p. 37).

Comedy as an entertainment form on television is highly successful with the child audience. The best-known examples of comic children's programmes in Germany are probably the sketches featuring mouse and elephant in *Die Sendung mit der Maus* [The Programme with the Mouse] and the comical scenes starring Ernie and Bert in *Sesamstraße*, the German version of *Sesame Street*. But these two are primarily educational programmes. Children's television consists of far more than just these two quality television classics. The question is: How often does comedy actually play an important role in children's choice of their favourite

programmes? How is this comedy generated? And who are the protagonists of this comedy? The intention of this paper is to provide an overview of the responses to these questions derived from a random sample.

Method

The data required for the evaluation was based on the findings of the research project "An audit of children's television"¹, which examined the intersecting line of mass-communication between the broadcasters' offer and the use of what is on offer by the recipients. The audit represents what may be described as a programme analysis from the perspective of children's uses of television. It is based on the annual programme recording of the channels KI.KA, ARD, ZDF, Super RTL, RTL, RTL 2, SAT.1, PRO7, the children's TV programme range in ARD's third channels as well as the children's TV channel Fox-Kids, broadcast on Premiere's digital platform. On three random sample days (a weekday, a Saturday and a Sunday) in April 2002, a total of approximately 500 hours of programmes broadcast during children's viewing slots between 6 a. m. and 11 p. m. was recorded and evaluated with a focus on content analysis. Without commercials, trailers, sponsoring announcements and programme schedules, the random sample comprised 440 hours of editorially

produced programmes. As programme duration varies enormously, stretching from 15 seconds to 90 minutes, the basis of the following analysis will be the duration and not the number of the broadcasts containing humour.

Types of humour: slapstick, language jokes, distortions of the body, and intertextual comedy

In fun programmes, the aspect of comedy is produced in a wide variety of ways and forms. The slapstick category accommodates both chaotic comic scenes and absurd scenes at one simple level of plot; such scenes appear in over a half of the programmes where comedy is paramount (cf. Chart 1). Plays on words, puns, narrative jokes and ironic, gloating or sarcastic remarks – classified under the category of "language jokes" – occurred with similar frequency. Sit-coms and funny teenager series mainly deploy this mode to generate their humour. Programmes specifically designed for children also contain many examples, however. One is the name of a machine that Petty invented in the programme *PuR*: the "Starverchecker." Besides the German pun "Stars verchecken," meaning selling or bartering stars away, the word also has an intertextual dimension created by an allusion to various new formats such as *Popstars* or *Teenstar*.

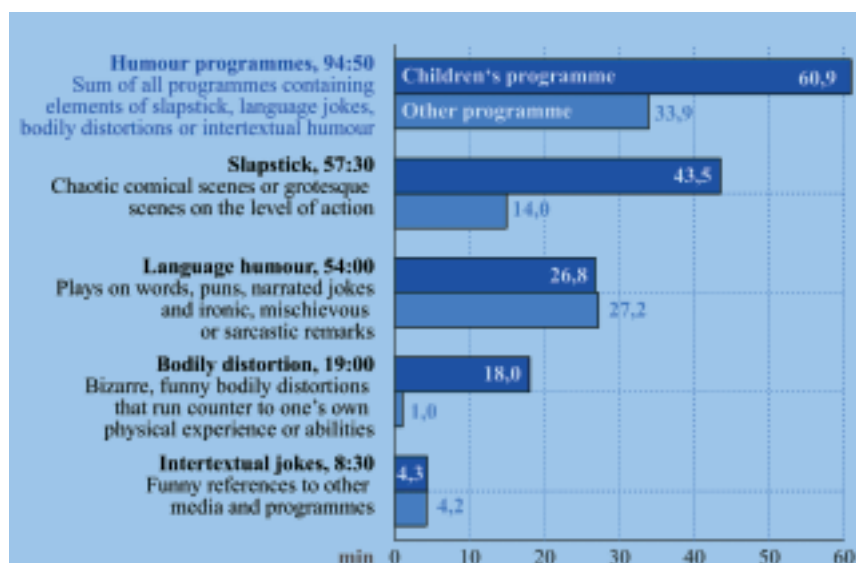


Chart 1: Forms of humour according to broadcasting volume

Comical bodily distortions bearing no resemblance to habitual body experience and faculties – a ready source of humour – occur far less frequently. In the sample they are restricted to the extreme grimaces of some comedians and to cartoons. In animated film, this is a way of demonstrating the consequences of what would otherwise be inconsequential violence without them running the risk of underscoring the real-life nature of the violent act.² These distortions of the body clearly run counter to the reality of daily life. (Two examples to illustrate this point: the constantly recurring image of the main character that has been “steam-rollered” into the ground only to miraculously appear completely intact a short time later; the squeezed *Mega Babies* with the bulging eyes, cf. Ill. 1). But it is precisely this total contrast to daily experience that



Illustration 1: *Mega Babies*

makes these distortions of the body so funny. This comical element is found in a fifth of the programmes containing comedy.

Another humour element found in TV programmes explicitly aimed at children is funny intertextual reference. In animated film, too, recurrent comical references to other media or programmes play a key role in the plot. An episode from the aforementioned programme *PuR* featuring the animated film character Petty serves to illustrate this form of humour. A new game called “Popélmon” (instead of *Pokémon* with the German “Popel” meaning bogey) is introduced with Bart Simpson fighting against Barbie in a sort of Punch-and-Judy match (cf. Ill. 2).

The range of comedy programmes

The random sample of programmes was coded according to the above definitions of different forms of humour; this classification, however, only included the programmes primarily intended to entertain by means of comedy. Magazine programmes, for example, those which may have contained elements of comedy but whose focus was not entertainment



Illustration 2: *Popélmon*

via comedy (e. g. *Die Sendung mit der Maus* etc.) were omitted.

The sample examined revealed that entertainment via comedy was the dominant feature in over 20 % of programmes on in the broadcasting period. Animated film programmes, i. e. cartoons, represented the core of almost 95 hours of humorous programmes, amounting to a total of 60 % (cf. Chart 2). Sitcoms and teenager or family series featuring comedy, e. g. *Sabrina – total verhext*, in the English-speaking hemisphere *Sabrina – The Teenage Witch*, (cf. Ill. 3) amounted to 13 %.

Sabrina – total verhext, ProSieben, Mon-Fri, 6.30 p. m.



Illustration 3: *Sabrina – total verhext*

A sitcom on the bizarre daily life of the young witch Sabrina, who lives with her aunts Zelda and Hilda as well as the talking tom-cat Salem in the Kingdom of the Mortals. Sabrina has to surmount the ambivalent challenges in her life, for she is a teenager facing all the everyday problems this poses and a trainee witch at the same time. She constantly becomes entangled in complex situations from which she is able to emerge unscathed thanks to her witchcraft and that of her aunts. Moments of fun arise, for example from si-

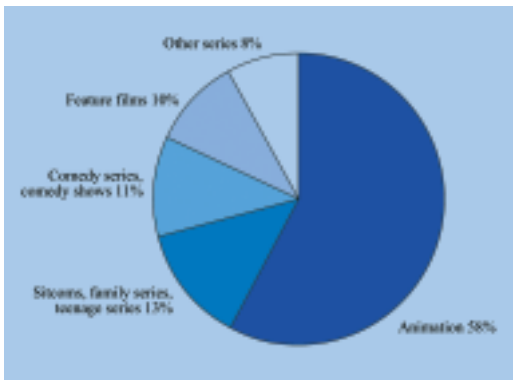


Chart 2: Distribution of fun programmes according to genres

tuations involving Sabrina’s double-edged role as a teenager and a witch, as a member of a magical family and a high school student with her “mortal,” non-magical friends.

Explicit comedy formats such as *Krüger sieht alles* [Krüger sees everything] or *Ladykracher* [Ladycracker] in addition to funny feature films e. g. *Mäusejagd* [Mouse Hunt] each occupy approx. 10 % of the comedy broadcasting time.

Ladykracher, SAT.1 broadcast as a repeat on Sunday at 10 p. m.:

Ladykracher is a stand-up comedy show starring Anke Engelke, who presents sketches and jokes to the audience. The stage presentations create the frame for further sketches which are shown as film inserts on a screen. Comedy in the programme is derived primarily from the leading lady’s skill at gleefully amplifying social clichés, picking up on everyday situations which she then turns upside down.

The other comedy programmes are a pot pourri of amusing serials, most of which are broadcast during the



Illustration 4: *Bananas in Pyjamas*

children’s programme slot, for example *Bananas in Pyjamas* (cf. Ill. 4) or *Willys große böse Wolf-Show* [Willy’s Big Bad Wolf Show].

Bananas in Pyjamas, KI.KA, Mon-Fri, 8.55 a. m.:

The life-size puppets B1 and B2 – two bananas in striped pyjamas – live in a studio world, where they encounter little stories and experience adventures with their puppet friends.

What would appear to be absolutely normal everyday situations drive them to despair, causing them to make silly, clumsy mistakes. The comedy is often produced by the characters themselves, the comical way they move and express themselves and the plot when, for example, their practical jokes end up as a total flop.

Children’s TV: real fun television

Over 60 % of all the programmes with comic content were found during the “children’s programmes.” Admittedly, the random sample was based on the specific perspective of “children’s TV;” moreover, it contained a 40 % proportion of children’s television programmes, which well exceeds that of television as a whole. And yet the

trend is clear. The programmes with slapstick as the comedy mainstay occupy a 75 % share of the programme range intended for children. The segment featuring funny bodily distortion is almost solely to be found in the children’s television programme range. This is clearly related to the fact that this comic instrument is mainly used in animated film, largely broadcast for children’s TV. Language jokes and intellectual jokes, on the other hand, are more evenly distributed across the entire programme range (cf. Chart 1).

Overview of the whole programme range: private broadcasters offer more humour

A comparison of comedy programme use between public and private broadcasting companies reveals very distinct differences. Notably, whereas over a third of all programmes in the private sector contain humour, only one seventh of those offered by public broadcasters feature comedy elements. Private broadcasters thus offer a wider range of programmes with a clear comedy focus (cf. Chart 3).

The various comedy instruments used

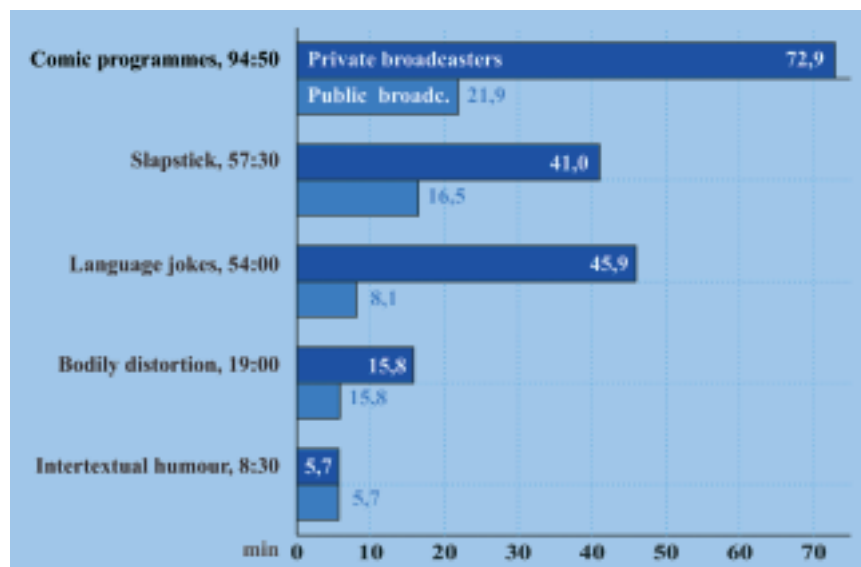


Chart 3: Forms of humour according to programme groups

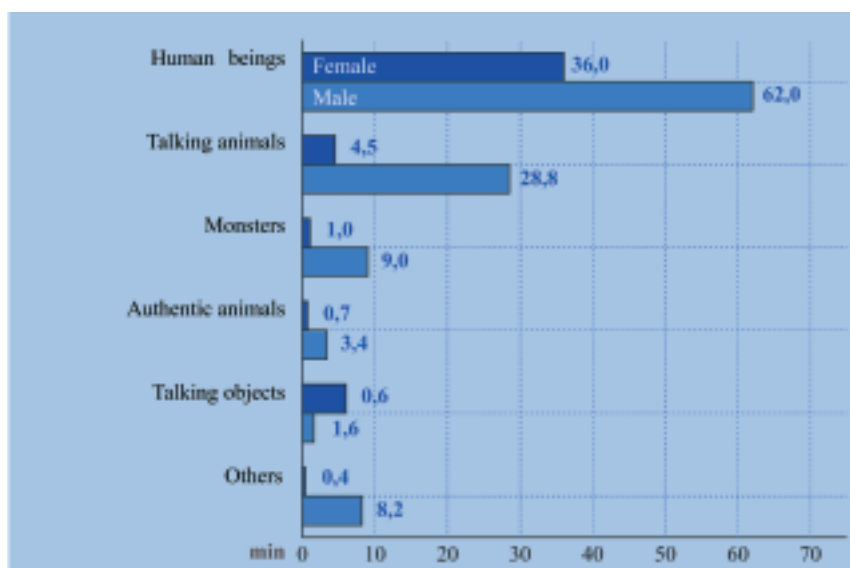


Chart 4: Comical players according to gender

also reveal differences. Private broadcasters transmit far more humour based around language than their public counterparts. A glance at the programme ranges on offer soon substantiates this contrast, since the private broadcasters show all the funny sitcoms in the random sample and most of the funny teenager and family series. As mentioned above, the comedy in both these genres is generated via language humour. Another difference is the strikingly high fraction of programmes containing slapstick comedy in the public broadcaster programmes. This is due to the funny feature films – in this case films containing slapstick –, which considerably influence the distribution due to their duration.

The comical players: numerous people and several talking animals

In the random sample's comedy programmes lasting almost 95 hours, a wide spectrum of totally different players surface with their comedy wares. On children's TV particularly not only numerous human beings but also a number of funny monsters (e. g. in *Die sieben kleinen Monster* [Seven Little Monsters]), talking

animals (e. g. in *Tiny Toon Abenteuer* [Tiny Toon Adventures]), and several real-life animals (e. g. in *Vorsicht Hund!* [Beware of the Dog] or *Rennschwein Rudi Rüssel* [Rudi Ruessel the Racing Pig]) make an appearance to lend comical touches (cf. Chart 4). There also appear to be several talking objects (e. g. *Siebstein's* suitcase) and various fable and fantasy creatures, (for example talking plants in *Chili TV* and *Der kleine Horrorladen* [The Little Horror Shop]). Thinking robots (e. g. a robot cat in *Tom, Jerry & Co.*) and such-like complete the list; they are summed up under the category of "Miscellaneous".

Usually the comedy focusses on human beings – both real people and animated film characters. Children's TV especially features many talking animals, fable and fantasy creatures. Funny monsters remain almost exclusively in the domain of animated film, whereas real-life animals and talking objects are more the exception than the rule. In particular, the gender-specific distribution of human players merits our consideration.

The first striking characteristic of comedy actors in these programmes is the extreme preponderance of male players. In the case of the human performers, the ratio between women

(approx. 37 %) and men (63 %) virtually corresponds to the quantitative gender ratio for the protagonists in the entire programme range (61 % male, 37 % female. The remaining 2 % have no gender-specific characteristics or names and are thus unclassifiable). The gender difference assumes even more marked dimensions in the example of the amusing characters in the roles of monsters or talking animals. These characters are over 80 % male! Fable and fantasy creatures such as robots are predominantly male.

The use of fun programmes

The analysis of the range of programmes on offer can be compared to the use of the programmes by boys and girls as well as by different age groups. The hit-lists of the respective viewer groups were taken as the basis for the modus operandi; the time segment occupied by the fun programmes among the 100 most successful programmes was ascertained. This procedure revealed that the use of funny programmes differs markedly according to the viewer group (cf. Chart 5).

Approximately one third of the programmes preferred by children are humorous or entertaining programmes. In the case of adults (to make the issue simple, those above the age of 14), the proportion is considerably lower at a mere 2 %, although that of adolescents, included in this analysis, is much higher (the proportion of funny programmes in the 14- to 19-year-olds' Top 100 amounts to almost 20 %). One reason is the strong preponderance of children's programmes in the children's hit-list. In the random sample, among the 100 programmes judged to be the most successful by the children were 70 programmes specifically for children. Since the proportion of fun programmes in children's TV was higher *in toto*, it is hardly surprising that

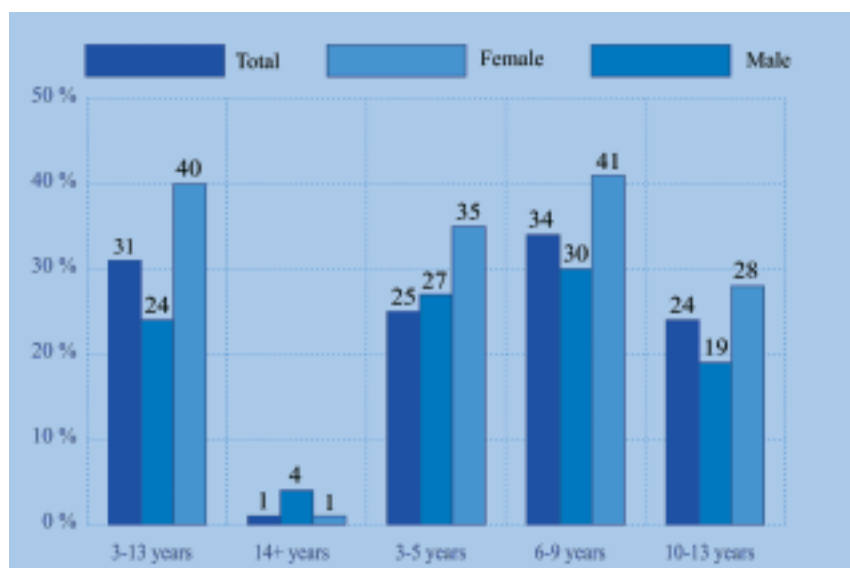


Chart 5: Time segment occupied by fun programmes in Top 100 hit-lists.

the share of fun programmes reaches a higher figure in the rankings of the children's favourites. And yet the difference to the adults' asserted preferences is quite astonishing.

Young children particularly prefer fun programmes

In the case of older children, the proportion of fun programmes is approximately 10 % below that of primary-school children. The latter group revealed the highest share at 34 %, a shade above that of the preschoolers. The smaller proportion registered among the older children runs parallel to the decline in the share of children's programmes in the respective hit-lists.

The gender ratio reveals fewer fun programmes in the girls' hit-lists overall than in the boys'. One reason for this is the boys' greater affinity towards animated films, which, for this age-group, more frequently deploy comedy to entertain their audience. As boys grow older, their viewing ratings rise particularly in prime-time thriller and action features, examples being *The Rock* and *Die Rückkehr der Jedi-Ritter* [The Return of the Jedi] in the random sample. Girls, on the other

hand, increasingly watch real-life series concerned with communicative, emotional and relationship themes such as the soap opera *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten* [Good times, bad times] and the daily soap *Marienhof*. Daily soaps play an important role in the girls' day-to-day lives.⁴ The switch in focus by older children to other formats produces a decline in children's programmes – mainly in animated comedy film series in the girls' case, with boys of the same age turning to animated action film series. Several humour forms are accompanied by age specificity, as in the case of the comical bodily distortions, which appear almost exclusively in the pre-school children's range. Alternatively, language humour plays a major role in the formats favoured by older girls.

Slapstick and animated film series featuring language humour are the broadcasters' and children's favourites

Broadcasters have a wide repertoire of funny programmes in the children's TV sector, which are well appreciated by child viewers. 3- to 9-year-old boys and girls prefer hu-

morous programmes; particularly striking, both in the broadcasters' programme offers and their use by the children, are funny animated films. In these cartoon programmes, slapstick is the chief comedy instrument. The second most common comedy tool is language humour, particularly favoured by older girls. By and large the percentage of fun programmes in the children's "hit parade" decreases as they grow older. They turn to other genres – the girls to soaps and sitcoms and the boys to action cartoons and action films. One reason for the girls turning their backs on humorous programmes is certainly the underrepresentation of women in those producing the comedy on the screen. With growing age, girls prefer programmes featuring female protagonists. ■

NOTES

- ¹ The "Children's TV audit" is a research project of the University of Kassel and the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI), headed by Prof. Dr. Ben Bachmair.
- ² Cf. Bachmair, Ben (2002). *Jugendschutz und Medienmacht*. In: *Medien praktisch, Texte No. 5*.
- ³ "Children's programmes" are programmes for children that comply with the corresponding advertising guidelines of the German Interstate Broadcasting Treaty. They are mainly to be found on the 100 % children's channels (KI.KA and FOX-Kids, now JETIX) as well as in the range of safe programmes specially made for children (tivi, toggo, toggolino, etc.).
- ⁴ Cf. Götz, Maya (ed.) (2000). *Alles Seifenblasen? Die Bedeutung von Daily Soaps im Alltag von Kindern und Jugendlichen*. München: KoPäd.

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