

Siegmond Grewenig

# 10-point plan for quality

## Statement from a programme maker for public TV

**We need good children's programmes – who would not agree with this statement? But this is already the lowest common denominator on which everybody can agree: programme makers, parents, critics, and – last but not least, of course – the children. Because opinions divide on the question as to what good children's television is. What follows is a statement of position from the viewpoint of a programme maker for public service television.**

### **Ratings and mandate: public service TV with both feet on the ground**

The principle of free enterprise is the maximisation of profits. This results in a simple equation for television companies under private law: quality is whatever the viewer likes. The ratings, and the advertising income which results from them, decide what constitutes "good" children's television. Public service TV producers are equally unable, and unwilling, to evade a quantifiable definition of "quality". Their programmes, too, are measured by ratings. No one can afford to produce a programme which does not reach its audience. Yet in contrast to commercial broadcasters, the mandate of children's television producers at the German public TV channels ARD, ZDF, and KI.KA (the children's chan-

nel of ARD and ZDF) is not maximisation of profits, but "education, information, and entertainment".

And where else, if not in children's television, is this programming mandate meaningful and important for our whole society? Public service broadcasters are accountable to the public. Public value vs. shareholder value: in television, this means that freedom from advertising is already a criterion of quality for the entire programme – regardless of whether children appreciate commercials or not.

Everybody is always saying that children should be taken seriously. Of course! But children are also easily seduced because they cannot evaluate the consequences of their actions in the same way as adults. Give a child the choice between spaghetti and carrots for their daily meal and the answer will be obvious: spaghetti, and for seven days in a row at that, regardless of whether this is healthy. A child cannot always gain an overview of the consequences of its actions. That is why there is such a thing as parental responsibility.

It is the job of a public service television producer to provide a well-balanced diet. Naturally, it must taste good. But it must also be full of vitamins and minerals. To take one example: politics is probably not one of children's favourite topics. But does that mean we should not provide it at all? However hard I look, I cannot find a single news format programme or information magazine anywhere

in the private sector. In our case, though, we have *neuneinhalb (nine and a half)*. Of course individual programmes should be emotionally gripping, exciting, and entertaining. But, over and above this, a television network aimed at the general public has responsibility for its provision as a whole.

### **Ten criteria of quality for good children's programmes**

#### *1. Communicate to children in their own life environment*

Children do not just watch children's television. But precisely those programmes which are produced especially for them should address them in the context of their own personal life environment. Do they have a personal relationship to the subject matter and characters? Do the locations look familiar to them? It is also our task to show them their own culture – to provide German and European references in addition to international (and often American- or Japanese-dominated) settings.

#### *2. Make it fun for children*

Television is an entertainment medium. This applies equally for children and adults. So children's television must be fun – for the children! Anyone who plays with children knows how important "messing about" is, and how important it is to make them laugh.

### 3. Provide children with role models

Good programmes must also always provide role models – characters with whom the children can identify because they possess abilities the young viewers would also like to have. These characters must be clearly delineated, and they must be positive and easily recognisable. Their unusual abilities should also help the child to develop further. The world of children is full of positive heroes, from the little elephant in *Die Sendung mit der Maus* (*The programme with the mouse*) to Willi Weitzel in *Willi wills wissen* (*Willi wants to know it all*).

### 4. Show children the world and astonish them

Moon landings, wild animals, exotic landscapes: even for very small children today's television opens a window on the world. Moreover, television reveals and explains things which are quite impossible to observe with the naked eye, for example by extreme magnification of the smallest forms of life, slow-motion photography, or journeys with a camera through the human body. Children can be astonished. Good children's television shows children the wonders of the world in a way they can understand, thus broadening their horizons. For this reason it should also be the *whole* world, not just the pictured world – which means real images as well as staged scenes, puppets as well as cartoon heroes. Everything, in other words.

### 5. Give children information

Children are interested in what is going on in the world. And they notice at the same time that this world is not a safe one. They hear about terrorist attacks and wars over the radio;

while zapping between children's programmes they see famines and natural disasters on the *Tagesschau* news broadcast. Children's television has a duty to place models of explanation for what is happening in the world within children's grasp. Why do people burn the American flag? Why are there refugee victims in the Mediterranean over and over again? What is the age pyramid? A format such as that of the news magazine programme *nine and a half* explains the news in such a way that anyone can understand it.

### 6. Teach children something

Television is no school, and systematic learning is only possible to a limited extent with this medium, since it always offers only a one-way channel of communication: from broadcaster to receiver. And yet television can be very educational. Here, the formats which demonstrate the most success are those which also communicate the fun of learning (see above) and do not overburden their programmes with factual knowledge. In addition to the classic *The programme with the mouse*, formats such as *Wissen macht Ah!* (*Knowledge makes you go ah!*) and *Willi wants to know it all* have built up a large following of fans. That German educational programmes even go down very well abroad (de-

spite PISA!) is demonstrated by the great success of the Asian versions of *The programme with the mouse* in Japan and *Knowledge makes you go ah!* in China.

### 7. Appeal to children aesthetically

Children are open-minded. Their tastes are not yet fixed. And they are interested in literally everything. Children's rich fantasy needs aesthetic nourishment. In this respect it can never be fantastic enough. For this reason children's television is also a source of innovation in all genres.

### 8. Children need events

A good children's programme is something out of the ordinary. It provides material for conversation because it creates an event in the children's lives. "You have to watch that!" is the cry of fellow pupils, and that is the real quality of this particular children's programme. Children want to be able to talk to one another about the highs and lows of the boarding school pupils at *Schloss Einstein* (*Einstein castle*) – televi-

sion becomes a topic of conversation. Besides subject matter, it is above all the manner of production (locations, editing, use of music, etc.) which decides whether a programme will appeal to children or not.

### 9. Be accessible for children

Good children's television addresses its audience at eye level – never from above looking down. Because children have a sense of whether the other person is taking them seriously and is accessible for them. Communication beyond the television broadcast itself is also important for accessibility. To what extent is the programme also a point of contact for the children? Does the programme have an internet presence? Can you ask questions? Are

there events at which children can meet their “childhood heroes” face to face? These off-air events, too, are important factors today.

### 10. Motivate and mobilise children

There is a world beyond the television screen. One of the tasks of children’s programming is also to instil in its viewers the desire to discover their own surroundings and become active themselves. If children’s television reports on the World Cup, then a further aim must be to entice more children onto the football pitch. Children have a great interest in animals and environmental topics. Their television programmes should point them towards opportunities for getting involved themselves. Factual magazine programmes should not only give answers, but above all stimulate questions. Because “asking” means “wanting to know” – that has been the principle behind *The programme with the mouse* right from the beginning.

Only when they are encouraged to ask questions do small children become great discoverers and researchers. Promoting commitment rather than consumption is an important responsibility. Doing is more important than watching!

### Conclusion: more commitment to good programmes

#### Who decides what good children’s programming is?

The times are long past when it could be said that high-quality children’s and family programmes are only to be found in the public broadcasting sector. Both sectors, private and public, are operating in the same market. Series which yesterday enticed whole families to switch to the ARD are today showing as repeats on Super RTL and Kabel 1. And several

high-quality premieres in the private sector could also be broadcast without cuts on KI.KA or *Check Eins* (*Check one*) on the ARD. If children like *Der kleine Eisbär* (*The little polar bear*) or *Bob the builder*, they are not deciding between private or public service children’s television, but simply for a well-made programme.

In this market segment, public service television must not only keep up with developments but – in accordance with its programming man-

date – also continue to play a leading and groundbreaking role. Three factors are crucial if public service children’s television is to continue being appreciated by the public for its quality. They are closely related to one another.

**Budgets.** The laws of the free market apply. Public service children’s television must be provided for financially in such a way that it can face up to competition with the private broadcasters. This applies both to programme acquisitions at international television fairs and to home-grown productions, which also take into account the national and regional identity of their target audience.

**Time slots.** In the all-inclusive schedules of the large broadcasters today children’s television is now to be found only at the margins, in the early morning hours and at weekends. With a clear conscience those responsible

for programming point to the specially created children’s channels. But although there are special sports and politics channels, no one would dream of abolishing these topics from the all-inclusive schedule. Children and families are not a minority group. They need good, “reliable” time slots, even on the ARD.

**Recognition.** Children and children’s television need a wide audience. Whether in connection with the PISA scandal or sinking birth rates, young people often feature in the headlines today. But for the most part discussions about this turn out to be very adult ones. What really interests children must interest them much more. In this regard campaigns such as the “Just ask...” initiative set up by *The programme with the mouse*, for which the German Federal President Horst Köhler has assumed patronage, are helpful. Children’s television is also a mouthpiece for the younger generation. In the children’s own

interests it must be promoted – especially amongst the ones in power. At the Deutscher Fernsehpreis (German Television Awards), the best children’s programmes should also be awarded prizes, and TV critics should once again allot more space to children’s television. Good children’s television is a social responsibility. ■

#### THE AUTHOR



Siegmund Gre-wenig is Head of the TV programme group “Entertainment, Family and Children” at the public service broadcaster Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in Cologne, Germany.