Children, television and emotions

A SUMMARY OF SELECTED RESEARCH FINDINGS

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This article gives an overview of international studies on the topic of children, television, and emotions, and it summarises their findings regarding central research questions.

Television offers children a wide variety of opportunities and possibilities to observe and experience emotions. While watching television, youths experience excitement, enjoyment, fear, and thrills – or just boredom. They build up emotional connections with characters and tend to prefer the ones who touch them emotionally (cf. Götz, 2011, p. 29). Programmes which children find funny can support learning processes, while media content which is not age-appropriate may instil long-term fears in them.

Although emotions play a large role in television, the existing studies in youth media research focus on the following questions: Which television content provokes emotions in youths? Which emotional reactions do they have when they are watching television? How do these provoked emotions affect them in the short- or long-term? When do children begin to understand emotional media content? How do they interpret the emotional reactions presented? Does emotional media content have a learning effect on children? The widest study thus far on the issues related to the effects of violent television content on aggressive behaviour has been analysed in another text (cf. vom Orde in this issue).

Existing research not only covers a limited spectrum of questions, but also a limited number of emotions. The majority of international studies concentrate on so-called "negative" emotions, such as fear. Only a small amount of research has asked which media content emotionally touches children or youths (Buckingham & Allerton, 1996, p. 12, cf. Götz in this issue). In addition, existing research also centres mainly on fictional programmes. Analyses regarding non-fictional content predominantly cover the fearful reactions of children to news reports.[1]

Götz, Maya (2011). What makes them so special? The utility value of children's favourite heroes and heroines. TelevIZIon, 24(E), 27-32.

Buckingham, David & Allerton, Mark (1996). Fear, fright and distress. A review of research on children's "negative" emotional responses to television. London: Broadcasting Standards Council. (Broadcasting Standards Council Research Working Paper 12).

"NEGATIVE" EMOTIONS: MEDIA-INDUCED FEARS

Although fear may be seen as a primordial emotion or as an evolutionary survival mechanism, in youth media research it is often interpreted as a "negative" emotion. Valkenburg and Buijzen name 3 main pathways to children's media-induced fears: direct experience with mediated dangers, observational learning from media characters and negative information transfer (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2008, p. 339). Reception studies on fictional media content, such as horror and mystery movies, show that fear can also be experienced as (aesthetic) enjoyment by (older) children (e.g. Hoffner & Levine, 2007).

Existing research shows that different media content may provoke fear in a child, depending on his or her age and phase of development (cf. Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2008, pp. 342-344; cf. Ill. 1). Preschoolers react much more sensitively to visual content than to audio content; for this reason, they are especially frightened by scary and shocking content, such as depictions of monsters, aliens, or deformed villains. Fantasy media content is particularly disturbing for children, because only in the course of their cognitive development and media socialisation do they learn how to differentiate between reality and the imagination and to categorise particular characters as typical of this genre. Children of elementary school age are not yet capable of this (cf. Messenger Davies, 2008, p. 128). Once they reach a cognitive development level in which abstract thinking is possible, then they commonly experi-
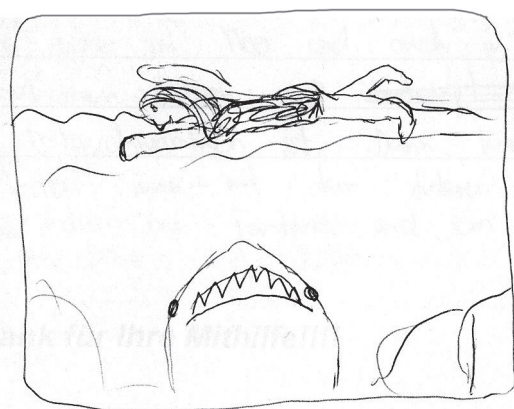
Ill. 1: Students remember fearful TV experiences from their childhood: a scene from *Jaws*

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Type of news event	Frequency
Terrorism	34
Murders/killings	30
9/11 attacks	29
Kidnappings	28
Natural disasters (not fires)	19
Wars	11
School shootings	10
Fires	9
Columbine shooting	9

Riddle, 2012, p. 746

Ill. 2: News events remembered as causing fear during childhood (n = 328)

ence fears of other threats such as war or natural catastrophes.

The US-American researcher Joanne Cantor has done numerous studies on children's fearful reactions to media (for an overview, cf. Cantor, 2003). However, until now only a few studies have investigated the long-term effects of emotionally disturbing media experiences from one's childhood (e.g. Harrison & Cantor, 1999; Riddle, 2012). The fear that children experience while watching audiovisual media content sometimes still haunts them as adults, and in dramatic cases it may lead to nightmares and sleeplessness. In a study by Riddle, 328 students of a US-American university were asked to name television news content which led to remembered reactions of fear between the ages of 2 and 10. Half of the interviewed adults were still able to remember this content (cf. Ill. 2, Riddle, 2012, p. 746), and 7.3 % reported that they still become scared upon remembering these experiences.

In the last 20 years, research on fear and media has usually studied the emotional reactions of children to news content in an event-focussed way (for an overview, cf. Riddle et al., 2012, pp. 280-281). These analyses show that the decisive factors influencing these reactions include not only children's age and level of cognitive development, but also the amount of news reception. The more children were confronted with news reports on a particular event that

scared them, the more intensively they experienced that fear. The few existing studies on children's fearful reactions to non-crisis news stories (e.g. Götz et al., 2012) found that children often mentioned natural disasters when reporting about their own fearful responses. The way children emotionally process and interpret the news events they watch is influenced not only by their cognitive state of development, but also by their gender (cf. Walma von der Molen & Bushman, 2008).

An important factor that decreases children's fear of media content is adult mediation of children's fear responses. There are few studies examining the different ways in which parents talk to their children about disturbing news reports on television. Martins and Wilson (2011) found that parents employ very different strategies of mediation and that "parents' communicative behaviour seems to mirror the conflicting messages that are conveyed in the media" (ibid., p. 144). The results of De Cock's 2012 survey and in-depth interviews with 11- and 12-year-olds indicate that "talking to your child does not automatically lead to a situation in which the child reports not being scared or less scared of the images shown on the news. Active mediation is not a simple and magical solution to fear and sadness provoked by news but a very complex and diverse concept" (ibid., 2012, p. 498).

Valkenburg, Patti M. & Buijzen, Moniek (2008). Fear responses to media entertainment. In Sandra Calvert & Barbara Wilson (Eds), The handbook of children, media, and development (pp. 334-352). Malden: Blackwell.

Hoffner, Cynthia A. & Levine, Kenneth J. (2007). Enjoyment of mediated fright and violence. A meta-analysis. In Raymond W. (Ed.), Mass media effects research (pp. 215-244). Mahwah: Erlbaum.

Messenger Davies, Maire (2008). Reality and fantasy in media: Can children tell the difference and how do we know? In Kirsten Drotner et al. (Eds), The International Handbook of Children, Media And Culture (pp. 121-136). Los Angeles: Sage.

Cantor, Joanne (2003). Media and fear in children and adolescents. In Douglas A. Gentile (Ed.), Media violence and children (pp. 185-203). Westport: Praeger.

Harrison, Kristen & Cantor, Joanne (1999). Tales from the screen. Enduring fright reactions to scary media. Media Psychology, 1(2), 97-116.

Riddle, Karyn (2012). Young adult's autobiographical memories of frightening news stories seen during childhood. Communication Research, 39(6), 738-756.

Riddle, Karyn, Cantor, Joanne, Byrne, Sahara & Moyer-Guse, Emily (2012). "People killing people on the news." Young children's descriptions of frightening television news content. Communication Quarterly, 60(2), 278-294.

Götz, Maya, Holler, Andrea, Nastasia, Diana & Nastasia, Sorin (2012). "I want to know how high the wave really was." Children worldwide and their perceptions of the catastrophes in Japan in March 2011. TelevIZIon, 25(E), 49-53.

Walma van der Molen, Juliette H. & Bushman, Brad J. (2008). Children's direct fright and worry reactions to violence in fiction and news television programs. The Journal of Pediatrics, 153(3), 420-424.

Martins, Nicole & Wilson, Barbara J. (2011). Parental communication about kidnapping stories in the US news. Journal of Children and Media, 5(2), 132-146.

De Cock, Rozane (2012). Mediating Flemish children's reactions to fear and sadness to television news and its limitations. Survey and in-depth interview results. Journal of Children and Media, 6(4), 485-501.

"POSITIVE" EMOTIONS: HUMOUR AND EMPATHY

Children's understanding and experience of humour has usually been examined from the perspective of incongruity theory. Incongruity theory assumes that humour is based upon incompatible ideas or images as the point of a joke. For an "enjoyable" experience of humour this incongruity must be noticed and understood: this begins with a realistic premise, which is then followed by the point of joke as an unexpected turn. This research says that children's understanding of humour is fundamentally limited by their cognitive development. Accordingly, it is assumed that children cannot evaluate this incongruity before they reach 7 or 8 years of age, that is, when they start being capable of thinking operationally. However, visual incongruity (e.g. in slapstick humour) may also be understood by 4- or 5-year-olds. Children generally do not correctly interpret satire, irony, and more abstract forms of humour until they reach early adolescence (cf. Schorr, 2009, p. 69).

Dolf Zillmann, who has analysed humour from a motivational and emotional psychology approach, studied the way humorous exaggeration and

understatement, as well as irony, affect children's ability to understand and remember new information from educational television shows. His research found that until viewers reach 14 years of age, humour may have a counterproductive effect in educational programmes: the children and youths studied usually remembered the information in a distorted or false way. While using humour generally has a positive effect on learning processes, according to Miron, Bryant, and Zillmann (2001), there are 3 decisive variables when using humour in educational television. First, the humour should be age-appropriate. Second, the positive effect depends upon the intensity of the emotional excitement provoked by humour, since this affects one's ability to focus one's attention and therefore learn successfully. Third, it depends upon the complexity of the educational content.

Maya Götz's humour research – in part international comparative – focuses on what children find funny on television (cf. Ill. 3). In her study on comedy programmes in German television, Götz found that not every scene intended to be funny was actually seen as such by the interviewed children. This was especially the case when the comic structure did not relate to the frame of reference of these children or fit their sense of humour. While younger viewers particularly appreciate slapstick, silliness, and action, older children and preteens are amused by anti-heroes or comedy based on inter-textual references. Götz also found that there were gender differences in the experience of humour: while girls preferred humorous content related to romance, boys preferred funny action scenes (cf. Götz, 2006, p. 65). Children's enjoyment of humorous content and preference for television content which is funny, have also been researched and confirmed in some studies on television advertising and entertainment programming (e.g. Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999; Lawlor, 2009).

Ill. 3: Funny TV experiences in children's drawings: a scene from *SpongeBob SquarePants*

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Until now one of the few "positive" feelings researched in detail with regard to children/youth and television is empathy. According to Feshbach, who has performed numerous studies on this topic (cf. overview in Feshbach & Feshbach, 1997), empathy is an emotion which is shared by the observer and the observed, that is, a common feeling among a subject and an object during an interaction. Analyses have shown that as children get older, their ability to feel empathy grows and with this, their perception and empathetic reaction to media content as well. Younger children still lack the role-taking skills necessary in order to feel empathy with another person. A further factor for developing empathetic emotions while watching television is how the children

and youths judge the protagonist. If children or youth judge a protagonist in a positive way or discover similarities between the protagonist's experience and their own, then their level of emotionality and empathy is higher (cf. Wilson, 2008, p. 91 ff.).

Schorr, Angela (2009). Emotions- und motivationspsychologische Grundlagen als Basis der Jugendmedienforschung. Das Forschungsprogramm von Dolf Zillmann. In Angela Schorr (Ed.), Jugendmedienforschung (pp. 63-89). Wiesbaden: VS Verl. für Sozialwissenschaften.

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Valkenburg, Patti M. & Janssen, Sabine C. (1999). What do children value in entertainment programs? A crosscultural investigation. Journal of Communication, 49(2), 3-21.

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Feshbach, Norma Deitch & Feshbach, Seymour (1997). Children's empathy and the media. Realizing the potential of television. In Sam Kirschner et al. (Eds), Perspectives on psychology and the media (pp. 3-27). Washington: American Psychological Assoc.

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UNDERSTANDING, REMEMBERING, AND INTERPRETING EMOTIONS PRESENTED IN THE MEDIA

Research findings show that the long-term memory of emotions shown in media is very weak in preschool children (cf. Martins, 2013, p. 203). Nevertheless, at least right after watching television, even younger children are usually able to recognise, name, and remember the emotions presented. This is especially the case for basic emotions such as fear, anger, or joy; however, younger children do not commonly understand or correctly interpret more complex feelings such as regret, surprise, excitement, or disillusionment. Some authors attribute preschool children's lacking capacity for long-term memories of emotional television content in part to their inability to completely understand the meaning of these emotions in the context of the plot structure (e.g. Hayes & Casey, 1992). Experimental research was also able to show that children are able to understand and interpret the presented emotions better if these feelings are performed by actors rather than puppets. This is attributed to the fact that human protagonists have stronger capabilities of facial and physical expression to help children make sense of the emotions more accurately (e.g. Beentjes, Boe & Heijink, 1997). Due to their state of cognitive development, younger children may also be distracted from the main plot if comic sub-plots are integrated into it, as done in sitcoms; this can hinder children's ability to comprehend and interpret the (negative) emotional content in the main plot (Weiss & Wilson, 1998). A further study was able to prove that repeated viewing of specific audiovisual content can support preschool children's comprehension of the depicted emotions (Mares, 2006).

Whether children can learn prosocial behaviour from emotional television content and to which degree this effects their emotional development, has been discussed in different ways in research (cf. Wilson, 2008; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1997). One reason for this may be that "prosocial behaviour" is defined in different ways. Mares and Woodard (2005) defined in their meta-analysis aggression reduction, altruistic actions, positive interactions (such as friendly play or peaceful conflict resolution) and stereotype reduction as dependent measures. The authors found that both in experimental settings or at home children who watched prosocial content behaved significantly more positively or held more positive attitudes than others: "This is striking news and should serve as something of an antidote to those who consider television to be nothing but detrimental. The results of this meta-analysis suggest the real potential for television and other media to help children feel and behave more pleasantly toward each other" (ibid., p. 316). ■

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Hayes, Donald S. & Casey, Dina M. (1992). Young children and television. The retention of emotional reactions. Child Development, 63(6), 1423-1436.

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NOTE

[1] *An extensive bibliography of relevant studies on these individual research focusses can be found online: www.izi.de/english/publication/televizion/27_2014_E/27_2014_E.htm*