

Michaela Levi/Maya Götz

# “Was it a monster coming through the water?”

## Picture letters to TV executives on the disasters in Japan in March 2011

**222 children from 8 countries wrote picture letters to TV executives, showing how they imagined the incidents in Japan and what they would like to have seen on television regarding these events.**

In trying to answer the question of how children perceived the natural and technological disasters in Japan we used quite different approaches – one method was “Picture letters to TV executives”. This involved asking children to draw on a pre-prepared sheet how they imagined the incidents in Japan and what they would like to see on television regarding these events. They explained their aesthetic articulations in a few sentences, which were noted down by researchers or educators and translated into English. In 2008, as part of an international study, this method had already proved itself as a possibility of gaining at least a rudimentary insight into children’s perspectives.<sup>1</sup> After the Japan disaster in March 2011 we were able, with this method, to include further countries in the study in addition to the investigations thus far. 222 children aged 6 to 13 years from Slovenia, Is-

rael, Korea, Hong Kong, the USA, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Argentina articulated their ideas and wishes in the first 4 weeks after the disaster (March 14 until April 8, 2011).

### Children’s inner images of the events

As IZI studies in other countries using different methodologies have demonstrated, the children’s picture letters show that the children have relatively similar perceptions of the events in Japan (cf. Götz/Holler/Nastasia/Nastasia in this issue). The tsunami wave or the flood were the most common pictures, often with people shouting

for help. These pictures probably came from concrete media images rather than from the children’s imaginations. The children also drew nuclear power plants, the earthquake, fire, people being saved, as well as people trying to get away or people in helpless situations.

Some children symbolised the power of the natural disaster by representing the wave as an animal. 9-year-old Marcella from Colombia, for instance, drew the wave as a monster (see ill. 1).

### *Distinctive themes in different countries*

Besides the many things the drawings about the Japan disaster have in common, it is, however, possible to see distinctive features in individual countries. In the [Dominican Republic](#), for instance, 51 out of 66 children drew the tsunami or the flood. Drawings of houses, trees, animals, and people swept up in the flood were particularly frequent. In some cases the children indicated on their drawings which buildings were involved: hospitals, schools, and supermarkets. These are places the children consider necessary, important for their culture, indispensable, and indestructible. In no other country did



Ill. 1: Marcella (9 years old) from Colombia pictures the tsunami wave as a huge monster

children focus so conspicuously on the destructive power of water. This is understandable, given that the Dominican Republic is an island. Interestingly, none of the children focused on the topic “earthquake”, which is striking considering that the Dominican Republic is right next to Haiti, which was devastated just over a year ago by a severe earthquake and a subsequent humanitarian disaster. Being close to the events and knowing about the dangers therefore do not automatically lead to greater awareness. The colleague responsible for this part of the study suspects one of the reasons behind this is the lack of children’s news making clear that the tsunami was caused by the earthquake. Other reasons could be the rather critical discourse concerning Haiti and the refugees from the earthquake, as well as the cultural divide between the everyday lives of those in the Dominican Republic and those on the other part of the island.

The picture letters from **Hong Kong**, situated approximately 2,800 km from the events, are characterised by significantly more emotion. This is in part due to age, but qualitative particularities are also involved. The children draw pictures of humans and human suffering much more frequently and with more intensity. The

events (tsunami, earthquake, nuclear power plant) are represented in detail, but the central focus is on people, their suffering and the possibility of them being rescued (see ill. 2). In addition, the children drew appeals for help which we found were nowhere else as concrete. According to Kara Chan, the researcher responsible for the local data, possible reasons behind this could be the media discourses supportive of Japan, but above all the emotional proximity to Japan. Japanese culture and media, e.g. mangas and animes, are very well known in Hong Kong, and Japan is a popular holiday destination.

The children surveyed in **South Korea** live just under 1,000 km from the disaster region. They are 7 to 8 years old and younger than, for instance, the children from Hong Kong. They focus more on the events (earthquake, fire) in their drawings. Some children speak of relatives in Japan they are very worried about. 7-year-old Sang-Hyun, for example, saw the big wave on television and is now afraid that the car belonging to his aunt, who lives in Japan, was also swept away. 7-year-old Sonyun tells of how she saw cars and people on television being washed away. This made her frightened. How far the children are themselves emotionally affected determines their per-

spectives and the themes they address (this is similar to the situation of the children in Ecuador, cf. Götz/Holler/Nastasia/Nastasia in this issue).

- how far the children are themselves emotionally affected;
- the children imagining they are potentially in danger themselves, e.g. of similar local or global situations;
- knowledge of and emotional proximity to the scene of the disaster;
- emotionally negatively charged discourses in the public sphere and in the children’s everyday environment.

There are still probably further significant moments that are not apparent in this study. Media, and the discourses



Ill. 2: Bao (12 years old) from Hong Kong is concerned with what she can do to help the destitute in Japan

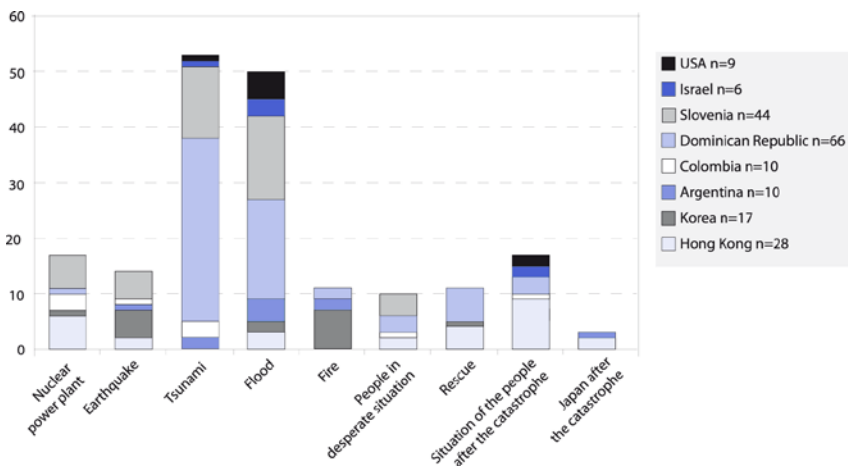


Fig. 1: 222 children from 8 countries drew picture letters on the question "What happened in Japan?"

they perpetuate and influence, play an important role at every point mentioned. Reflexion and quality debate are equally important for all people, but especially for children. For them, the manner in which the events are reported becomes a constituent part of their image of Japan, the incidents, and the question of how "one" deals with crises in other countries.

### What do children across the world want to see in a programme for children?

We asked the children to draw the kind of things they would like to see in quality children's TV. 3 key areas emerged here:

#### Facts

Children growing up without children's television wanted explanations of the events that are easy to understand:

"Step by step (...) like a comic. And there should be lots of girls and boys in this comic." (Juanita, 12 years old, Colombia)

"It should be explained what has happened, and the foreign words that are always used should be explained, with funny examples and pictures." (Carmen, 10 years old, Colombia)

Some of the responses are typical of children's imaginations or involve humorous formulations. 10-year-old Fernando from Argentina, for

example, wanted children's news to explain the following: "How did the tsunami start? Was it a monster coming through the water?" That does not mean he wants a programme that "makes fun" of the facts, but rather a programme that can give a detailed answer that engages with a child's perspective or question.

#### Background information

Some children from Slovenia said they wanted, for instance, more background information on why the earth shook, what effects this had and whether there will be any consequences for the future. To some extent, the children presented information that they had already learnt from the media and that they wanted to learn more about. Tamar from Israel (11 years old) had, for instance, heard that "the evening had got shorter by a billionth of a second" because of the movement of the globe.

#### Stories of coping

Many children expressed, however, how they would also like personal stories and reports about individual experiences. They would like to see families being reunited, where they got their food from, how they had survived the earthquake and escaped the tsunami. Following that, according to Alan from Argentina, they should report on what it feels like to be trapped inside a car. The em-

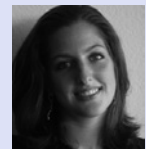
phasis here is clearly on stories of coping with the crisis. These stories take up the children's thoughts and fears and show in the reports how people cope with these problems and dangers. They want "something that gives you a good feeling" and "happiness" (Kia, 7 years old, Korea). The children imagine that these facts, background information, and stories of coping are communicated through a presenter (similar to how children in the USA imagine this, cf. Götz/Holler/Nastasia/Nastasia in this issue). These could be animals like dogs or tortoises, but also cartoon characters like SpongeBob, who reports on the events together with his friend Patrick. ■

### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> In that project, in which around 1,000 children from 21 countries participated, the participants were asked to draw in picture letters to television executives what annoyed them about the way in which girls and boys were represented in children's television (cf. Götz, Maya; Herche, Margit (2012): *Was Kinder am Mädchen- und Jungenbild kritisieren*. In: Götz, Maya (ed.): *Die FernsehheldInnen der Mädchen und Jungen. Geschlechterspezifische Studien zum Kinderfernsehen*. Munich: Kopaed [in preparation]); (cf. Götz, Maya; Lemish, Dafna (eds.): *Sexy girls, heroes and funny losers. Gender representations in children's TV around the world*. Munich: Peter Lang, pp. 181-202 [in print]).

### THE AUTHORS

Michaela Levi, BA Communications, was responsible for the partial study "Picture Letters from Children to TV Producers" as part of the IZI's Japan study.



Maya Götz, Dr. phil., is Head of the IZI and the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL, Munich, Germany.

