

# What makes a story newsworthy for children and adolescents?

## NEWS VALUE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Maya Götz, Caroline Kleine-Besten

**For an IZI study, n=1,461 young people between the ages of 6 and 19 evaluated various news items with regard to their news value and relevance.**

When children in grade 3 to 9 are asked what they would include in a news programme, they express the desire for age-appropriate, easily understandable and interesting news. The topics that are most likely to be considered boring are domestic politics (parties, politicians) and news from the financial and business world. The topics they see as interesting, on the other hand, are those that deal with music, television, films, computers, VIPs, sport and animals. In addition to this, young people also want positive and humorous news content (Tirosh & Lemish, 2014). If children watch news online, they click disproportionately often on items with titles that focus on fear and danger or on individual cases (van't Riet & Kleemans, 2021, p. 10).

So children want positive, happy news, and yet they tend to select those that offer negative impacts or personalization as news factors. There is probably an additional factor besides interest in particular topics and the desire for positive news: a subjective news value, which makes certain stories seem more or less relevant for children.

For media producers, this allocation of value is described by the classic theory of news value and news factors, probably the most frequently studied theory in communication studies at least in

Germany (Eilders, 2016). According to Winfried Schulz (1976/90), news factors are not objective features of an event, but are a journalistic aid to facilitate the necessary selection decisions. The greater the news value of an event, the more likely it is that journalists will pay attention to it, the bigger the report will be, and the more prominent its position. Schulz defines 18 news factors, which can be summarized into 6 dimensions (e.g. Schulz, 1976/90):

1. **Time** (topicality, duration of the event, and how long it has been on the news agenda)
2. **Proximity** (spatial, political, cultural proximity, and the degree to which the audience is affected by the event)
3. **Status** (regional and national centrality and significance of the region where the event has occurred)
4. **Dynamism** (unexpectedness and complexity of the sequence of events)
5. **Valence** (importance of the conflict, crime, harmful effect or success)
6. **Identification** (personalization and the extent to which the event affects the population of the country or region where the medium appears)

News factors apply not only to journalists, but also to audiences, who evaluate the news value of an event or news story for themselves (Eilders, 1997, 1999, 2016). For children, however, this concept has so far only been examined in degree theses (Zorn, 2007; Kettenhofen et

al., 2010; Rössler et al., 2009). A more pedagogical approach is followed by Serve and Lorenz (2018) who talk about the children's news value as "positive role models", "relevance to [children's] lives", "curiosity" and "adventure". These formulations certainly have their function in a pedagogical context, but implicitly suggest that children judge news value with more infantile and systematically different factors than adults. But is that the case? Do children, preteens and adolescents really have different factors and dimensions for judging whether a story is worth publishing? In order to investigate this question and find out more about how young people assess news value, IZI conducted a series of studies entitled "Quality Journalism and News Value for Children and Adolescents", in which young people were questioned about their assessment of the importance of news items. The approach is similar to that used in the study by Tirosh und Lemish (2014) in Israel: to give respondents the imaginary power to make journalistic decisions.

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### THE STUDY

In contrast to the study on individual topics that interest children (see also Götz in this issue), in this study we put children and adolescents in the role of potential journalists. We asked n=1,461 young people aged between 6 and 19, from a representative panel,

to imagine that they were responsible for a news programme targeting their age group, and had to assess the relevance of various news items.<sup>1</sup> The 19 items presented were either fictitious or taken from the field of children's news. Building on knowledge of the topics that interest children and adolescents and on the current state of research in this area (see also vom Orde in this issue), the stories were formulated in such a way that they were expected to have a high news value for particular age groups.<sup>2</sup>

For example, 3 items were devised for the news value of "proximity" (spatial, political, cultural proximity, and degree to which the audience is affected by the event). The hypothesis was that these would be particularly significant for the different target groups because of their situation in life, e.g.:

- **Children (6 to 13)** – Children in your area have succeeded in getting their school toilets renovated.
- **Adolescents (14 to 19)** – A new subject is being introduced for the "Mittlere Reife" [school-leaving certificate after 10 years of schooling] and the "Abitur" [university entrance certificate]: media design and media literacy.
- **Adults** – The minimum wage in Swabia is being reduced.<sup>3</sup>

The respondents were then asked to assess the importance of the different news items on a 4-point scale. For the first 4 items we asked the young people to explain their judgement. The aim of the study is to use the results to develop recommendations for quality journalism for children and preteens.

## RESULTS

### Stories that all respondents regard as important

It becomes clear that some stories are seen as having a high news value across all age groups. One example is a report on a (natural) disaster, a flood in Italy,

an event that also had a harmful effect on a vulnerable group, i.e. children. The news factor of damage or harm (part of valence) is therefore also relevant for children. Similarly, the announcement that refugee children had been rescued from an inflatable boat in the Mediterranean has a high valence for children, since the successful outcome is already mentioned in the headline. What was surprising was the consistently high news value that all young people ascribed to the announcement that children in their own area had succeeded in getting their school toilets renovated (65-77%; Ill. 1). Probably many respondents have experienced old school toilets in urgent need of renovation; the importance (valence) is therefore high. The factors of spatial proximity and dynamism also play a part, however: such a news story is a surprising success, and many people want to hear more about it.

### Stories that become more relevant with age

Most items show a clear age tendency: As the respondents get older, they give a higher rating to the news value of most stories. This applies, for example, to the announcement of a (fictitious) reduction of the minimum wage in Swabia<sup>4</sup> (30-77%), a (fictitious) withdrawal of short-time allowances<sup>5</sup> (38-85%), further restrictions on the freedom of the press in Hungary (31-80%), and a (fictitious) stock fraud at Deutsche Bank (21-74%). All these stories have a high news value for a large proportion of the young adults but only for a small number of the primary school children.

On the one hand, children are often unable to understand the context. For example, they are not (yet) able to perceive the harm caused by a reduction in the minimum wage or the withdrawal of short-time allowances. Furthermore, most primary school children know too little about the remuneration of work and the use of short-time al-

lowances as a system of social shock absorption in times of crisis, and they are unable to reconstruct the connections. The same goes for stories about a (fictitious) stock fraud at Deutsche Bank, or further restrictions on the freedom of the press in Hungary: many children cannot perceive and comprehend the harmful effect, the conflict, or the criminal intentions behind these headlines. Here quality journalism for children would begin by providing a thorough introduction to the relevant context, to help children understand the significance of the event.

Another example where subjective news value rose significantly with respondents' age is the (fictitious) announcement that a new subject is to be established for the Mittlere Reife and the Abitur: media design and media literacy. This has a high news value for nearly 9 out of 10 young adults (87%), but only for 1 in 2 primary school children. The relevance of this story (dimension: proximity) is presumably much higher for older respondents because they will be completing these qualifications in the near future or have already obtained them. For children, their own school-leaving examinations are in the distant future and therefore not within their frame of relevance. Here quality journalism would show connections between the news item and the children's lives, thus enabling them to understand its importance.

Another (fictitious) news story was that Made My Day and the social network TikTok were going to charge fees. Only a quarter of primary school children (25%), but half of all 17- to 19-year-olds found this so important that they would include it in a news programme for their age group. Again, it is probably both relevance (dimension: proximity) and harmful effect (dimension: valence) that lead to the different assessments of children and adolescents. Primary school children are officially only allowed to use TikTok from the age of 13. If this topic were regarded as worthy of publication from

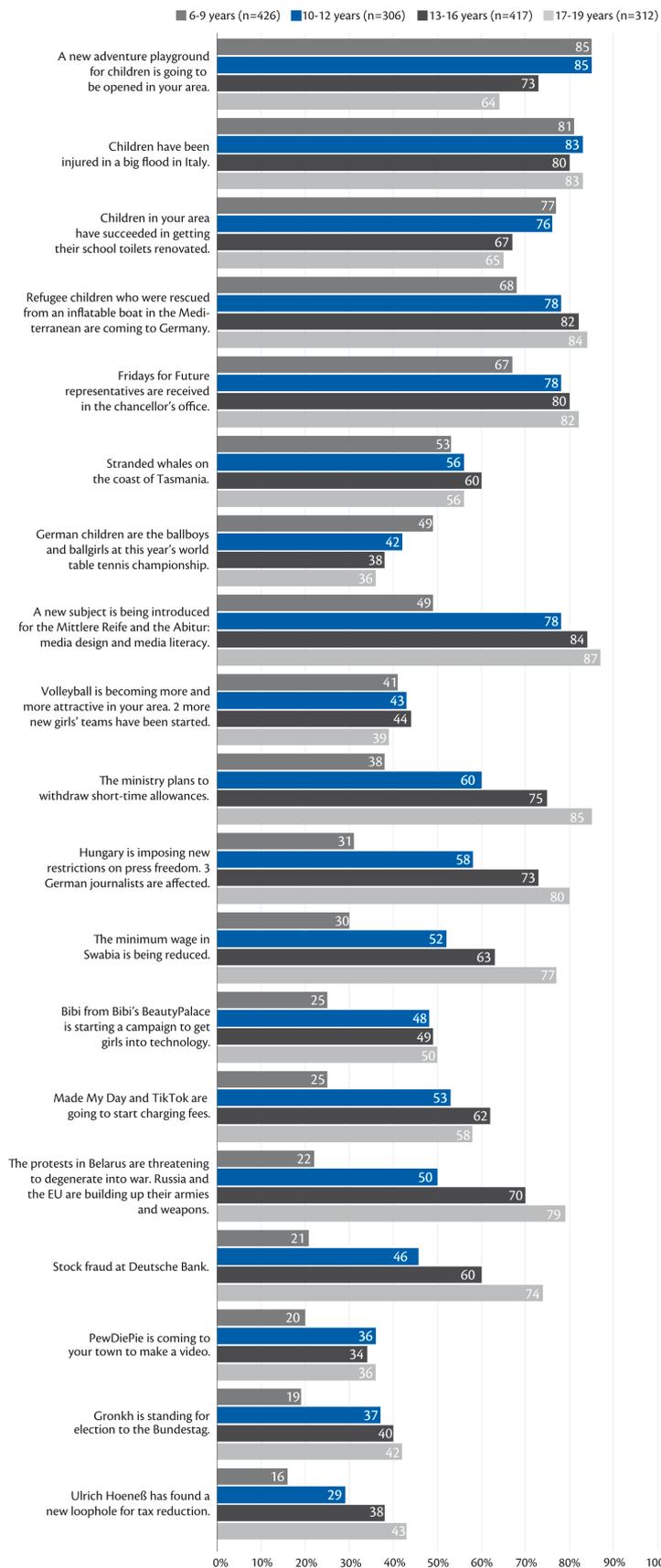
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a journalistic point of view, it would be necessary to explain some basic concepts to children, such as networks and youth protection.

Overall, the results here already show that the judgements of the 6- to 9-year-olds differ most markedly from those of the older respondents. With 3 exceptions (the stories about school toilets, a new adventure playground and the German ballboys and ballgirls at this year's world table tennis championship), they attribute the least news value to the items mentioned in the questionnaire. Quality journalism that wishes to reach primary school children must first show the users how the events relate to their own lives, explain basic facts, report on the structure and dynamics of the event, at least in a simplified form, and explicitly formulate the significance of the news story.

### Stories to which all age groups ascribe relatively little news value

Comparatively little news value is ascribed to some stories. These include the announcement that the German influencer Bibi (BibiBeautyPalace) is campaigning for STEM subjects (25-50%), the (fictitious) announcement that Uli Hoeneß (former professional footballer and former president of FC Bayern München) has found a tax loophole (16-43%), that Gronkh (a famous German gaming influencer) is standing for election to the Bundestag (German Parliament; 19-42%) and that PewDiePie (a popular influencer) is coming to their home town (20-36%). These news items have little valence in themselves, and if some respondents found them worthy of publication it would be because of identification and/or status. In such cases the attribution of news value depends on how well-known the person is, and whether he or she is important for the individual respondent. For most primary school children, this is probably not the case for the people mentioned in the questionnaire. Children are not



III. 1: Subjectively assessed news value of story as "fairly important" or "very important" (sorted by age group)

(yet) able to identify the conflict (and the possible criminal intentions) connected to a tax loophole. In order to discern the dynamism inherent in the news that 2 influencers are engaging in sociopolitical activities, it is necessary to know not only the names of these influencers (Bibi and Gronkh), but also their usual sphere of action (lifestyle, gaming). Children usually only begin to engage with influencers in grade 3 to 4, so younger children are unaware of the surprising nature of these developments and do not perceive the corresponding news value.

In order to ascribe news value (usually identification and status) to events involving prominent personalities, it is necessary to be familiar with the people and their context and to regard these as important. Quality journalism is aware of the news value of stories from popular culture, knows about the preferences and knowledge of children and preteens in this context, and provides fundamental information on the personalities and their sphere of influence.

### Stories that become less important with age

The news value of some stories decreases as respondents get older. On the one hand these are stories that have particular proximity and relevance (dimension: proximity) for children and preteens. One example is the announcement that an adventure playground is being built in their area (85-64%), offering new leisure opportunities for children and preteens – but also for adolescents and young adults.

The announcement that children from Germany will be the ballboys and ballgirls at this year's world table tennis championship had relatively little news value for young people (42%). However, 1 in 2 primary school children perceived this as having a high news value, probably because they saw it a potential opportunity to participate

for their age group (identification). Only around 1 in 3 older respondents (36%) regarded this as having a high news value.

Thus there are topics that are specifically important for children and preteens. These are probably stories that explicitly affect children and take place in the world they live in (e.g. school, club), or are highlighted as special. Quality journalism recognizes the importance that events can have and offers more information about them.

### Gender tendencies

A comparison between boys' and girls' assessments of news value shows mostly similarities, overall. There are, however, some highly significant differences, e.g. in the case of the story about the German influencer Bibi, who wants to campaign for STEM subjects. The underlying reason is probably that this influencer is mainly popular with girls, so the news factor of personalization (dimension: identification) leads to a higher assessment of the story's news value here.

Girls also attribute a significantly higher news value than boys to the announcement that representatives of Fridays for Future have been invited to meet the German chancellor (Wahlström et al., 2019, p. 10).

Boys, in contrast, are significantly more likely to ascribe importance to the idea that the influencer Gronkh is planning to stand for election to the Bundestag. For years, this gaming influencer has been in the top 5 in IZI's annual survey on favourite influencers. He therefore has, among other things, the news factor of prominence (dimension: status). The (fictitious) announcement that Uli Hoeneß has found a tax loophole also generates significantly different values. The footballer's prominence (dimension: status) and possibly personalization (dimension: identification) are the news factors that are mainly important for boys, since in Germany football is of greater interest to boys than to girls.

### How children explain their subjective assessment of news value

The interpretation of the quantitative data already shows that children regard fewer news stories as relevant for their age group than preteens, adolescents, and young adults, but probably have quite similar subjectively important news factors or dimensions. To give us a better understanding of these values, the children and adolescents were asked to explain their assessment of the news value of 4 items. The transcribed statements were interpreted qualitatively for indications of news factors and news value, and in terms of the importance of quality-oriented reporting for children and preteens. For example, the (fictitious) announcement that "The protests in Belarus are threatening to degenerate into war. Russia and the EU are building up their armies and weapons" is regarded as relevant by just over half of children and adolescents on average (54%). There are very clear age-related tendencies here: this story has a high news value for only 1 in 5 children (22%), half of all preteens (50%), but around 8 out of 10 17- to 19-year-olds (79%).

### Why does the story have no news value?

Many of the primary school children cite a lack of interest when asked why they do not regard this (fictitious) news item as important: "That doesn't interest me" (boy, 8) or "It is not important because it is very far away" (girl, 12). Besides the lack of interest, a few preteens use arguments based on "Bewahrpädagogik", a pedagogical approach focussing on protecting young people from harmful content. One 12-year-old boy says, "Children shouldn't be dealing with that", and a 10-year-old boy states, "That's too serious for children". This is an attitude that has to be respected, but at the same time it is important in the long

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term to at least introduce a basic political education. In some cases the rejection is associated with a sense of powerlessness, because “Children can’t do anything about it” (boy, 10), or indifference, as in the case of a 10-year-old girl who justifies her decision as follows: “There are so many conflicts and you don’t always have to hear about everything.” A 10-year-old boy explains: “I don’t live there, fortunately.”

In some cases the respondents emphasize the fact that they would not want to include the story in a news programme because “Wars scare me” (girl, 12), or, as an 11-year-old boy puts it: “Because it has the word war in it, I’m always scared of that.” Here the respondents are describing their fear of an emotionally overwhelming experience. Quality-oriented news programmes for children therefore need to find ways to inform children who are interested without overwhelming them emotionally (Götz et al., 2019), and to show them how to get involved within their own sphere of action and become a prosocial part of the world they live in.

In several cases, the story was not accorded any news value because no proximity was perceived. For example, an 8-year-old girl says, “Doesn’t interest me, don’t know the countries”, and a 6-year-old girl argues, “I don’t know where that is.” The names Belarus and EU are probably not part of the vocabulary of many primary school children, and many may not understand the phrase “building up their armies and weapons”: “Because



Ill. 2: Contextualizing the countries involved in a story in terms of their position and importance for the children’s own country (here: Germany and Belarus)

I don’t know what that means” (boy, 7). The assessment of news value is closely linked with an understanding of the words and contexts. Besides a lack of understanding there are other explanations, for example “What happens in Russia doesn’t interest me” (girl, 9). This argument is based on a lack of proximity and/or valence. A 12-year-old boy offers an argument based on dynamism, explaining his rejection as follows: “Nothing has happened yet, not so interesting until then.”

Quality-oriented news reporting for children must therefore explicitly name the countries involved in an event or story, show their spatial, cultural or political significance, and contextualize them in terms of their

position and importance for the children’s own country (Ill. 2).

### Proximity

Quite a number of children and preteens use the news factor of spatial proximity to explain their decision. A 7-year-old boy, for example, states, “Because it’s in Europe”. Others emphasize the event’s transnational significance; the news factor

here is the extent to which people are affected by the event. For example, a 13-year-old girl says, “Because something like that affects the whole world”. In some cases there is an explicit reference to the self: “Because Russia and the EU (...), that affects us all” (girl, 13). For some children there is also a family connection, e.g. “Because it’s about the country my father comes from”, as a 7-year-old boy reports.

A news story has more significance for children if they recognize e.g. the spatial proximity. Quality-oriented news reports for children mention possible proximity and connections for children and preteens, without overwhelming children emotionally.



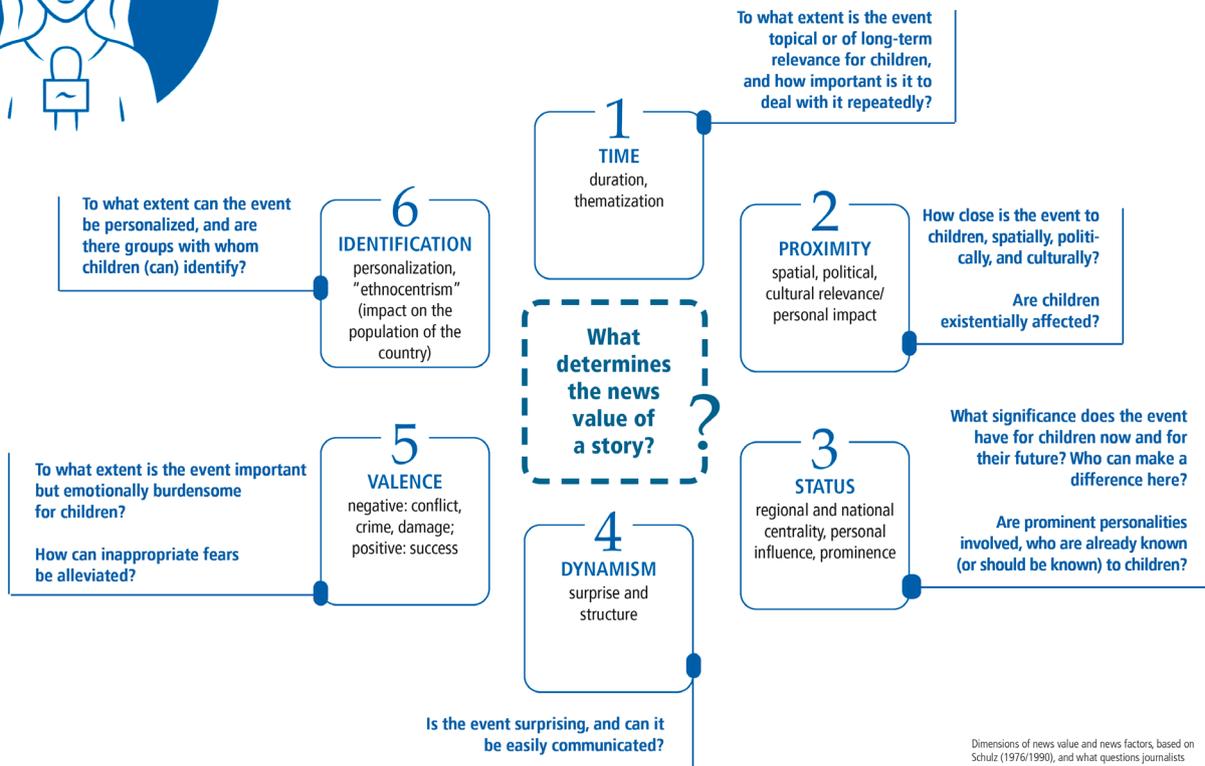
Ill. 3: Children identify with other children who are affected by an event (here: refugees on an inflatable boat)

### Status

For some children “EU” is a familiar term, and they can therefore identify the importance of the region where the event is taking place. For example, an 8-year-old boy says, “This is a war on European territory”. Two preteens are an exception, actually naming the actors involved in the conflict. One 13-year-old girl says, “The



## The aim of news is to classify the causes and effects of an event



Ill. 4: The dimensions of news value studied here

population doesn't want Lukashenko as president", and a 10-year-old boy comments, "Putin's always causing trouble." Some children are aware of the status of Russia, probably thanks to remarks from their parents: "Russia's always interfering, something urgently needs to be done" (girl, 7). Some activate pieces of knowledge derived from conversations with their parents: "Russia is no longer as strong as it used to be, Dad says" (girl, 8). Children and preteens become aware of fragments of complex events, partly from conversations with their parents. Quality-oriented children's news programmes help to communicate the roles of the parties and contexts involved in an age-appropriate manner.

### Dynamism

In terms of the news value dimension of dynamism, a 9-year-old boy

argues: "This is the scenario for a war. I don't like that, and I'm interested in whether someone will do something else." He describes a hypothetical course of events and wants to know who could change the subsequent course and how. A 9-year-old girl comments on the news item with a view to possible consequences: "Another conflict is the last thing we need, it will trigger flows of refugees." Quality news reporting for children would explain the course of events in a readily understandable manner and reduce the complexity.

### Valence

Around half of the primary school children and preteens who saw this story as important explain its high news value with reference to the importance of war: "Because wars always

have very bad consequences" (girl, 8); because "A war always threatens many people's lives" (boy, 12). Both are explanations based on the news factor of damage or harm. Often children say things like "When there's a war, a lot of people always suffer, [it's] important to prevent that" (boy, 9), or "Wars are important and dangerous" (girl, 8). These can be seen as explanations based on the news factor of conflict. This suggests that certain key words such as "war" are (rightly) associated with a high degree of negative significance for young people. The task of quality-oriented news reporting for children is to find an age-appropriate way to report on conflicts, harmful effects etc., so that children are not overwhelmed by the negativity of the news content and can recognize successes as positive.

Identification

In the case of the protests in Belarus, the children and preteens did not mention news factors from the news value dimension of identification, since there was no scope for this in the news item. This dimension was evoked, however, in relation to other news stories. Respondents were particularly likely to argue on the basis of this news factor in stories where children were directly affected, suffered harm, or experienced success.

In the case of the (fictitious) announcement that new girls' volleyball groups had been established, several girls stated that they thought this was important because they were girls and could get involved, and "Because they're finally reporting on girls" (girl, 7).

In the case of the (fictitious) announcement that "Refugee children who were rescued from an inflatable boat in the Mediterranean are coming to Germany" (Ill. 3), the most frequent explanation for the high news value is that this is about children: "It's important to know when other children are having a hard time" (boy, 6). In some cases respondents make a direct link to themselves as children: "They're children, they're the same age as me and have a really hard life" (girl, 8). Children often identify with children who are affected by an event. It is therefore important for quality-oriented children's news reporting to think about this and consider this particular sensitivity, e.g. in the case of damage or harm.

CONCLUSION FOR QUALITY-ORIENTED CHILDREN'S NEWS

Children deserve quality journalism that reports on stories with news value for the target group. Schulz's model (1976/1990) can be used as a journalistic aid to facilitate the necessary selection process. Children and preteens, however, often have a specific view of the world, shaped by

their social position, their knowledge, and their psychological development. Thus the choice of news stories, design and placement are based on the perspective of the children. Quality-oriented news reporting for children and preteens therefore asks different questions (see Ill. 4), is aware of the knowledge and interests of its target group, makes connections to children's lives, and offers necessary additional information, as well as easily understandable explanations for complex contexts (see also Mörchen in this issue). This requires great sensitivity, to avoid emotionally overwhelming children, and a prosocial attitude which always perceives children and preteens as what they are: a part of our society.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Conducted by Iconkids & Youth International. The survey was conducted in a representative sample, apportioned by age, gender and migration background of the children and adolescents, school-leaving qualification of head of household in the case of 6- to 12-year-olds or school attended/school-leaving qualification for 13- to 19-year-olds, distribution by federal states and municipality size classes, and marital status of the mother (150 BIK sample points). Face-to-face interviews were carried out by 463 specially trained youth interviewers using a standardized questionnaire as part of the multi-topic survey iconKIDS bus & iconYOUTH bus (personal interviews, in home, CAPI). The fieldwork period was 9 March to 14 April 2021. The worst-case sampling error for n=1,461 is ± 3.03%.
- <sup>2</sup> Since a representative face-to-face survey always takes at least a month, the dimension of "time" and topicality was disregarded in this study.
- <sup>3</sup> The surveys of adults over 19 and journalists are not discussed any further in this context. Only the data relating to young adults (17 to 19) are included.
- <sup>4</sup> A region in the south of Germany whose inhabitants are reputed to be particularly stingy (similar to the cliché about the Scots).
- <sup>5</sup> In Germany, in crises such as the coronavirus pandemic or in a financial crisis in a company, the state pays a short-time allowance as a partial substitute for the wages lost due to the temporary lack of work. The employer is relieved of some of the costs of employment, and employees can remain employed even when business is poor, thus avoiding redundancies.

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THE AUTHORS



Maya Götz, Dr. phil., is the Head of the IZI and of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL, Munich, Germany. Caroline Kleine-Besten, B.A. Communications and Sociology, is doing an internship at IZI, Munich.