

# “They could describe some things more”

## CHILDREN’S NEWS ON THE RADIO AND IN PODCASTS

Andrea Holler

**IZI has conducted several reception studies with 7- to 11-year-old German boys and girls to support the redevelopment of the children’s news at BR (Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation). This article summarizes the key findings.**

Representative surveys of children in Germany make it clear that children want to be informed about current events. To help them participate actively in society, children need children’s news (Götz, 2011; see also Götz in this issue). For the most part, children use news services which are not made for them, but are aimed at adults or older adolescents (see also Weisser in this issue). But Germany does have news services tailored to children. The best known and most successful children’s news format is the daily TV programme *logo!* (see also Knöchel in this issue). Besides watching television, listening to content is important for children (Guth, 2020). Two thirds of 6- to 13-year-olds listen to the radio, and this is the most important medium at the beginning of the day (KIM, 2020). Podcasts have also experienced an upsurge (cf. Reichow & Schröder, 2020; Online-Audio-Monitor, 2020), and are increasingly popular with young

media users as well as older ones (JIM, 2020; Ill. 1). In view of the information needs of children on the one hand and the educational mandate of public service broadcasters on the other, this presents a great opportunity to offer children of primary school age an appealing service appropriate for this target group.

After 20 years on air, the children’s radio news programme *klaro* (BR) has decided on a new direction and a relaunch as a radio and podcast format. This will be offered as a linear service on 2 of BR’s radio stations, but will also be available to children online via various forms of on-demand access. IZI provided scientific support for the redevelopment and redesign of the children’s news at BR with various reception studies. The following article summarizes their findings, focusing on specific examples, and discusses

the resulting “dos” and “don’ts” for the conception and design of children’s news on the radio or in podcasts.

### THE KLARO CHILDREN’S NEWS IN AUDIENCE TESTING

#### The programme

For each episode of the weekly news programme *klaro*, journalists from children’s radio and from the BR newsroom visited one Bavarian primary school class, where the programme was produced as a joint project by pupils and media professionals. The year-four pupils and their teacher chose the topics for the programme together. In the original format, 4 to 5 current topics were discussed per week, in the newer monothematic format (from 2019) the focus was on one topic per week. The concept of the programme is that children read out the news themselves, report on information they have found in their research, and ask their questions about a topic, which are then answered by adult experts. The result is a news programme for children, in which children of the same age act as newsreaders and ask experts questions on behalf of the listeners.



Ill. 1: Studies have shown that radio and podcasts are increasingly popular with young media users as well as older ones

### The study

In a reception study on the acceptance and optimization of this project, 146 primary school pupils aged 7 to 11 were asked for their views on the news programme. The children listened to 1 of 3 shows selected for the study with their classes, and participant observation was carried out while they listened. While attention or inattention can be readily observed during television viewing (Holler & Götz, 2017), it was already clear from broadcast tests on other children's radio shows that it is not possible to draw conclusions about attentiveness from a forward-facing gaze or posture. In some cases children can move about and look in different directions and still be listening, as the subsequent surveys showed (Holler & Götz, 2018). As a way of measuring interest and attention in spite of this, it proved to be helpful to distribute brochures which were not especially appealing in terms of content (e.g. flyers about IZI's work). We chose this method here too. Flyers were placed on the children's desks, and they were told they could look at these if they got bored while listening to the 8-minute programme.

After listening they gave feedback on the comprehensibility and appeal of the programme in an age-appropriate questionnaire. To gain a comparative insight, the programmes selected for the study included both mono-thematic programmes (new format) and one programme with several topics (old format).

**Programme 1** was about the start of the international MOSAiC research expedition, which aimed to gain a better understanding of the impact of the Arctic on the global climate. **Programme 2** dealt with the topic of traffic in cities and its consequences for the climate, and was inspired by protests at the IAA (International Mobility Show) in Frankfurt, demanding a radical change in transport policy. **Programme 3** discussed 4 main topics:

Trump declaring a state of emergency, a rise in the number of wolves attacking farm animals in Germany, the security conference in Munich, and the death of Karl Lagerfeld.

### Results

Overall, the radio format was well received to some extent, but was not rated as highly as children's educational TV programmes in comparable reception studies (cf. Holler & Götz, 2017; Götz, 2015; Holler, 2013). Assessments of its appeal were on a similar level to adolescents' assessments of educational television (Götz et al., 2017). Only a small proportion of the children would listen to the programme on their own or search for it actively.

Overall, the children were able to remember a considerable number of things about the topics addressed. Particularly in the episodes dealing with one topic in detail ("Polar Expedition" and "Traffic"), many children were able to reproduce detailed information. If several topics featured in the show, the children remembered the individual topic headings but not many details. As in a study on fictional radio programmes, in which primary school children were filmed while listening (Holler & Götz, 2018), children's attentiveness while listening and therefore the appeal of the programmes were found to follow similar patterns to children watching television shows.

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## WHAT WORKS WELL AND ATTRACTS ATTENTION

### Making children's perspectives central

Children find it important to be able to recognize their own perspectives, so they appreciate the fact that it is children who ask the questions in the children's news. One aspect rated very positively by 7- to 11-year-olds is that children and their questions on news

topics are taken seriously, "because the children's ideas and opinions were mentioned" (Alexandra<sup>1</sup>, 10). The listeners were pleased by the fact that children of their own age took centre stage, and that "children's questions are answered" (Fahmiya, 10).

In the programme on the polar expedition, for example, questions that adults might have found unimportant at first glance were answered very precisely, e.g. "Do you get days off on the ship, or do you have to do research every day?" or "What happens if someone gets really ill?" The respondents were particularly interested in and had good recall of the background information and details about the everyday work of the researchers, and of the many other occupational groups working on the ship.

### Connections to children's topics and interests

The children surveyed showed a high level of attentiveness when connections were offered to their own interests and topics. For example, the topic of climate and environmental protection, which is relevant to them, encouraged them to pay attention to both the programme on the MOSAiC polar expedition, and the one on traffic in cities. Climate protection is a topic which they find particularly interesting (see also Götz in this issue) and want to know more about, because they feel that it affects them personally: "Because it's important for me too", explains Mara (7). A key element for Ruth (10) is "that we found out so much about the future". As in other reception studies on attentiveness to educational programmes on television (Götz, 2004; Holler, 2013; Holler & Götz, 2017), the reception of radio reports shows that animals are a guaranteed way to attract attention, and are especially appealing to children. In the episode dealing with several topics, the second most frequently remembered story (after the one about Trump and current events

in the US) was about wolves returning to Germany. Three quarters of the children recalled this story; in contrast, only 2 in 10 children mentioned the security conference in Munich.

Increased attention levels could be observed when the programme on the expedition to the Arctic talked about how the researchers have to protect themselves from polar bears when they leave the ship, and how they behave if they discover polar bears. The information about the animals and how to deal with them was rated as particularly interesting. For example, Leon (8) found it especially informative to learn “what they do when a polar bear comes along, because I didn’t know that”.

### Surprising facts

Astonishing new information also leads to a high level of attention and good recall. Programme 2, for example, mentions that there is some thought of establishing a cable car as an alternative means of transport to reduce traffic in the city of Munich. This broadened the perspective of the listeners in a surprising way, “because I didn’t know that was possible” (Luise, 10), and encouraged them to think more about it, “because it would be cool to fly over the city” (Selin, 9).

A cable car is something that most children probably associate with mountains or perhaps amusement parks, not with city traffic. An intriguing fact, which maintains their interest and upsets their existing knowledge.

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### PROBLEMATIC: OBSTACLES TO UNDERSTANDING AND CONNECTION

The observation of the children as they listen, combined with their own statements, makes it clear that there are also moments in the radio programmes when the children are less involved and attentive, and are no longer following the news content properly.

### Experts, technical terminology, and unstructured explanations

As with the reception of television, it becomes apparent that if adult experts report facts or take an obviously didactic approach, the children listen less attentively and are less likely to reproduce the content or rate it as interesting afterwards. This becomes especially clear in places where a large number of technical terms are used. Some children, like 9-year-old Aurelia, criticize this directly, “because I didn’t understand some of the words”.

At one point in the programme about the MOSAiC polar expedition, a professor of atmospheric physics introduces his institute and the research mission. At this point, half the children began to flick through the material placed on their desks as a distraction, or to do something else at the same time, such as sharpening pencils, sorting out books under their desk, or having a whispered conversation with the person sitting next to them. The acoustics exacerbated the problem: the expert was directly connected from the ship in the Arctic via satellite phone. Though highly authentic, this was not well received by the listeners, “because in the bit where the man called I couldn’t hear what he was saying” (Ramona, 9). When adults use words that children do not know or understand, children often find it difficult to follow the content. This is also the case when experts explain things and lose track of what they were saying. In the programme about traffic, a journalist specializing in the auto industry tries to answer the children’s question about whether there are cars that are powered by the sun. The sentence structure and content of his subsequent explanation do not follow any structured pattern. Furthermore, his remarks on solar-powered cars require knowledge about how electric cars work. So it would take a great deal of cognitive energy to even begin to reconstruct what he means. If children cannot extract any meaning

from what has been said, because the explanation is unstructured or because it is beyond their stage of psychological development, then the report will not appeal to them.

### Children in the role of news-readers

It is not just the experts that are problematic, however. The respondents were sometimes also critical when the children in the programme presented information or read out facts. Clara (10) criticizes the style of presentation, “because the children sometimes got stuck”, and Mara (7) remarks: “I thought it was a bit too much text and sometimes it was read too quickly.” What both are trying to express is that they did not really understand what the children were saying.

At some points the children on the radio falter while reading out the prepared news content, and of course their articulation is not as good as that of professional newsreaders. This makes it harder to listen to and understand them: “They spoke so badly that I couldn’t understand anything” (Veronica, 9). What this probably means is that when children are not really experts in an area and report on content with words that they themselves only partially comprehend, they are also hard to understand for the children listening to the radio. The overall conclusion was that this was a very valuable media education project for the children participating at school, but that its usefulness and appeal for the children in the audience were limited.

A representative survey on the news interests of 6- to 13-year-olds in Germany (see also Götz in this issue) makes it clear that most want to have adolescents or young adults presenting the news, and only the youngest respondents, aged 6 to 7, would rather have children as news presenters.

Despite the active involvement of children, the *klaro* children’s news pro-

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gramme was not clearly identified as a children's programme by the majority of the 7- to 11-year-olds in the audience test. Two thirds considered the programme to be "for all" target groups – children, adolescents and adults. Nor was there a clear preference when respondents were asked whether "more children" or "more adults" should explain things in the programme. The children probably do not believe that their peers have the necessary skills to explain the news.

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### WORK IN PROGRESS: THE NEW FORMAT *FRAG MICH! DIE NACHRICHTEN UND ICH*

Based on the findings on the reception of the *klaro* children's news programme, and following a design sprint in which 3 prototypes were developed and tested in school classes, a new format has been created. This will be broadcast on the radio of BR and also made available as a podcast.

#### Concept

For children of primary school age, news bulletins are often complicated, hard to understand, and far removed from the reality of their lives. As a further development of the *klaro* children's news, the new podcast format *Frag mich! Die Nachrichten und ich* [*Ask me! The news and I*] is intended to fill this gap. Instead of explaining the world to children from an adult point of view, each episode pairs up 1 of the 2 journalists (who are young adults) with a child who is knowledgeable about the topic of the show and is directly affected by a news story. Together the child and the presenter find out to what extent the story affects children in their everyday lives, and how they can deal with this. To include the perspectives of other children as well as the child co-host, listeners can send their views to the editors via voice message, or suggest topics for the news podcast.

#### Evaluation

The plan is to conduct regular audience tests evaluating the new format from the perspective of children, so as to continuously improve it and adapt it to the information needs of primary school children. So far 2 pilot episodes have been audience-tested.

##### *Pilot 1: Sports clubs in times of coronavirus*

N= 111 listeners aged 7 to 11 were able to evaluate the first pilot episode via an online questionnaire. The episode deals with the news story that half of all German sports clubs fear for their existence, since many members have left because of the closure of gymnasiums and sports grounds. The central question is: Is it still worth being a member of a sports club in times of coronavirus? For the topic "sports clubs in times of coronavirus", the central figure is a girl who is currently unable to do gymnastics with her club because of the pandemic. In a conversation with the presenter, she talks about the effects this has on her everyday life and the experiences she has had, and gives listeners tips on how to deal positively with the situation – the closure of clubs and the cancellation of training sessions. Other children send voice messages saying what they are doing to support their clubs and continue with their sport.

The new format was well received by the 7- to 11-year-olds: "It's interesting and fun to listen to" (girl, 10). Many found the topic of sport very appealing, while others appreciated the topical reference to the coronavirus. For some children, particularly those uninterested in sport, the programme was a little boring in places and contained too much detail.

A key element for the girls and boys surveyed was that children take centre stage. Their evaluation of the 11-year-old protagonist of the show was extremely positive. They praised her authenticity and the lively way she

talked about her experiences, and were impressed by her courage in taking part in a radio programme, and by the fact that "she presented her point of view very clearly" (boy, 7).

The 7- to 11-year-olds also very much appreciated the fact that children contribute their views on the topic of the programme via voice message, and "that you have an opportunity to have a bit of a say in the news, so to speak" (boy, 9). Children felt that they and their perspective were being taken seriously. "I thought it was really good, because you heard other people's opinions and learned something new" (boy, 10).

Learning something about others, staying optimistic, opportunities for training during the pandemic, and details about sports clubs: these are the things that many children took away from Pilot 1. It is not always possible to discern news value in terms of the news story.

##### *Pilot 2: The killing of male chicks will soon be banned*

N= 52 children aged 7 to 11 gave feedback on the second pilot episode, focusing on the announcement that the killing of male chicks will be prohibited in Germany from 2022.

The second pilot episode, based around the topic of the killing of male chicks, is conceived more as an investigative report. The presenter visits a child, Hannah, who has a few chickens in her garden and is knowledgeable about the subject (Ill. 2). The presenter and Hannah carry out activities together to find out more about chickens, e.g. how loudly a rooster crows or how to candle an egg. So there are elements of investigative reporting and joint activities between the child and the presenter, accompanied by the audience, and the child co-host is able to share her knowledge and experience of chickens in a spontaneous, natural way. This programme was even better received by most children than the one on sports clubs in times of coronavirus.

The topic of animals appeals strongly to children, leading to a generally positive evaluation of the show, “because it was about animals and I love animals!” (girl, 10). The respondents were impressed by the protagonist and her commitment, “how she stood up for animals” (girl, 10), and saw her as having a high level of skill in recounting and explaining things. A 10-year-old girl, for example, thought it was great “that a child explained things that she knew more about than the adults”. The girls and boys surveyed were very appreciative of the central role played by children in the format. Besides the protagonist, other children were again given a chance to speak via voice message. “The thing I liked best was that other children give their opinion too, because I think it’s nice that they ask for opinions” (girl, 10). The various ideas for active engagement with the topic in the more investigative pilot were well received. For example, Hannah and the presenter use a measuring device to check how loudly her rooster crows, attempt to candle an egg in the hen house, and look at the inside of a broken egg together.

The children surveyed felt as though they had learnt something. They recalled various facts about chickens and eggs, for example, “if there’s a blood spot in an egg, it doesn’t mean it’s fertilized” (girl, 10), “that the rooster was as loud as a jack-hammer” (girl, 9), or “why there are numbers on eggs” (boy, 11). Only a very small number of children recalled the actual news story, that the killing of male chicks will be prohibited from 2022, and with one exception they did not identify its potential implications.

Overall, this is a programme that was very well received. At the same time a problem becomes apparent: the news story that the mass killing of male chicks by maceration or gassing will be banned was only discussed to

a limited extent. This story, especially if accompanied by images showing the fluffy yellow chicks falling into the macerator, is exceptionally brutal. This image might be too gruesome for primary school children – this would have to be determined by the authorities responsible for protecting minors from harmful media content. So the editors made the right decision in not explicitly evoking this. At the same time this leads to a discrepancy, because the announcement does not actually mean that from now on all male chicks will be allowed to live on until their slaughter. It will probably mean that the eggs are screened earlier to identify male embryos, which will then be destroyed or turned into animal feed. The whole topic of professional chicken farming and especially the treatment of male chicks or eggs containing male chicks is hard to digest, even for adults.

The radio news programme for children is therefore wise to only touch on this topic briefly. The child co-host, Hannah, says: “It’s stupid, you’re born and then you’re killed straight away ... if it has to happen then at the end of their life. But not living for a week and then off with their heads.” This is a fine statement, which should give us all food for thought. At the same time,

it shows how far removed the report is from reality: normally no chicken dies of old age in a large-scale farming operation.

One of the biggest problems of children’s news is revealed here: What do we do when the reality is so horrible that it cannot be shown to children, or only to a very limited extent?

### Insights from the 2 pilot tests

The respondents evaluated both episodes as very positive and interesting. The basic concept of the new format appeals to children, and the majority would like to listen to further episodes. In both pilot shows, children particularly appreciate the child protagonists, who are seen as sharing their experiences and knowledge openly, authentically and competently, and the fact that other children can express their views on the topic via voice message. Overall, the new format is a very good starting point for communicating news content to children. The main opportunities for improvement have to do with the relevance of the topics and news value. With this monothematic concept, there is a risk that if the topic selected does not interest listeners, if a story only affects them indirectly

or there is nothing connecting it to their everyday life, the whole programme is unappealing or does not offer them any news value or added value. Of course a story like the one selected in Pilot 1, about the increasing number of people leaving sports clubs in times of coronavirus, has an easier time than a political meta-topic such as the general context of the chicken industry, which has only indirect significance for children. Here it is worth taking a close look at what topics are of specific interest to children (see also Götz in this issue), and what aspects of a news item should



Screenshot from Frag mich! Die Nachrichten und ich © BR

Ill. 2: In every episode of the new podcast format *Frag mich! Die Nachrichten und ich* a child expert takes centre stage and explains things to the listeners

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(or possibly should not) be focused on and explained for them. Relevant topics and items for this format are those that directly affect 7- to 11-year-olds, and those that allow an active response.

Based on the results of the audience test, the editors altered Pilot 2 "The killing of male chicks" before the programme was broadcast. They placed the news item into an age-appropriate and comprehensible context and included hints on what the children themselves could do. This highlights the advantage of radio and podcast formats in comparison to TV productions as recording information anew and rerecording contributions is cheaper and less burdensome.

## CONCLUSION

The studies on the reception of radio news formats show that children's response to radio and podcast content is similar to their response to educational and news formats on television. In both, they need programmes that are produced with a knowledge of their information needs and age-specific perceptions. Children only take away things that they have perceived and understood, and that connect to their prior knowledge. If a programme wants to attract attention and activate educational processes, it needs to offer connections to children's everyday world, their topics and interests.

When selecting a news topic, it is important to formulate this from a child's perspective and to define how it can affect children in their everyday life. It is also crucial to consider what explanations need to be given to enable children to understand the context and the significance of the news story. It is children who know best what topics are relevant for children, and their perspective should be central. But they should not act as newsreaders themselves. News content for children requires strategic didactic preparation, and it must be placed in contexts that are meaningful for them – by providing a mediating connecting character they can identify with, or simply a good explanation. This can make complex topics comprehensible and encourage more sophisticated thinking.

The study also shows that detailed reflection and collaboration with researchers are worthwhile, especially in areas where new paths are being taken, and public service broadcasters are pursuing their key mission: to make appealing, informative and beneficial programmes for children.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> All children's names are code names.

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