

# News from children's perspective

## WHAT DO CHILDREN THINK IS NEWS AND HOW DO THEY USE THE NEWS?

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The article summarises current study data on the topic of children's news and uses a current qualitative study to explore the question of what children in Germany think the news is and to what extent they use it.

### CURRENT STUDY DATA

News is part of the core mission of many media providers: Users can choose from a vast array of established programmes on TV and radio, in daily newspapers and magazines, as well as various news feeds and apps, online headlines and articles on search engines, email portals, on social media platforms, messenger services and

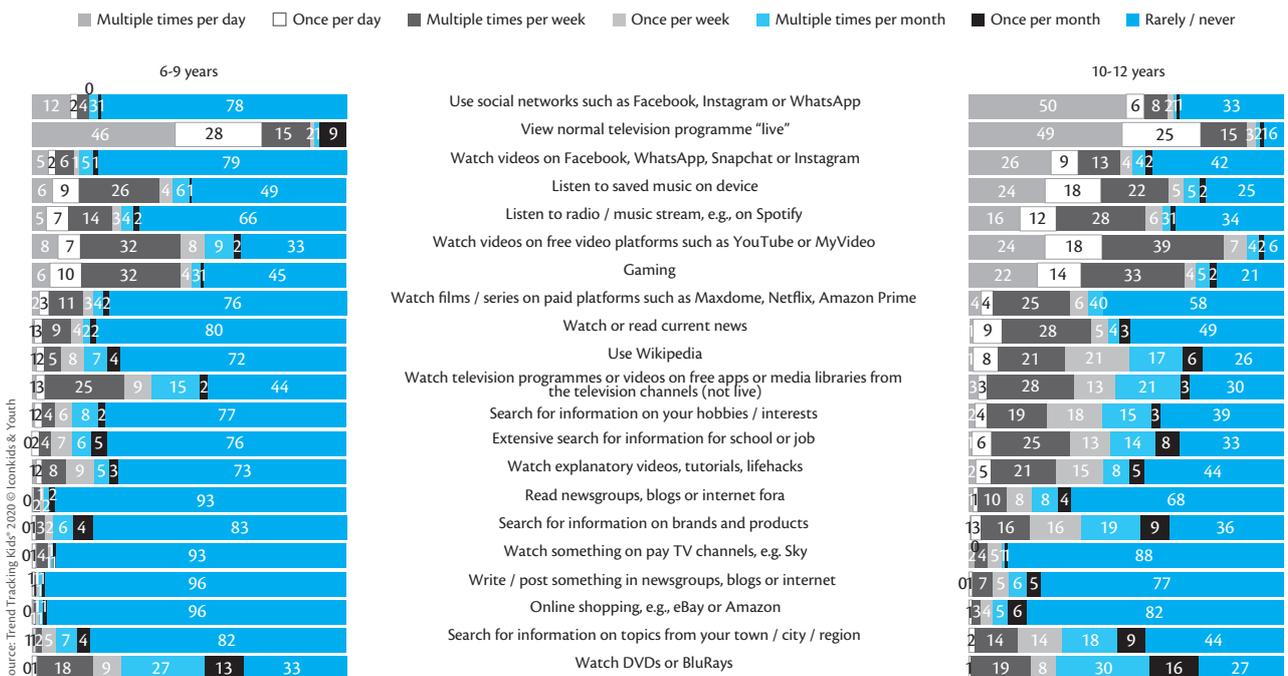
much more. Children grow up with these offers and experience them either with guidance or entirely intuitively. But to what extent do children watch, listen to or read news? What exactly is news from a child's point of view? Which offers or which platforms are used by children in today's changing media landscape? The following gives a brief overview of the results from 3 recent representative studies.

### TrendTrackingKids®

The market media study TrendTrackingKids® (TTK for short), which is representative of the German population and is conducted by the market research institute Iconkids &

Youth, collects basic data on media use and the lifeworlds of children and adolescents once a year. The study includes questions on news usage, which were supplemented by exclusive questions in the 2020 survey; the German broadcasting stations KiKA, MDR/ARD and ZDF commissioned these additional questions.

According to TTK 2020, 38% of 6- to 13-year-olds in Germany used electronic media to watch or read news, e.g., about world events or sports, at least once a month. In general, it was found that the older the children, the more likely they were to consume current news: 68% of the 11- and 12-year-olds, but only 15% of the 6- and 7-year-olds informed themselves about the news



Ill. 1: 2020: Electronic media: Frequency of various activities by age (6-9 years old/10-12 years old)

using electronic media (see also Ill. 1). How often children read or watch the news also increased with the age of the respondents: 56% of 12- and 13-year-olds, but only 11% of 6- and 7-year-olds consumed news at least once a week. A noteworthy proportion of daily users could be seen from the age of 12.

Differences in usage could also be seen in the devices surveyed: 6- to 9-year-olds watched or read news primarily on the TV set, secondarily on a desktop PC/laptop. For 10- to 12-year-olds, smartphones started to become a relevant device.

The YouTube platform deserves special attention. Already children's favourite online platform for years (see, among others, KIM, 2018, p. 34; KIM, 2020, p. 40; AGF GenZ Video Study, 2020, p. 9), it was used as a news source very often among 6- to 13-year-olds (question with example options). A comparison with previous years shows that the number of children using YouTube to consume news increased from 22% in 2018 to over 34% in 2019 to 38% in 2020. However, the YouTube figures should not be overinterpreted: Videos on current world events, as news content would be understood from an "adult perspective", play a subordinate role in the YouTube usage of 6- to 12-year-olds. Only 11% of them used the platform in this way at least once a week. Rather, it can be assumed that children understand much more under the term "news" than content formatted as traditional news, despite the fact that questions were clearly formulated regarding what was meant by news.

In order to find out more about children's understanding of news, the 6- to 13-year-olds who said they watched or read current news on electronic devices (...) were asked what kind of news they use: when asked with an open question, the children named a



Ill. 2: The term "news": children's definitions (age 8-13)

wide range of topics, most frequently current world events (84%), sports (40%), science/environment/technology (24%), culture/celebrities/entertainment (21%), politics (17%) but also specific events (coronavirus) and individual programmes (the German news programmes *logo!* (for children), *Tagesschau* (for adults)). This indicates that their understanding of news is very broad. In a second question about news sources, online content, social media and offers that cannot be assigned to any specific channel were also mentioned in addition to traditional linear television. The continuing relevance of classic television for news reception is also evident by the fact that 61% of respondents named it. The final open query about specific providers underpinned the finding that especially established broadcasters and formats experience a high level of use – specifically, the German broadcasting stations KiKA, ARD and ZDF as linear broadcasters were frequently named as news providers, as were, for example, Wikipedia, Google, the German children's knowledge portal *Helles Köpfchen* as well as numerous offers for which it is no longer possible to trace the playout channel by which this use comes about.

### EU Kids Online – Digital Participation

The EU Kids Online study, conducted in 2019, also provides data on news usage. In the sub-module "Digital Participation", an online survey of 9- to 17-year-olds, the focus was on how

children and young people use digital media to participate in society. News usage – surveyed based on reports about Germany or other countries or one's own region/location as well as other current events that can be found on the radio, on TV, in newspapers or on the Internet – was

low, similar to TTK, but increased with age.

When asked about different types of news, only a minority (<10%) of 9- to 17-year-olds in Germany found political or international news interesting. This also applied to the older children, while funny/strange news about celebrities or sports, and in some cases also about lifestyle, achieved double-digit ratings even among the younger children. Similar to TTK, television played the biggest role as a news source, according to the German respondents, with 61% and 67% of 9- to 11-year-olds and 12- to 14-year-olds, respectively, naming it as a source. Radio and – especially for the children over 12 – social networks were also relevant variables here, however, including WhatsApp and YouTube in particular, but also Facebook and Instagram (question with example options).

3 other findings were striking: First, only 15% of 9- to 11-year-olds stated that they talk to their friends about the news, although this figure increased with age. In other words, news was not "peer group talk" at this age. Second, it was noticeable that the children read or watched a wide variety of news presentations, such as headlines, pictures and online articles as well as news videos. This indicates that in this study, as well, their understanding of news was broader than it first appears. Finally, at least some of the children and adolescents wanted guidance and support on topics such as how to distinguish between real and fake news.

**JIM Study**

The 2018 wave of the German JIM study, a telephone survey conducted regularly on media use among 12- to 19-year-olds, focused on young people’s trust in various news sources and programmes, among other things. German public broadcasting offers enjoyed a particularly high level of trust, above all ARD’s daily news programmes *Tagesschau/Tagesthemen*. With increasing age, respondents also judged the print and online editions of the German news magazines *SPIEGEL* and *Focus* to be increasingly trustworthy, but decreases in trustworthiness were reported for the news programmes *ProSieben Newstime*, *RTL Aktuell* (both offered by commercial broadcasting stations) and news offered by the tabloid newspaper *BILD* (print/online). Young people with a higher formal education trusted most of the programmes more than those with a lower education; *ProSieben Newstime*, *RTL Aktuell* and *BILD-Zeitung*, on the other hand, received better marks from young people with a lower formal education.

In the 2019 JIM, it was also found that just under one-fifth of 12- to 19-year-olds watched videos of YouTubers talking about breaking news. Boys watched these videos slightly more often than girls (22% vs. 15%). However, similar to the findings of the TTK and with the younger target group, the priority here also tended to be on other genres: YouTube was primarily used for music videos, funny clips, Let’s Plays, etc., rather than news content.

All these studies provide evidence that no uniform understanding of news can be assumed among children, but that this target group has a very broad and vague idea of

news. Participants used classic news formats, but at comparatively low rates. In contrast, there was widespread use of other offers that reflect this broad understanding – as well as the heterogeneous market situation.

**QUALITATIVE STUDY**

Based on the representative findings, the German channels KiKA, MDR/ARD and ZDF decided to find out more about topics that interest children, their understanding of news and their use of news within the framework of a qualitative baseline study.

**Method**

The research questions were:

- What is news from the perspective of 8- to 13-year-olds?
- What factors influence interest and relevance of news?
- Access points: How do children learn about news?

36 children between the ages of 8 and 13 with varying degrees of affinity for news and media and one parent each were surveyed at 3 locations in Germany in a multi-stage process: First, there was a preliminary video call interview, which was followed by

a 7-day online diary phase in which every “informational moment” of the child – every topic and every possible source – was documented. Finally, a 90-minute parent-child interview was conducted via video call, in which the previously reviewed informational moments, identified topics, sources and channels were discussed in depth. This resulted in a deeper understanding of the definition and relevance of messages and the resulting usage patterns – the customer journeys – in this target group, which are briefly presented below.

**What is news from the perspective of 8- to 13-year-olds?**

“News is information that everyone should know about (...) because it’s about important topics that people are concerned about, and I don’t think that how to teach your dog tricks belongs in a news programme.” (girl, age 13)

When asked about the term “news”, the vast majority of children primarily associated it with information about events and happenings which above all have a certain topicality and affect a large number of people or are relevant for many. From a child’s point of view, anything can be news at first; what matters is its relevance to a wide range of people (Ill. 2). At the same



Ill. 3: News as an impetus for further research, e.g. on how to avoid plastic in everyday life

time, the children interviewed set a certain limitation that classic YouTube topics such as celebrities/stars and entertainment were not necessarily to be defined as news. It was also striking that the youngest respondents recognised news as significant and important, but were unable to name the added value it provided for them personally.

*“I’m interested in what’s happening in Germany, so I’m also interested in other cities, but when it’s in Hamburg, it’s especially interesting.” (boy, age 9, living in Hamburg)*

They also perceived most news offers as something geared toward adults. Only among respondents aged about 10 and older a certain understanding and relevance of news to them personally could be assumed. In this group, it was actively demanded that news contain true content – a distinction from “fake news” became more important. Regardless of their own interest in certain topics, the group of 12/13-year-olds was the most likely to recognise that news also has a certain relevance for them personally. Likewise, interest in political issues and socio-political topics increased; for the children, it was important to know what was happening in the world. Accordingly, offers on these topics were used more frequently, and contexts and relationships among topics in these areas were also understood.

### What factors influence interest and relevance of news?

Based on the diary documentation and the survey, it became clear that very different influencing factors played a role in the understanding and relevance of a news item. Besides the children’s parental home, key factors were the living environment and personal interests as well as the comprehensibility of the news item in terms of language, presentation and dramaturgy. In concrete terms, this means that regardless of age and cognitive development:

*“My dad often watches the news and catches up on some things and tells us in the family what’s going on.” (boy, age 13)*

1. The more news-savvy the parents, or the greater the interest of older siblings, for example, or the school lessons – and thus the resulting presence or discussion of news in everyday life – the more news-savvy the children surveyed appeared to be.

*“Sometimes I watch some videos on coronavirus, how it’s going now, because my mom always tells me it’s important for health and stuff.” (boy, age 8)*

2. The more the respective news item coincided with the child’s personal areas of interest or the more a comprehensible reference to the child’s personal situation was evident in the news item, that is, if the news item was perceived as being “close” to the child’s own reality, the more that news item was perceived as relevant. The strongest example during the survey was certainly the topic of the coronavirus because it directly affected their own everyday lives: Compulsory masks at school, meeting with friends and much more. Political processes and decisions, otherwise largely perceived as abstract or distant, became very concrete here from the respondents’ perspective.

Another example – that of climate change – illustrated how differently a topic could be perceived in terms of personal relevance and investigated by age groups: While the topic was almost exclusively understood as environmental protection by the youngest children with specific aspects such as animal welfare and waste, the oldest children were able to make links with topics such as Fridays for Future, global warming and the situation in the rainforests or were already actively researching these topics.

*“At the very beginning when it started, she had a magazine and there the main topic was ‘living without plastic’ and there she discov-*

*ered by chance that there were logo! reports [German children’s news programme] on the topic. Then she started researching plastic-free living.” (mother)*

3. Several news items that the children experienced in the course of the day did not catch on due to speed, presentation that was not appropriate for children, or a lack of connecting points to their lives. At best, they acted as an impetus for further research (III. 3).

*“When he heard the news that this mother killed her 4 children, he couldn’t stop thinking about it. I also felt like he got a little scared; he was asking questions for quite a while ‘Why would a mother do that?’ ‘What did the kids do that was bad?’ We talked about that a lot in the family.” (mother of boy, age 9)*

Tabloid reports are a special case: Regardless of the age of the children, unusual news and news that was experienced as particularly bizarre aroused the interest of many children, as did unusual events in what they felt to be their region. Depending on the extent of the report, this gave reason to discuss it with the parents.

### Access points: How do children learn about news?

News is not automatically inherent in everyday life from a child’s perspective: Children often take over the routine access paths to news from their parents; if parents are less interested in news, the access paths to news are clearly limited for children as well. In line with the representative data, the qualitative study also found that television news programmes in particular were an established and highly relevant news source that was often watched together with parents, especially in news-savvy households. The main programmes identified here were the German children’s news programme *logo!*, but also adult programmes and some entertainment/infotainment and tabloid magazines.

*“If I don’t know how to do something or would like to know a piece of information,*

## RESEARCH

I go to YouTube, enter the topic there and then just watch more detailed information about it.” (boy, age 13)

As age increased, online sources and platforms became more relevant. A whole range of usage patterns can be identified in this context: In some cases, the children entered a search term – often triggered by a topic or a news question, e.g., a radio report or a school topic – and oriented themselves on the first 3 to 5 headlines. From a child’s point of view, the comprehensibility of the headline was particularly relevant. The sender or the source was not decisive at first. The older the children, the more established patterns of use became apparent: they selectively accessed network offers, and in some cases also used news apps or aggregators, e.g., to scan local events or news. One aspect was particularly striking: Many of the children aged 11/12 and older said that the depth of information at headline level was enough for them and that they felt sufficiently informed, even without having read more on the topic. Looking at the entire age segment – 8- to 13-year-olds – social media news offers played a role only very sporadically.

“I happened to see on TikTok that a TikToker woman was saying something about racism in America. I watched that, but otherwise I don’t watch news on TikTok.” (girl, age 12)

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, all of the studies presented not only show great overlap in results, but also provide valuable insights into children’s understanding and use of news.

The quantitative results showed that children had a very broad understanding of news, not only in terms of topics, but also in terms of providers, playout channels and forms of presentation. This was further specified in the qualitative study, which looked in more detail at children’s understanding of news: From the child’s point of view,

any information that was current and true and was important and relevant for at least the person using it, or even for a large group of people, can in principle become news.

For successful news communication, it is important to note that the understanding of news as well as the personal interest in (news) topics strongly depended on the children’s age and cognitive level. Certain assumptions about the understanding of news in general and concrete contexts, for example, about climate change, as they are presupposed in the usual news offers, can in part only be assumed for the oldest children.

“I have to watch news at least twice a week for the subject Home and Society because we always talk about it in class. I usually watch the [adult news programme] Tagesschau at 8, but sometimes I watch [the children’s news] logo! on YouTube – it’s always explained a little easier there.” (boy, age 13)

Another factor to be taken into account is the children’s home and living environment: If children grow up in a home with an affinity for news, or if such offers are a topic at school, they are at least more likely to learn about these offers and how to deal with them. Otherwise, the children cannot be assumed to already have this knowledge, even if they do in parts express interest in such support.

2 conclusions emerge from the results presented: First, there appears to be a lack of systematic engagement with news offers in childhood. This could be remedied, for example, by a school subject called “media studies”, as called for, for example, by communications scientist Prof. Pörcksen (re:publika19), which would help explain the origins and evaluation of news. The German initiative “Journalismus macht Schule” [Journalism provides education],<sup>1</sup> which is aimed at older children, takes a similar direction.

Second, looking at the study data, there is evidence that there is a need for more children’s news offers in Germany. To a large extent, the children surveyed

knew or used news services which from their point of view are primarily aimed at adults or at least older children. With logo! on TV, for example, but also with a few offers on the radio or in print, there are a few formats for the children’s sector. Judging by the interest of the target group, however, there is a great deal of potential for further offers, especially online. This is currently served primarily by news aggregators and offers not geared toward children. ■

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> *Journalismus macht Schule, Hamburg. Available at: [www.journalismus-macht-schule.org](http://www.journalismus-macht-schule.org) [30.4.20]*

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