

How was the Ukraine war addressed in children's programming around the world?

TV executives and programme makers worldwide were asked how they had reacted to the Russian attack on Ukraine and if they had produced special programmes for children dealing with the topic. Furthermore, we wanted to know which feedback they had received on the contributions and which lessons they have learned from this for the future.

Anne Dreesen (Content Manager, Ketnet, Belgium)



Like everyone in Europe, we were shocked that so close to our homes a war had started. The most important thing – for children and grown-

ups – is correct information about what exactly is going on. In *Karrewiet*, our daily news bulletin for kids on Ketnet, we talked openly and honestly about it from day one. The children could send in all their questions via all kinds of platforms. We were very aware that children also get their news intake from social media. This is why we also made TikToks on our *Karrewiet*-channel about what was real and fake news going around on the internet. Our colleague and psychologist Telidja Klai talked to parents in our general news the day the war started, to help them talk to their children about this news, teach them where to get the right information and how to try and sooth them.

The days after the war started, we noticed through reactions on our social media platforms and apps that

children wanted to show they cared and that refugees were welcome here in Belgium. That is why we started the initiative “flags for peace”. Our Ketnet-hosts encouraged children to make a painting or drawing on a white flag. The kids made artworks and put them behind windows, hung them on balconies etc. They could also send in photos of their artwork via our app and website. The flags were then shown on television, on our stories etc. This made the kids feel included and seen, and most of all, hopeful. It is hard to say how many flags were made, but when you walked the streets of Brussels or Flanders, you could see them everywhere. The message was simple and clear, and when a Ukrainian refugee would enter the street, they would feel welcome.

At that point, we did a lot to talk about the topic with the children from Brussels and Flanders. However, we also wanted to do something for the Ukrainian children who were now living in a foreign country. This is why we decided to subtitle our *Karrewiet*-news into Ukrainian. We know that in many schools the children start their day watching *Karrewiet* together with their classmates. We made sure that a subtitled version was available on our website and app every day so teachers could show these versions in class if there were refugees watching along. This way the Ukrainian and the Belgian kids felt a little bit more connected. In retrospect, we are happy that we could provide children with correct information, but we are aware that the



Ill. 1: Ketnet initiated the “Flags for Peace” campaign in which children put their self-designed flags as a message of peace behind windows, on balconies, etc.

stream of content about these events online and on social media is gigantic. Therefore, the challenge for now and for the future is to get correct information to children quickly and to teach them to be critical in terms of their news sources.

Josephine Hattevig (Project Manager Lilla Aktuellt, SVT, Sweden)



We know children turn to us at *Lilla Aktuellt* when major news events occur. An event that shed light on this was the terrorist attack in Stockholm in

2017¹. Many children then contacted us to get information about what was going on in real time.

With that experience in mind, one of the first things *Lilla Aktuellt* did on February 24, 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine was to set up a chat in our app “Duo”. We reported about what was happening and children asked questions to which we responded together with an invited expert and a psychologist. The “Ukraine war”-chat was ongoing daytime for 9 days in a row. After that, we activated the chat when the news situation so required until mid-April 2022. Now we answer questions about the Ukraine war in our regular “Ask us about news”-chats, which we set up once a week.

Lilla Aktuellt is a daily TV news program, and we report about the Ukraine

war on an ongoing basis. In the beginning of the invasion, we reported about it every day and the reporting is still frequent. For example, we explain what is happening in Ukraine, backgrounds to what is happening, and we meet children who have fled the war. We have also made a video “wordlist” with short clips where we describe words such as “invasion”, “propaganda” and “sanctions”. We address and answer many questions about the Ukraine war that we receive in our chat and on TikTok in our program, for example: “What is ‘nuclear weapons’?”

On TikTok, *Lilla Aktuellt*’s account currently has over 280,000 followers. Since the Ukraine war has started, we have been making several posts about source criticism as there are many viral clips which make it difficult to determine if they are true or false (Ill. 2).

We have received feedback from children that they appreciate that we answer their questions and that they feel less anxious when they receive answers and information. This is a quote from one person chatting with us: “I felt much happier and safer when I chatted with you <3”. Our lessons learnt from this for the future:

- Prioritize interactivity and be available. Meet the audience as soon as possible, for example in a chat or on social media, to be the obvious choice when major events happen.

- Use the audience’s questions to make content, in our case video content. Many of us have the same questions and the answers are often interesting to many people.
- War is awful, often long-lasting and affects us in different ways. Talk to each other at the office and, if needed, professionals to deal with hard emotions and stressful work situations.

Eirin Nilssen Vikøren (Chief Journalist on Duty) and Geir Evensen (Producer of Supernytt, NRK, Norway)



NRK *Supernytt* is Norway’s only news broadcast for kids and youngsters targeting children aged 8-12. We do not seek to publish breaking news, but focus on giving background information and comprehensible explanations on difficult or troublesome issues.

Already before February 24, 2022, our editorial staff paid close attention to the situation in Ukraine. When the Russian attacks started, we immediately saw that this was a major event requiring special coverage. With kids being both worried and curious about what was going on and in need of a reliable news source, we started planning a special on the war. It was aired 2 days later. Over the next weeks, we followed up by almost daily updates on different aspects of the situation. Later we published a small documentary series on how 2 young Ukrainian boys, who had arrived in Norway with their mothers, experienced their new life in a new country.

Altogether, our news coverage had the following focus:

- trying to explain why Russia decided to go to war
- providing historical background on the Soviet Union, Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula



Screenshot from Lilla Aktuellt © SVT

Ill. 2: Since many fake clips are circulating virally, *Lilla Aktuellt* focuses on emphasizing the importance of source criticism

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- reassuring the viewers that the war is unlikely to reach Norway
- covering Ukrainian refugees fleeing to Norway and other European countries
- answering questions we received from our young viewers.

The last point is an important one. NRK *Supernytt* actively uses incoming questions from kids to make sure that we are relevant to our audience and to

make them feel included. The main sources of these questions are comments on our posts on TikTok and an in-house video submitting system, called "Monitor", where we receive hundreds of messages and videos each day. Hence, we can include children asking or talking about the Ukraine war directly in our news stories (Ill. 3). We also initiated a press conference with Norway's Prime Minister Støre, exclusively answering questions posed to NRK *Supernytt* by children.

NRK *Supernytt* is watched by some 100,000 school children every weekday. We get a lot of feedback from both teachers and parents, and most of it refers to our news coverage as being enlightening as well as reducing fear and anxiety. One parent told us that after watching *Supernytt* his son had started selling his home-made Ukrainian flags and donated the money to the Red Cross. One of many responders on Twitter stated: "*Supernytt* is a TV show that takes children seriously by breaking down and explaining the news they see on TV."

We have gathered a lot of experience from all this. The foremost is that children are even more concerned and curious than you would think. They crave explanations for important events they hear and read about, and want to contribute as much as they are able to. It



Ill. 3: To give children the feeling that they are being taken seriously *Supernytt* takes up questions from the children in the program

is also our experience that even sad, dramatic or disturbing news can be told to kids, it all depends on the words we use and the tone of voice. In NRK *Supernytt*, one of our main missions is to always try to bring hope and possibly optimism to the reporting, also when the news are grave.

Tina Antončič (Chief Editor of Infodrom, RTV Slovenia)



In the children's and youth programmes of Television Slovenia we follow events at home and around the world in *Infodrom*. *Infodrom* is a news show for children which is broadcast once a week on Friday afternoon on our first TV channel. The show is 13 minutes long and it is a weekly overview of different events.

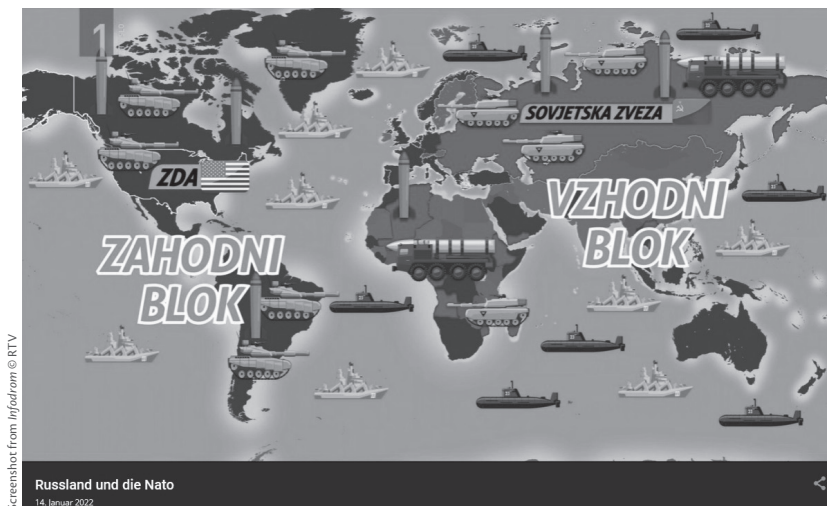
Even before Russia's attack on Ukraine, there were frictions between the 2 countries. In the show we had already reported what was happening, what had happened to the Crimean Peninsula, what role NATO plays in the region, why there are tensions at the border between Russia and the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk and Donetsk (Ill. 4).

On the day of the Russian attack, we had already finished the frame and

the production of the weekly show, but, of course, we completely changed our plan. Our editorial team started reporting on the attack on our social networks on the same day. Since there was no live broadcast on the day the war started, we reported on Instagram. The children started sending us many questions which we answered with the help of experts.

Since the questions were numerous and refugees started arriving in Slovenia the very next day after the attack, we decided to prepare a special, longer and in-depth *Infodrom* show for our young viewers - *Infodrom extra*. We thought it was important that even our youngest viewers understood what was happening and got a broader insight into the terrible subject they encountered in various media. We follow the idea that only if we are aware of and well informed about a topic, are we less afraid, making it is easier to understand what is happening around us.

In the special show, we shed light on what kind of country Ukraine is and how the war reached a young Ukrainian girl who lives in Slovenia. Via Skype we connected with a boy who stayed with his family in Kyiv. He told us what it is like to live in an apartment that they do not leave, to hear missiles, to have to sleep in the bathroom because it has no windows, to have to run to the bunker in the basement when they hear sirens. We also spoke to an expert who answered children's questions: "How is it even possible that the war started?", "Is this the beginning of the third world war?", "Does the Russian army follow the rules of war?" etc. We also recorded a report with a group of children who organized a fundraising campaign to help Ukrainians.



Ill. 4: Even before the attack on February 24, 2022 *Infodrom* reported about the conflict in the Russian-Ukrainian border region, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the role of NATO in this region

In addition, we hosted a psychologist who explained to the children what to do if the news scared them and made them worry, and she gave some instructions on how they could best welcome refugees from Ukraine. We have received information from schools that some pupils started harassing children with Russian roots, so we thought it was important to produce a piece about the friendship between Russian and Ukrainian children. They told our viewers: “We don’t want any conflicts between us, because that depends on the politicians and the leaders of the countries that made the war, not on us residents.”

In all further shows, in addition to the weekly events in Ukraine, the focus was on our young audience and their values: empathy, solidarity, and help. We introduced many young Ukrainians who are trying to continue their life in Slovenia in their own way, although they all want to return home as soon as possible.

When events happen at home and around the world that frighten youngsters, they bombard us with questions and our task (though difficult) is to answer them responsibly, fact-based and in an age-appropriate way. And, more important, we are with them – not only in the live show, but every day on our social networks. Since we have

been producing *Infodrom* for more than 10 years, we are aware that if such events happen we should not wait for a suitable time to explain what is happening, but we must answer the children’s questions and respond to their concerns and fears immediately. This can be challenging, as we are only a very small editorial team. There is nothing wrong with telling children that some things are still unknown and that no one can answer certain questions, but it is important to address them at all.

Lisa Fender (Senior Producer, CBC Kids News) & Marie McCann (Senior Director, Children’s Content, CBC, Canada)



Our teams resolved to help kids living in Canada understand this conflict in a child-appropriate way. We also have tried to reflect the support that many Canadian children have given to Ukrainian kids and to shine a light on efforts to help them physically and emotionally. Some of our content has also tried to address kids’ fears that the conflict could affect

them personally (Ill. 5) and we have told the stories of many kids who are refugees living in Canada or who have close family members in Ukraine.

For preschoolers:

In April 2022, kids from our preschool singalong series *Ukulele U* participated in “Stand Up for Ukraine”, a world wide social media rally to mobilize humanitarian aid for refugees and conflicts around the world. Along with Canadian songwriter Melanie Doane, they performed the Beatles song “All You Need is Love” as well as Justin Bieber’s “Friends”. The messages of peace and love are symbolic of *Ukulele U*, a singalong musical variety show that models inclusivity and kindness.²

For school age:

CBCKidsnews.ca is a daily, digital news service for tweens 9-13. We produce news for kids and with kids. Our goal is to help kids better understand the world around them. Canada has the third largest Ukrainian population in the world and *CBCkidsnews.ca* has been covering the war in Ukraine since the early days of the conflict. Our stories reflect the perspective and concerns of Canadian and Ukrainian kids who live in Canada as well as in Europe. Some of our early content focused on questions from kids about the war – particularly if Canadian kids were safe from the conflict. Recent stories have included how young refugees celebrated Ukrainian Independence Day in British Columbia, how a boy from Ontario flew to Poland with 440 backpacks for Ukrainian kids, why Russia has been accused of war crimes, efforts to rescue pets and animals in Ukraine and the personal story of a teen who escaped the war on foot. Another theme has been to counter misinformation on social media that has been very present. Our strategy is to continue to tell this evolving story from kids’ perspective and not shy away from difficult topics.³

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Elke Franke & Ulises Soto (*Vientos Culturales, Mexico*)



Our team at *Vientos Culturales* tried to analyze the main messages that could cause confusion and fear among Mexican children. These were the geographical location and the mentioning of a potential third world war. We realized that children did not know where

Ukraine is located, that they did not have knowledge about the First and Second World War, and that they

were afraid. This is why we decided to show that Ukraine is far away, provided them with background knowledge about World War I and II (Ill. 6), tried to remove their fears and aggressiveness and voted for a peaceful world.

If the information situation is unclear, we usually do not tell the story in our children's news; *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan* until we have reliable information. We try to avoid anything that causes more fear and instead try to provide useful information. We rely on the hope-factor, explain that this is not the children's responsibility or fault, and we always include messages that call for peace.

When we produce content about Mexican civil wars or violent conflicts, the Mexican networks for human rights often take our content and distribute it in order to address their adult audiences.⁴

Marcela Benavides (*Content Manager, Eureka and Canal Capital*) & Sandra Téllez (*Producer, Eureka, Colombia*)



One of the main topics of *Eureka* is citizenship and children's rights. It is important to offer high-quality information to children about what is happening in the world. For example, the war in Ukraine is an issue of global and media impact that worries children.

Therefore, it is necessary to explain the conflict to them, in particular if you consider that Colombia has had an internal war for more than 50 years that still worries children and which is an issue that was not usually discussed with them. They receive their information about the war through the news for adults and their families, but it is not usual that issues like the internal war in Colombia or armed conflicts in other parts of the world are discussed with children. Against this background, *Eureka* has created digital contents in which we explain to the children some of the reasons for the war in Ukraine (Ill. 7). The most important lesson we have learned on the subject of the war in Colombia and the wars that occur in the rest of the world is that in order to talk about childhood citizenship it is necessary to maintain a dialogue with the children about the country and the world in which they live. In the case of Colombia, it is important to talk about the situation in which we are living and to tell them that we are in a process of achieving peace. It is also important to reflect on the behaviors that lead us to maintain harmony and peace in each

Here are some tips for dealing with sad or scary news:



Screenshot from CBC Kids News © CBC

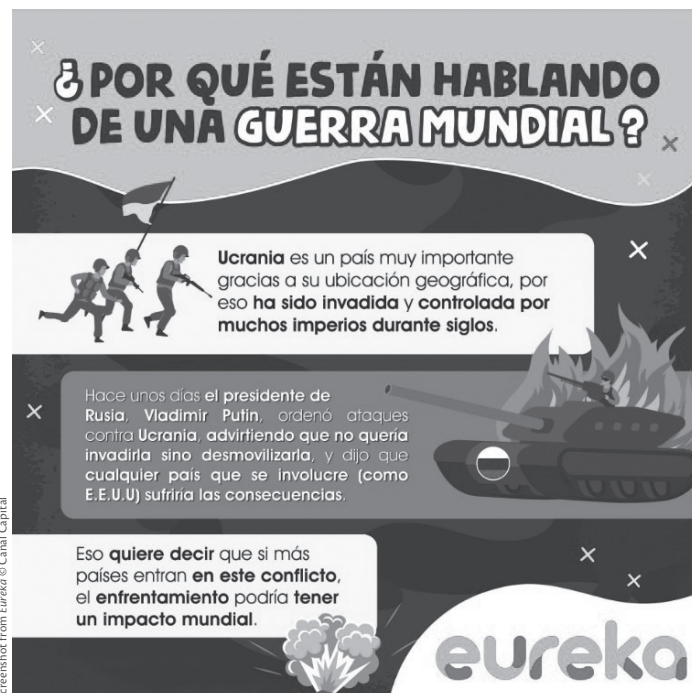
Ill. 5: On the CBC Kids News website, children can find tips on how to deal with sad and scary news



Screenshot from Vientos, noticias que vuelan © Vientos Culturales

Ill. 6: Since Mexican children had little knowledge about the 2 world wars, *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan* produced a program with historical background

house, neighborhood, city, in the country and within themselves. We are also interested in knowing the direct or indirect impact the war has on their emotional and physical health to be able to encourage them to talk about these feelings and to offer information where they can get help. In addition, we help them to develop critical thinking about the reasons for the war in Colombia through contents and strategies that make them understand the subject.⁵



Ill. 7: Eureka conveys background information on the Ukraine war primarily via digital content

Yasuda Shin (Secretary General Japan Prize/NHK, Japan)



After the war on Ukraine was waged by Russia, NHK's Japan Prize Secretariat reached out to former jury members and prize recipients (so-called

"Japan Prize alumni") to exchange information about the situation in each country or region, mainly focusing on how the war is being reported in the media and what, if any, measures were taken to support young viewers who are feeling anxious and confused in light of the recent mass coverage of the war. The members also discussed about how they can cultivate a feeling of solidarity with the people of Ukraine in each country or region. The most valuable asset of The Japan Prize is the international network of like-minded producers, creators, and educators, and the dialogue among them soon led to the idea of producing a special program that provided a safe space for parents and children to discuss about war and peace. The Japan Prize pitched the idea to NHK's Educational Channel and was commissioned to produce 2 half-hour

special programs that showcased an anthology of Japan Prize works. The works were selected from the list of past Japan Prize winners and finalists and shared in common the topics of bravery and hope in face of violence and aggression. For this special program, the Japan Prize Secretariat reached out to producers, directors, and animators of the selected works and recorded interviews with them. In these interviews, the producers spoke directly to the young audience and addressed ways in which their works could be used to talk about what is happening in Ukraine and to cultivate empathy for the victims of war. Even though many of the works didn't deal with the war per se, the producers empathized that their works could be used for understanding the importance of peace building, solidarity, and friendship.

The special programs were produced in less than 2 weeks, and on March 30, 2022, NHK broadcast 2 episodes of *Japan Prize Special: Let's talk about War and Peace – A Safe Space for Children and Parents*.

The first episode was entitled *Showing Solidarity* and featured 3 Japan Prize works: *Children of the Holocaust* (UK), *Bury Me, My Love* (France), and *Rabbit and Deer* (Hungary). The second episode was entitled *Finding Hope* and featured 3 Japan Prize works: *No Fish Where to Go?* (Canada), *Sesame Street Special: Power of We* (USA), and *What Would You Do?* (Colombia).

Both programs received positive feedback from the viewers and proved the strength of Japan Prize works and its network of producers.

They also highlighted the importance of looking at global events such as a war from multiple viewpoints through the lens of visual artists and filmmakers.

NOTES

¹ In 2017, a truck was deliberately driven into crowds in central Stockholm by an Islamist terrorists; 5 people were killed, 14 people were seriously injured.

² <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1334016557103876> [10.1.23]

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/kidsnews/post/canadian-kids-ask-is-canada-safe-from-the-russia-ukraine-war/>; <https://www.cbc.ca/kidsnews/post/this-teen-escaped-war-in-ukraine-here-is-his-story/>; <https://www.cbc.ca/kidsnews/post/watch-volunteers-help-ukrainian-pets-flee-the-war-with-russia/>; <https://www.cbc.ca/kidsnews/post/experts-answer-10-questions-from-canadian-kids-on-russian-invasion-of-ukrai/> [10.1.23]

⁴ <https://youtu.be/14Jn-QkwA4c?list=PLG0CvxNy1a6ycG45NoHWshaUXHJuYyc73>; <https://youtu.be/Ovb3KJP--3s?list=PLG0CvxNy1a6ycG45NoHWshaUXHJuYyc73> [10.1.23]

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/eurekatucanal/>; <https://www.facebook.com/eurekatucanal/photos/452325189969681>; <https://conexioncapital.com/informe-comision-verdad-chicxs/> [10.1.23]