

What television news reports

AN ANALYSIS OF THEMES IN REPORTS ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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An IZI study analysed coverage in German television's primary news programmes for adults and children on the war in Ukraine, looking into the various themes portrayed.

Visual media play a key role in reporting on, interpreting and documenting war. The discourse on the power of images to create facts and emotions also often deals with the responsibility and limitations of journalism. Nearly 2 weeks after the Russian attack on Ukraine, the *New York Times* showed a photo of a murdered Ukrainian family, a mother with her teenage son and primary-school-aged daughter, without blurring their faces. The newspaper placed this photo on the front page and the corresponding Internet article,¹ fuelling the discussion about images of war in German media, as well. Is this an example of authentic "proof of a war crime"² that must be published so that the war is not downplayed? Should they not be shown at all from a media-ethical perspective or, if they need to be shown, then is it more appropriate to blur them? After all, even with blurred images the recipients get an insight into the reality of war, but the blurring helps uphold the dignity and privacy of the dead (Samnick, 2022). German coverage also had different ways of dealing with the horrific pictures of the Bucha massacre in April 2022. The TV news programme *heute* (ZDF), *tagesschau* (ARD), *RTL aktuell* (RTL) and *Newstime* (ProSieben) as well as the children's news programme *logo!* (ZDF/KiKA).³ In reference to the youth survey (see also Götz & Holler in this issue) and the discourse on reporting on the war crimes in Bucha, 3 evalua-

tion periods were selected. In the first evaluation period (February 23 until March 1, 2022), reporting was analysed for one week starting with the day before the Russian invasion of Ukraine (IZI study 1). The second evaluation period (March 2 until March 8, 2022) covered the news programmes for one week starting one week after the war began (IZI study 2). In the third evaluation period (April 3 until April 9, 2022), the news programmes were investigated for one week starting with the events in Bucha. All news stories in the respective programmes that reported on the war in Ukraine and the consequences of the war were included in the analysis. The research question was: Which themes were discussed and shown? Besides primary themes, especially the main themes that were repeated in reporting on the war in Ukraine were coded. The studies also looked into whether the stories showed images of the dead, injured, children or destroyed buildings. In total, n=546 news items from 102 shows⁴ were analysed. In 3 *logo!* shows in evaluation period 3 (*logo!* from April 3, 5 and 7, 2022), the war was not mentioned. Building on the quantitative analysis, individual qualitative analyses were carried out centred on the themes. The key findings are summarised in the following.

THE STUDY

Following Früh (2001), a quantitative analysis was carried out for the leading news programmes *heute* (ZDF), *tagesschau* (ARD), *RTL aktuell* (RTL) and *Newstime* (ProSieben) as well as the children's news programme *logo!* (ZDF/KiKA).³ In reference to the youth survey (see also Götz & Holler in this issue) and the discourse on reporting on the war crimes in Bucha, 3 evalua-

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REPORTING THEMES

The theme analysis clearly shows differences in the focus of reporting on the war in Ukraine (Ill. 1). Besides

the differences between reports for adults and children, the public broadcasting programmes *tagesschau* and *heute* (with n=282 stories total) also showed different foci than the news programmes from the private commercial programmes *RTL aktuell* and *Newstime* (with n=216 stories total).

Reporting for adults: War events and politics

One of the main themes of news programmes for adult viewers was the provision of information and stories on the current events in the war, e.g., discussing attacks and their consequences or negotiations between the warring parties. Another frequent theme was politics outside of Russia and Ukraine, including stories that focused on political negotiations and decisions, diplomatic measures or institutional processes. Specific examples of this were a meeting of the NATO foreign ministers or the review of Ukraine’s application to join the EU. Often this was discussed in connection with sanctions against Russia. In the news programmes on the public broadcasting channels, stories on politics and possible sanctions were shown more frequently than in the programmes of private commercial channels. The latter more frequently focussed on war events in general.

Children’s news: Explanations about the war and reports on solidarity and aid

On *logo!*, background information and explanations about the war were key. In slightly more than one-third of the reports, general information and explanations of terms and situations related to the war against Ukraine

were given while in the programmes for adults, it was assumed that the viewers were already familiar with these terms. For example, explanatory pieces dealt with what nuclear weapons or war crimes are, what NATO or SWIFT mean, or why people cannot charge Putin in a court of law. With one exception,⁵ the explanation of standard terms was a unique feature of reports designed for children.

Another focus in the children’s news programme was the theme of solidar-

ity. In one-quarter of the *logo!* stories analysed, statements of solidarity with Ukraine were discussed or shown. In the adult news programmes, this theme only arose in 1 in 10 stories. These included stories on demonstrations or campaigns against the war. Additionally, 2 out of 10 stories focussed on concrete assistance for Ukraine, military, financial or humanitarian aid from states or help from the wider population for refugees or aid in the form of material donations.

Situation of people in Ukraine and those fleeing

One theme that could be found frequently in the reports was the living conditions or emotional state of the people in Ukraine and the civilians’ resistance. This theme was seen most often in the stories of the private broadcasters’ news programmes. The development of refugee movements or the situation of refugees was the theme of 2 in 10 stories, although there were proportionally fewer in the children’s news programmes than in those for adults. The adult news programmes also depicted personal and dramatic stories of people fleeing Ukraine or arriving in Germany or other European countries, for example, a mother of 2 children with cancer talked about her journey (*RTL Aktuell* on March 6, 2022).

Situation and knowledge of people in Russia

The situation of people in Russia was also a theme found in reporting on the war in Ukraine. This included stories on dem-



III. 1: Themes in stories shown on the main public broadcasting news programmes, private commercial news programmes and the children’s news programme *logo!*

Screenshot from *logo!* © ZDF

Ill. 2: The children's news programme *logo!* explained what nuclear weapons are

onstrations, war propaganda, media censorship or restrictions on the freedom of speech. In the children's news programme, this theme was found in 2 out of every 10 stories, but in the news programmes of the private commercial broadcasters (6%) and the public broadcasters (10%) it was less frequent.

Politicians as key actors

Another notable theme was the representations of the 2 politicians Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin as key actors. Putin's actions and appearances were discussed more frequently (13%) in the private news programmes than in the reports of the public broadcasters (6%), especially at the start of the war (evaluation period 1). In comparison, Putin as a person was shown more often and his position played an important role in the explanations, e.g., on the topics of

natural gas or nuclear weapons. The Ukrainian President Zelensky was never shown on *logo!* with the exception of one background picture. In the news programmes for adults, Zelensky was mentioned in 15% of the stories analysed, e.g., in recorded speeches in which he asks for assistance from other countries or when visiting the destroyed city of Bucha.

Possibility of a nuclear war

Stories that discussed the possibility of a nuclear war or world war were not particularly frequent. The scenario was picked up more often in the news programmes of the private broadcasters (6%) than in those of the public broadcasters (1%). In some cases the stories showed dramatic enactments and played up insecurities and fears the viewers might have. In the *RTL Aktuell* or *Newstime* news studios, for example, the background pictures

were montages of atomic and nuclear weapons, symbols of radioactivity, Vladimir Putin or children with fear in their eyes. The reports showed flying missiles and explosions, and they mentioned a demand for iodine tablets or the lack of bunkers.

Overall, the theme "nuclear war" was discussed most frequently in the children's news programme (17%), but in *logo!* the focus was on explaining basic terms using an explanatory piece on the topic "What are nuclear weapons?" (Ill. 2). To minimise children's fear of a possible nuclear war, experts talked about how improbable it is that nuclear bombs will be used. Children's questions were taken seriously and answered specifically, which helps children better understand the situation as a whole (cf. Götz, 2021).

Destruction

The destruction wrought by the war was mentioned and shown less frequently in reports in February (14% of the reports in evaluation period 1) than at the beginning of April (31% of the reports in evaluation period 3). The analysis paid particular attention to the depiction of destroyed and bombed buildings, which were often found in the children's and youths' drawings on the war in Ukraine (see also Mlapa in this issue). Destroyed buildings were shown somewhat more frequently in the private broadcasting (22%) than in the children's (19%) or the public broadcasting news programmes (14%). On the private programmes, private buildings were shown more frequently than public buildings such as hospitals or schools that had been destroyed. On the public programmes, the 2 types of destroyed buildings were shown equally. In two-thirds of the children's news stories, the type of building cannot be determined from the depiction or context.

Casualties

If the victims of the war were discussed or shown or if the number of dead and

injured was reported, then this was coded as a theme. The frequency with which dead or injured people were actually shown in the images was also counted.

The children's news programme did not show anyone who was injured or dead, but it was still a theme. 6% of the *logo!* stories reported on the injured and/or dead.

In a total of 7% of all stories analysed, images of the dead were shown. This occurred twice as frequently in the private broadcasters' programmes (10%) as compared to the public programmes (5%), and the images were shown primarily in evaluation period 3 (starting with the reporting on the war crimes in Bucha). In one-quarter of the stories in the beginning of April, dead people could be seen. On *tagesschau*, *RTL Aktuell* and *Newstime*, at least the faces or the corpses were blurred. Only close-ups, for example of bound hands, were shown without blurring the image. On *heute*, the dead were shown without any blurring in very few cases, but they were not shown close-up and, if so, then no faces could be seen. The majority of the dead people shown were adult civilians (58%). Somewhat less than one-third of the dead people could not be more closely identified, and 6% were dead soldiers. Dead children could be seen in 2 stories from the private commercial broadcasters.

Especially when the news reports on children, young viewers empathetically experience the events in the reports, and if a news story mentions that children are affected, then this can scare children who are viewing the story (cf. Götz, 2021). The analysis therefore looked especially in-depth at those news stories in which children could be seen.

REPRESENTATION OF CHILDREN

In a total of one-fifth of the stories analysed, children were part of the reporting. They were shown somewhat more frequently in the news programmes of the private commercial broadcasters (24%) than in those of the public broadcasters (18%). In the children's news programme, the reports mentioned children nearly as frequently (23%). Children were shown especially in evaluation period 2, that is, 1 week after the war began.

Children as victims or actors

One particular difference was the way in which children were portrayed (Ill. 3 and 4). In *logo!*, German children were shown as active participants in almost half of the stories, almost exclusively in the context of expressions of solidarity

and assistance campaigns, for example at demonstrations or when collecting donations. In the reports in the main news programmes for adults, the proportion of children shown as active participants was only 8% in the public broadcasting programmes and 2% in the private news programmes. There, children were depicted primarily as victims of the war and were shown fleeing in thick winter jackets, for example (Ill. 4). Some of them were crying, exhausted, saying goodbye to their fathers, or huddled together and scared in cellars or underground stations; in the stories of the private broadcasting programmes, they were also shown with injuries or dead next to grieving parents.

Emotionalising and dramatising individual miseries

DRAMATISING IN THE REPORTS

The images mentioned above are examples of a tendency toward dramatising that can be found in the reporting styles of the private broadcasters. The stories become a drama, to which the events and images of the war already lend themselves, and they are made even more dramatic and emotional when individual miseries are shown.



Ill. 3 and 4: Depiction of fleeing children: On *logo!* (February 28, 2022), a girl talks about her journey (left), and a crying girl fleeing from the war can be seen in a *Newstime* report (February 27, 2022) (right)



Ill. 5 and 6: Dramatising using background pictures: A simple image on *heute* (left) and a dramatising photo montage on *Newstime* (right)

When qualitatively assessing the background images shown on the news programmes, it could be seen that these not only referred to the topic of the report but also pointed to how the theme was being discussed. The public broadcasters used simple background images in the programmes *tagesschau* and *heute*, typically showing individual pictures from the upcoming stories. *logo!* used a similar design. The background pictures on *RTL Aktuell* and *Newstime* were often photo montages, for example in a report on a special session of the German Bundestag on February 27, 2022: The background picture for *heute* (Ill. 5) showed German Chancellor Olaf Scholz giving a statement. On *Newstime*, a picture of Olaf Scholz giving his speech was also shown, but photo elements of a destroyed house from which smoke is emanating were added, and over this a picture of Vladimir Putin's face (Ill. 6).

Constructive and solution-oriented news journalism

SUMMARY

High-quality children's news programmes pick up the themes and interests of their target group and attempt to convey the news in a way that is positive and does not cause any addi-

tional emotional distress. On the other hand, part of their task is to report on relevant events such as war and crises. Research has shown how that can be successful with "constructive news", for example (for a summary, cf. vom Orde, 2021). But does that only apply to young viewers? Surveys have made it clear that more and more people are reducing their consumption of the news because the focus is so negative (Reuters Institute, 2022). This implies that constructive news journalism that focuses on solutions is relevant for all target groups in order to enable sustainable societal participation and civic education.

NOTES

- ¹ Warning: An image of dead people is shown. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/world/europe/ukraine-irpin-civilian-death.html> [25.10.22]
- ² <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/panorama/fotoaddario-ukraine-krieg-russland-100.html> [20.10.11]
- ³ The editions of the programmes were *tagesschau* at 8 p.m., *heute* at 7 p.m., *RTL Aktuell* at 6:45 p.m. and *ProSieben Newstime* at 6:00 p.m.
- ⁴ Due to a technical error, *RTL Aktuell* was not recorded from 3.4.–5.4.22 and could thus not be included in the analysis.
- ⁵ In the *RTL Aktuell* edition on February 26, 2022, one story gave explanations to the following questions: What is NATO? Who is a member of NATO? How strong is NATO in military terms? What happens in a mutual defence case?

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