

Do men create different children's television than women?

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A secondary analysis of the data from the study “Children’s Television Worldwide 2: Gender Representation” looked at who had created programmes to investigate whether men invent different stories than women.

What do *Pooh Bear*, *The Muppet Show*, *Jim Knopf und Lukas der Lokomotivführer*, *The Little Prince* (III.1), *Peter Pan* and *Wickie und die starken Männer* have in common? They were created by men, and the plots centre on boys or boyish animals. Girls and women do feature, but they usually have a supporting narrative function. *The Little Prince* needs someone he can tell about his adventures (III. 2), *Peter Pan* needs someone to rescue and to show his fantasy world to, and *Wickie* needs someone to wait for him at home.

In these stories for children, the male creators have inscribed their wishes and hopes and thus their own socialization as men. The Smurfs are prototypical of this type of narrative.

The Smurf is inherently male (III. 3). He lives in a world of a hundred little blue men, all happily using their talents in their work. In the first episode of the animation series,¹ the evil wizard Gargamel, unable to bear the Smurfs’ happiness, devises the ultimate means of disrupting their blissful contentment: he magically creates a female Smurf from a lump of blue clay. The result is a Smurfette, a dark-haired girl Smurf, flirtatious, cunning, helpless and very emotional. Smurfette almost succeeds in sowing strife between the Smurfs, but then, overcome by guilt, she feels compelled to confess Gargamel’s devious plan. Papa Smurf recognizes the potential beneath the ugly exterior, and magically transforms the devious, dark-haired girl Smurf into a real woman:

blonde, sexy and in high heels. The other Smurfs are drawn with their tongues hanging out and their eyes popping out of their heads with lust at the sight of the new Smurfette. This serves to show their enthusiasm for the female. Highly displeased, Gargamel is forced to withdraw to his dilapidated castle

with his cat. From then on, Smurfette lives in the Smurf village.

Many stories for children are set in a world conceived by men; in the case of the Smurfs it is that of the Belgian artist and author Peyo (Pierre Culliford). He invented a world in which female characters are not only blatantly under-represented, but in which the story has a deeply inscribed male gaze.² The woman (Smurfette) – created by the man (Gargamel) – sets out to seduce the men (the Smurfs) (stereotype of the vamp). But she is not strong enough (too emotional), so men (the Smurfs) have to help her, and a particularly good man (Papa Smurf) transforms her into a “proper” woman (blonde, sexy, with a short dress and high-heeled shoes) – to the delight of all the men (the Smurfs). This is a view of women which Simone de Beauvoir summed up in 1949 with the term “the second sex”. Men, who have the power to define the symbolic material of a culture, position themselves as the essential, and assign women the



III. 2: Girls have a supporting narrative function: *The Little Prince* tells *The Rose* about his adventures



III. 1: 65.4 % of the stories created by men centre on boys



Ill. 3: The Smurfs live in a world of hundred little blue men

role of the other, the object, which is only conceivable in relation to men (De Beauvoir, 1949/1968/2014). In this context, and with reference to films, Laura Mulvey (1975) speaks of the “triple male gaze”. The male gaze upon women is inscribed into the script, the camera work, and the direction. When the character of Smurfette is introduced to the Smurf universe, the male gaze can hardly be overlooked, and the Smurfs are not alone in this. Elizabeth Prommer and Skadi Loist refer to film and television production as an “industry culture with a gender bias” (Prommer & Loist, 2019). In terms of numbers, the dominance of men in the children’s television market is easily proven. Analysis of the catalogue of MIPJunior, the world’s largest trade fair for children’s and youth programmes, shows that over 7 out of 10 programmes are written by men as head writers (Ill. 4) and produced by men (Ill. 5). When it comes to direction, the proportion is even higher: 9 out of 10 programmes are directed by men (Ill. 6).

But do men really create different stories than women? Beyond the analysis of individual programmes, is it possible to prove a significant quantitative difference between men and women in the role of the “creator”? This was the starting point for a secondary analysis of the data set “Children’s Television Worldwide 2: Gender Representation” (Götz et al., 2018),³ from the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI), which looked at the creators of shows to investigate whether there were significant differences in content.

THE STUDY

In the study, a total of $n=12,177$ programmes in 10 countries⁴ were recorded and subjected to a content analysis. Coding was based on 25 categories of analysis, including the main characters and main secondary characters, their nature (human, animal, magical being etc.), their sex, their main resource for solving problems, and the sex of the people who devised the material for the show (the creators). The material from German children’s television consisted of 512 programmes from the schedules of the children’s broadcasters KiKA, Super RTL, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon.⁵

What are the characteristics of children’s television in Germany?

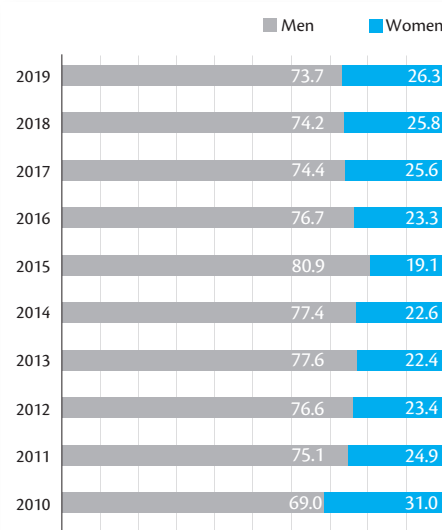
The majority of German children’s television is fictional (85 %), and this fictional television consists mainly of animations,

i.e. cartoons (83 %). Over 90 % of the shows broadcast by the commercial providers are fictional, while 64 % of the programmes offered by the public service channel KiKA are fictional, 19 % are non-fictional, and 17 % are mixed formats.

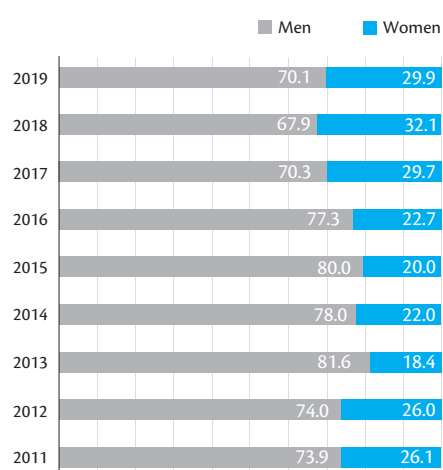
Analysis of the country of production shows that children’s television in Germany is mainly imported from abroad. Of the children’s programmes broadcast, only 7 % were produced exclusively in Germany. The largest proportion is made up of external productions (80 %) and international coproductions involving Germany (14 %).⁶ External productions make up over 94 % of programming at Nickelodeon and Super RTL, and 48 % at KiKA, while 17 % of KiKA’s shows are produced in Germany and 35 % are international coproductions.

Of the 1,517 fictional main characters or main secondary characters analysed from German children’s television, twice as many are male: 65.4 % are male, 33.4 % female.⁷ In an international comparison, this puts Germany in second-to-last place.

72 % of fictional programmes are developed by men or by purely male teams



Ill. 4: Who writes children’s programmes? Head authors 2010-2019³



III. 5: Who produces children's programmes? Producers 2011-2019⁴

Who creates stories for children's television?

Typically, fictional children's television has a creator who came up with the initial idea, which is often based on a book or comic.

In Germany, 72 % of fictional programmes were developed by men or by purely male teams, 14 % by women or female teams, the rest (14 %) by mixed teams. This puts Germany in the middle of the international field, however the United Kingdom – with 24 % of programmes created by purely female teams, 56 % by purely male teams, and 20 % by mixed teams – is well ahead in terms of equality (III. 7).

Who is at the centre of the action?

In children's television programmes broadcast in Germany that were created by a man, 2 out of 3 main characters and main secondary characters are male.

29.3 % of the central characters invented by male creators are female. When women come up with programme ideas for children, 55.8 % of the main characters and main secondary characters are female.

In half of all programmes thought up by women (50 %), girls or women play the main role. In the programmes created by men, not even a quarter of the characters clearly conceived as the main character (23.5 %) are female.

This tendency is equally significant internationally. If the stories are devised by women, 47.9 % have female characters and therefore a nearly balanced sex ratio. If the programmes are created by men, there are almost twice as many male protagonists as female ones (65.4 % as opposed to 32.8 %). Of the

fictional characters created by mixed teams, 39 % are female and 59 % male. In short, women are much more likely to put female characters at the centre of their stories and their universes. But while men tell stories focusing on their own sex more than twice as often, women remain closer to the real distribution of the sexes in society.

Humans or fantasy creatures

When men invent stories for children's television, 6 out of 10 of their stories (61.8 %) have human characters, while the others put animals, plants or objects (8.8 %), such as Bernd das Brot (a loaf of bread), at the centre of the action. The characters devised by women are more often human (73.3 %), and none of the programmes created by women in this sample centre on a living plant or object. A similar but much less marked tendency can be found internationally (women 55.7 % human characters, men 52.7 %).

National and ethnocultural diversity

Of the human characters invented by men, only a small proportion are People of Co-

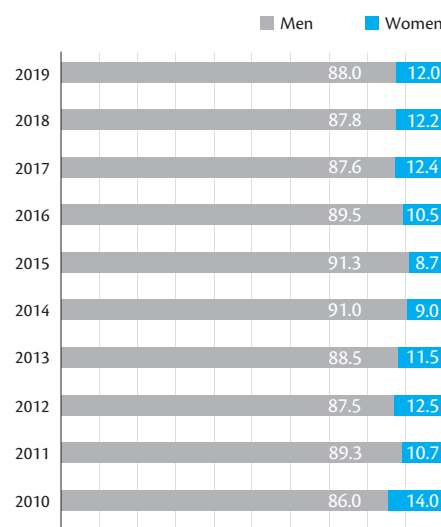
lour (PoC) (4.2 %). This is different for the characters created by women: 19 % of them, for example, have a national, ethnic or cultural background that can be identified as Black.⁸

This tendency is also apparent in other countries. Internationally, the main characters created by women were more seldom white⁹ than those created by men (61 % versus 71 %), and women told more stories with central Black characters than men or purely male teams. While 9 % of characters in the sample as a whole were Black, they played a main part in 15 % of the shows created by women and only in 7 % of those created by men.

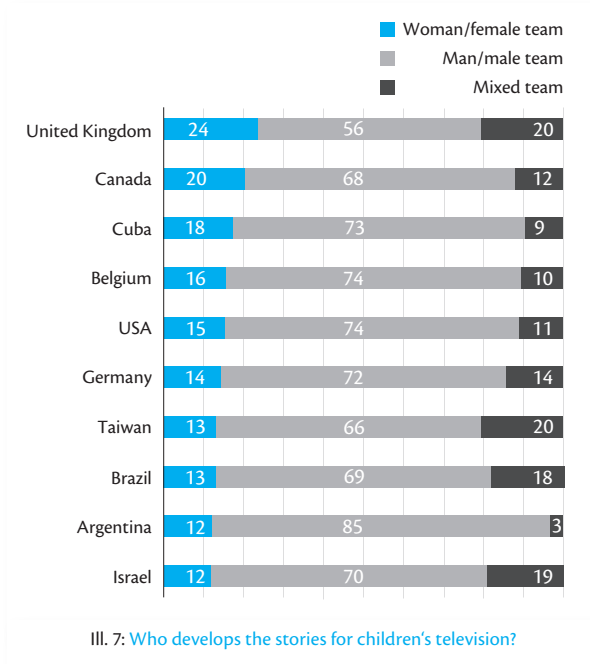
Problem-solving strategy

When it comes to the characters' main problem-solving strategies, they most often use conversations or organization (24.3 %) to resolve the challenges they face during the story, but there are also a few who use technology (or STEM knowledge) (8.8 %), magic (6.7 %) or physical strength, i.e. fighting (6.4 %).

The characters devised by men more often use physical strength to solve problems (8.7 %), a narrative that does not occur in any of the programmes



III. 6: Who directs children's programmes? Directors 2010-2019⁵



created by women. Besides physical strength, key problem-solving resources used by characters invented by men are technology or scientific knowledge (7.6 %), or in some cases magic (5.7 %).

In contrast, the characters invented by women more often solve their problems with magic (22.1 % versus 5.7 %). Here it is mainly the female characters who use magic. One third (33.3 %) of all the female characters invented by women use magic, while the male characters created by women are much less likely to have this gift (8.8 %). Fighting and physical strength do not feature in the formats created by women in this sample. This tendency is also evident internationally. Women creating children's television are more likely to evoke magic as a problem-solving strategy (24 % of women versus 12 % of men) and less likely to evoke physical strength (6 % versus 16 %) or STEM skills (9 % versus 19 %).

CONCLUSION

Men and male teams create different stories for children than women and

female teams. Men are more likely to invent fantasy worlds in which male characters take centre stage, often supported by another male character (e.g. in the role of the stupid sidekick) and a female character (often responsible for emotions and problems). Here, alongside conflict resolution through communication, physical strength is much more often envisaged as a problem-solving strategy

than in children's television created by women.

Women, in contrast, more often evoke magic as one of the main strengths of their protagonists. Furthermore, women come up with more gender-equitable stories, in which the female characters are imagined in more active roles, and a greater national, ethnic and cultural diversity is represented. In summary, if programmes are based on story ideas created by women, or if women are tasked with developing a story idea, then this leads to change: more gender equity and more real diversity.

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NOTES

¹ Die Schlumpfine (Smurfette) first broadcast in Germany on Friday 22 April 1983, ZDF.

² This does not change until the third Smurf feature film, where 2 women wrote the script and the production team was mixed. In *Smurfs 3 - The Lost Village*, there is a village peopled entirely by female Smurfs, who prove to be well able to defend themselves.

³ <https://childrens-tv-worldwide.com/> [22.2.2021]

⁴ In each of the participating countries, Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Germany, the United Kingdom, Israel, Canada, Cuba, the USA and Taiwan, between 150 and 300 hours of programming from the most-viewed children's channels or children's broadcasting platforms were recorded.

⁵ 178 hours of television made explicitly for children were recorded in the period covered by the study, 21 to 24 September 2017.

⁶ Totals may differ from 100 % due to rounding.

⁷ As well as 1.3 % neutral characters such as the Mouse, the Elephant, and the rabbit Kikaninchen.

⁸ "Black people" is a self-designation and describes a social position affected by racism. "Black is capitalized to make it clear that this is a constructed classification and not a real 'characteristic' which can be attributed to skin colour. So in this context 'being Black' does not mean being assigned to an actual or assumed 'ethnic group', but is linked with the common experience of racism, the experience of being perceived in a certain way." Source: Amnesty International Glossar für diskriminierungssensible Sprache. <https://www.amnesty.de/2017/3/1/glossar-fuer-diskriminierungssensible-sprache> [23.2.2021]

⁹ "White" and "being white", like "being Black", does not designate a biological characteristic or a real skin colour, but a political and social construction. Being white [in italics] refers to the dominant and privileged position within the power relation of racism, which otherwise usually remains unspoken and unmentioned. Being white comprises an unconscious concept of identity and of the self, which informs white people in their self-perception and their behaviour, and assigns them a privileged place in society, in terms of e.g. access to resources. Source: Amnesty International Glossar für diskriminierungssensible Sprache. <https://www.amnesty.de/2017/3/1/glossar-fuer-diskriminierungssensible-sprache> [23.2.2021]

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