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Gender in children's television worldwide

Results from a media analysis in 24 countries

In the world's largest quantitative media analysis of children's TV so far the main characters of fictional programmes in 24 countries were coded. The results show a clear under-representation and stereotyped depiction of female characters worldwide.

Children's television provides kids with stories, with material for their fantasy and offers images about the world. In this process television also gives them an idea of what it means to be a girl or boy, a woman and a man. While it is firstly the daily experiences in their immediate social environment which influence their world view, the media – and in this case particularly the leading medium television – offer important additional images and perspectives. Children deeply incorporate these images into their inner pictures, especially where the representation of gender is concerned (Götz et al., 2005). But what do these images of boys/men and girls/women look like? How is femininity and masculinity being constructed in the media texts for children?

National media analyses in the United States and Germany show a clear imbalance: 3 out of 4 characters are male (Smith, 2008; Götz, 2006). While women may no longer be pre-

sented solely as helpless victims, however, regardless of the role they take on, they are almost always impeccably beautiful and longing for the love of their life. In addition, females are hyper-sexualised five times more often than males (Smith, 2008). Typical clichés such as the helpless blonde or the cheeky red-head are reiterated over and over again (Götz, 2006). The occasional exceptions are few and far between: programmes which make girls and their perspectives the central focus. But even the super heroines, which at times may appear very modern, reveal obvious gender clichés (Baker/Raney, 2007), or they are characterised by endless consumption, where life is just a "passion for fashion" (McAllister, 2007).

These media analyses – each based on national samples – already give a strong indication of the existing patterns, yet it remains unanswered whether these are merely national tendencies in the USA or Germany.¹ Larger comparative studies on an international scale, similar perhaps to the Global Media Monitoring Project (Gallagher, 2005) in the domain of news reporting in adults' media around the world, are missing. The study *Children's Television Worldwide: Gender Representation* aims to address this omission. In co-operation with international colleagues, a sam-

ple of children's television in 24 countries was collected and analysed. The research questions of this quantitative content analysis as a first step were:

- What characterises the range of children's TV programming that reached kids in the year 2007?
- Who are the main characters of the programmes?
- What characterises the integration of the main characters into the social context and narrative?
- What kinds of differences exist between male and female characters, between public and private channels, and between domestic and international productions?

We will present a brief summary of some of the preliminary findings.

Method

In each of the 24 participating countries a sample of children's TV programmes was taped, representing the most popular programmes and the diversity of the television programmes available for children up to approximately age 12. On average, between 100 and 200 hours of broadcasting were recorded in each participating country, which represented the offering of the week as well as the weekend.² Due to the limited range of children's TV available in

Country	Broadcaster	Fictional programmes	All characters	Human characters
Argentina	Canal 13, Canal 7, Canal 9, Telefe	34	110	50
Australia	ABC TV, Channel 10, Channel 7, Channel 9	282	878	516
Austria	ORF1, ARD, KI.KA, Nick, RTL2, Super RTL, ZDF	497	2,120	1,128
Belgium	Ka2, Ketnet, La Deux, VT4, VTM	445	1,803	1,032
Brazil	Disney Channel, Globo, Nickelodeon, Record, RedeTV, SBT, TV Cultura	95	693	408
Canada	CBC, CTV, SRC, Teletoon/Télétoon, TQc, TQS, VRAK, YTV	147	1,015	609
China	BTV, CCTV	277	1,015	596
Cuba	Cubavisión, Tele Rebelde	290	838	243
Egypt	Art, Channel 1, Channel 2, Al Jazeera, Family Et Children, MBC 3, Space Toon	191	894	624
Germany	ARD, KI.KA, Nick, RTL2, Super RTL, ZDF	457	2,011	1,095
Hong Kong	ATV Home, ATV World, TVB Jade, TVB Pearl	169	447	277
Hungary	Cartoon Network, Duna, Jetix, M2, minimax, minimax/A+, RTL Klub, TV2	281	910	468
India	Animax, Australia Network, Cartoon Network, Chandana, Disney, Doordarshan, etv, jaya tv, Nick, Nick Jr., Pogo, Sony, Star one, Star plus, sun tv, surya, zee kannada	158	877	439
Israel	Cartoon, Channel 6, Hop!, Jetix, Nickelodeon, Yes Sababa	360	1,041	690
Kenya	Citizen Television, Family TV, KBC Television, Kenya Television Network, Nation Television, Television Network	149	781	601
Malaysia	Astro Ceria, RTM 1, RTM 2, TV 9	29	173	126
Netherlands	Jetix, Nederland 3, Nickelodeon	370	1,447	938
New Zealand	Cartoon Network, Disney, Nickelodeon, Playhouse, tv2	382	1,619	970
Norway	Disney Channel, NRK, TV2	78	364	215
Slovenia	Cartoon Network, Kanal A, POP TV, TV 3, TV Slovenija 1	566	2,156	1,517
South Africa	ETV, SABC	204	1,123	820
Syria	Al Jazeera Children, MBC 3 Children, Syrian 1st TV Channel, Syrian Satellite Channel	31	134	84
UK	CBBC, CBeebies, CITV	260	1,178	588
USA	ABC Family, Cartoon Network, Discovery Kids, Disney, Fox, Nickelodeon, Nicktoons, Noggin/The N; PBS, PBS/Digital Kids, Playhouse Disney, Toon Disney, Jetix, WLIW/PBS, WNET/PBS, WPIX/CW, CBS, CW, ION, NBC, TLC, Toon Disney, nick jr, sprout	623	2,715	1278
Total		6,375	26,342	14,959

Table 1: Participating countries and sample of the study

some countries, the sample collected for them was smaller. The dates of recording were May, 2nd, 2007 to July, 2nd, 2007³ and the same code-book was used in all countries.

The whole sample encompasses 2,367 hours of children's TV, with 19,664 single programme elements. More detailed analyses were conducted with 1,654 hours of fictional pro-

grammes, which came to 6,375 shows with a total of 26,342 characters, with a special focus on the 14,959 human characters encountered therein (see table 1).

Children's TV programmes worldwide: fiction, cartoons, and bought-in productions

The analysed sample of 9,207 individual programmes consisted of 6,375 (69 %) fictional shows, 1,570 (17 %) non-fictional programmes, and 678 (7 %) mixed formats.

The proportion of non-fiction shows is significantly higher on public television. The main share of these fictional programmes is made up of animated shows (84 %). Much smaller was the share of children's programmes featuring real human beings (9 %), mixed formats (5 %), or puppet shows (2 %).

Of the countries surveyed Slovenia (96.5 %) and China (96.4 %) have the highest percentage of cartoons in their TV for children, while Belgium (54.8 %) and the UK (55 %) have the lowest.

In regard to the country of production, only 23 % of the programmes are produced or co-produced domestically while 77 % of all fictional programmes are "bought in". The USA (82.7 %) and the UK (67.7 %) are countries with the highest percentage of domestic productions in their children's television. Kenya (0.7 % of the programmes are at least not recognisably foreign) and New Zealand (0.5 %) are the ones with the lowest percentage.

The biggest export region of children's TV programmes is North America with 60 % of the worldwide production followed by Europe with 27.9 % and Asia with 9.3 %.

To summarise, we can state that empirically, children's TV consists primarily of fictional programmes, largely cartoons, which are not produced domestically but are purchas-

ed from abroad, mainly from the US and Canada.

Heroes in children's television

1. Gender of the main characters: twice as many males as females

We counted the main characters,⁴ their sex, age, their role and how they are integrated in their social environment. The result: Just 32 % of the 26,342 main characters in the fictional programmes are female, while 68 % are male (see fig. 1).

Norway (42 %/58 %), Syria (39 %/61 %), the UK (38 %/62 %), and Israel (37 %/63 %) broadcast children's television with the highest percentage of female characters. Argentina (19 %/81 %), Cuba (20 %/80 %), and Malaysia (23 %/77 %) show the lowest percentage of female leads in their children's TV programmes.

In animation programmes the proportion of female to male main characters was 31 % to 69 %, which is lower than in the real-life formats (40 % females to 60 % males). The percentage of female leads is slightly higher in domestic productions than in imported ones. Overall, private broadcasters have a gender proportion of 33 % to 67 %, which is a better ratio compared to what the public and state broadcasters provide (31 %/69 %).

This is a remarkable result, since public broadcasters – with their public mandate – have the responsibility for representing the reality in a balanced way. The reality of human life is 51 % female to 49 % male, which could not be found in children's TV anywhere!

This gender im-

balance translates to other aspects of children's television: In most of the fiction shows (76 %) no dominant voice-over is used. But if there is a narrator, it is more than twice as often a male voice (15 %) than a female voice (6 %).

To emphasise the result: There is a clear gender imbalance all over the world, in public and private television, in international and domestic programmes, in animated and real-life formats.

In the next step we coded which type of being the main character is and if this means anything to gender equality. The results show that more than half of all main characters are portrayed as humans (59 %) and 1 out of 4 is an animal. This is complemented by a few monsters, mythical creatures, plants, objects and robots or machines.

From a gender perspective the ratio of female to male human characters is the one least biased (37 % to 63 %). Female characters are even more noticeably underrepresented as animals (25 %/75 %), monsters (21 %/79 %), robots (16 %/84 %), and other fictional beings (13 %/87 %) (see fig. 2).

This is particularly astonishing, since in such cases the biological sex of a character is purely constructed. Whether an animal or a monster is a "he" or a "she" is entirely arbitrary. Yet we

can discern that the protagonists of children's television are much more frequently constructed as male than female. It seems that the greater the degree of creative freedom, the more the gender ratio is biased towards male characters.

2. Social relationships: females in groups and males as loners and antagonists

More than half of the main characters in children's television are presented initially in groups or teams (57 %), whereas 1 out of 5 appears as "loner" or as part of a team of two. Female characters appear significantly more often in groups than do male characters (60 %/54 %) and are presented less often as loners (18 %/22 %). Brazil is the country with the most loner characters (69 %); the countries showing many programmes revolving around teams are China (76 %) and the USA (75 %).

Regarding hierarchical relationships, nearly half of the characters appear more or less as equals in the story. 1 out of 5 represents a leader, and 16 % are followers of somebody else. Female characters are more frequently shown as equals (plus 7 %), and they are less often represented as leaders or followers.

A great proportion of main characters are wholesome characters; only

14 % are presented as obvious villains. Countries with a particularly large share of antagonists are the UK (29 %) and Australia (27 %); countries in which these characters appear much less often are Israel (5 %) and Belgium (6 %). Only in 10 % of the shows women are presented as antagonists; compared to 15 % of all male characters.



Fig. 1: Sex of the main characters in fictional programmes

What male and female characters look like

1. Skin colour of main characters: the dominant skin colour is white

Another focus of our research was on the external appearance of the human main characters. With regard to their skin colour a very clear tendency was brought to light: the majority, with 10,764 characters (72 %), were coded as Caucasian. 1,739 (12 %) of the human characters in the sample present Asian physical traits. We found 961 (6 %) black characters, 383 (3 %) were classified as Latina/Latino, and 249 (2 %) as South-(East)-Asian. The proportion of Caucasian protagonists is larger in the bought-in programmes than in the domestic productions.

The countries showing programmes with the highest percentage of black characters are the UK (15 %) and the USA (12 %). Malaysia or Hong Kong did not have any black characters – at least none appeared in the sample. Countries with the highest percentage of white characters were Cuba (92 %), Argentina (90 %) followed by Belgium, Slovenia and South Africa (!). It is remarkable, that South Africa is one of the nations with the “whitest children’s television” with 81 % Caucasian main characters, although in reality only 9 % of the population of that country are white (Statistics South Africa 2007).⁵

Female characters more often have a skin colour other than Caucasian-white. Women are significantly more often represented as Asians, Africans, or Latinas. China and Hong Kong broadcast programmes with a high percentage of Asian girls and women. However, few Asian girls can be found in children’s TV programmes in the UK or in Australia (both 2 %). More remarkable even than this is the finding that Kenya has a higher percentage of Asian female characters represented in its programmes for kids than black Africans (16 %/11 %). In South Africa the proportion is at least balanced on a low level, with 12 % to 12 %, yet again these percentages are far from representing the real distribution of skin colours in that country.

2. Hair colour of main characters: girls and women are more often blonde and red-haired

Black, brown, and blonde are the main hair colours of principal characters in children’s TV. Female characters are significantly more often blonde and red-haired. The country with the highest percentage of blonde-haired girls is Australia (32 %), followed by the UK (30 %) and Syria (28 %!).

The country with the highest percentage of red-haired girls is Slovenia (27 %), followed by New Zealand, the German-speaking countries Ger-

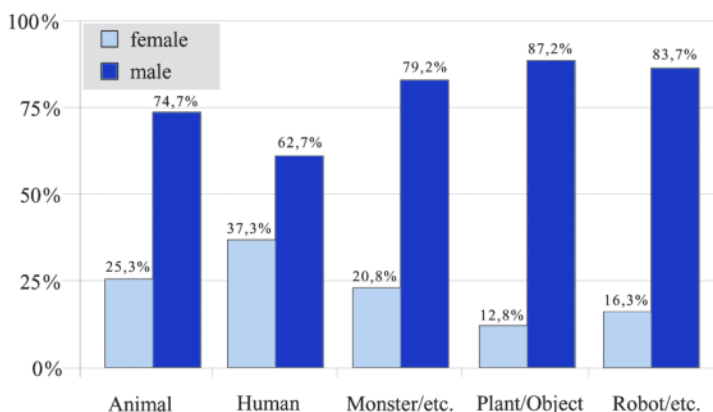
many and Austria, and Canada (all 22 %). While in Slovenia and Canada red hair is a common hair colour for both sexes, in Germany’s broadcasts only girls are presented with red hair. In reality, only 1 in 100 women in Germany is naturally red-haired.⁶ Interestingly, the UK, with only 4 % of the female main characters having red hair, ranks at 22nd place.

3. Protagonists’ age: babies and the elderly are nearly absent

In terms of age the leading characters are mainly children, teenagers, and adults. Only rarely they are babies/toddlers (2 %) or elderly (4 %). The countries with the highest percentage of children in their children’s TV are Malaysia (64 %) and China (53 %), while none or just a few children appear in the programmes broadcast in Argentina, Hungary and Brazil.

The countries with the highest percentage of elderly people in the sample are Argentina (12 %) and Norway (9 %), while in New Zealand, the USA, and Hong Kong older people do not play an important role in children’s TV (all under 2 %) – which is quite different from what children experience in their real lives, where grandparents often play a very important role.

Adolescent girls are more common than adolescent boys



Source: IZI – Children’s Television Worldwide 2007, basis: all countries, 6,375 fict. programmes, n = 26,342 main characters

Fig. 2: Type of main character

The female characters are significantly more often teenage (37 % vs. 25 % of the male characters) while a higher percentage of male characters are adults. The country with the highest percentage of teenage girls is Hungary (67 %), followed by the Netherlands (62 %).

4. Main characters’ physique: skinny girls and overweight boys

Most main characters are presented in TV broadcasts with a physique in a range that can be described as with-

in the normal range of TV reality. However, 9 % of characters are very thin, and 7 % very overweight. The share of particularly skinny characters is especially high in international productions.

The gender-related findings are quite unambiguous: with 15 %, female characters are presented as very thin more than twice as often as their male counterparts (6 %). The country with the highest percentage of very thin girls is Australia (45 %), followed by the UK (37 %). In Hong Kong and Israel (under 1 %) female characters were rarely coded as “very thin”. Obese girls or women appear scarcely at all in the entire sample. In the samples no overweight characters could be found in: Norway, Argentina, South Africa, and Hong Kong. In all likelihood, this does not correspond to reality.

Male characters are twice as frequently overweight as girl characters

Male characters are twice as frequently overweight as girl characters. The country with the highest percentage of overweight boys is Kenya (19 %), followed by Argentina (17 %).

To summarise:

- Human characters presented on children’s TV are typically Caucasian (75 % of cases), and rarely very young or elderly.
- Girls turn out to be very thin more often, tend to be teenage characters more frequently, presented as blonde or red-haired more commonly, and more likely to be presented as Asian or African than their male counterparts.
- Boys, however, appear as white even more often, and they are presented as overweight to a higher percentage.
- Disabilities and chronic diseases are virtually absent from children’s TV.

Frequently appearing stereotypes

In applying statistical analyses, certain combinations of features can be shown to be particularly common, such as the examples presented below. They may illustrate some of the stereotyped depictions that should be avoided in children’s TV:

What bad boys and girls look like

The female antagonists in children’s TV are for the most part loners and leaders, who call the shots for others. Relatively often they are blonde and disproportionately often teenagers. Here the stereotype of the “blonde bitch” is reinforced again and again. Male antagonists, on the other hand, tend to be black or brown-haired adults, but virtually never blonde. They, too, are loners who call the shots; rarely are they ever members of teams, yet they are comparatively often disabled. Stereotypes of bad older dark-haired men with a disability are enforced.

What leaders and followers look like

Leaders in children’s TV worldwide are over-represented as white. The idea of a “leading race” which is definitely not appropriate could shape the inner pictures of children. Female leaders are particularly often red or black-haired, while male leaders are rarely blonde. Female followers are twice as often black-haired than in the normal population, and male followers are especially often blonde and overweight. Here, too, stereotypes of the little fatty blonde boy or the cheeky red-haired are told again and again.

Social status of Blacks, Latinos/Latinas, and Asians

Overall, black characters are distinctly more often part of a team. This holds for female characters as well, but particularly for male blacks, who

then are also equal to one another within the team. A stereotype of groups of black males who enjoy equality among themselves but are scary for society may be reinforced this way.

Latinos are often presented as leaders and loners and not so often as equals. Latinas appear disproportionately often as part of a duo. Here the danger of reinforcing the stereotypes of Latino machos and Latinas with their one and only best girl friend are reinforced.

Female Asians are significantly often members of a group, while male Asians tend to be presented as a pair on children’s TV. The notion of Asians as less individual than e. g. Caucasians is presented in this way.

Conclusion – Gender in children’s TV worldwide

This analysis brings to light strikingly prominent tendencies in international children’s television, which deviate sharply from the reality surrounding the kids.

- There are more than twice as many male characters than female characters. In clearly constructed programmes (cartoons, shows with animals) the proportion of females is even lower.
- 72 % of all main characters are Caucasian and in most of the countries the reality of ethnic diversity is not represented in an appropriate way.
- Overweight girls or elderly women are virtually absent.

Children’s TV, especially quality-oriented broadcasting, needs to optimise its programming in order to counteract these biased and distorted representations of reality.

We found certain tendencies like girls being portrayed disproportionately as a member of a group and equal, and rarely as loner or antagonist. As human beings female characters are significantly more often blonde and red-

haired and twice as much really skinny as compared to male characters. These kinds of portrayals are gender-imbalanced and producers should reflect whether these are truly necessary for the storytelling. The tendency of children's TV to tell stories using certain stereotypes could also be demonstrated with regard to other aspects. With these combinations of features – blonde men rarely acting as loners, black men appearing in groups of equals, Latinas as a team of two, or Asian girls in groups – stereotypes are established, which is imperative to recognise and dispel. These combinations of features are not natural but are the stereotyped constructions of their producers. What is needed is reflection over this situation and the courage to create different constellations and characters.

Of course, quantitative analysis can only provide a partial picture and fails to uncover aesthetic and dramatic details of the programmes. The next step will be to take a closer look at those using qualitative methods, because children's TV worldwide is diverse, and has different tendencies nationally and regionally, which need to be further determined and understood. The similarities in these cases are thus all the more remarkable – especially with regard to gender representations. In contrast, the differences between domestic productions and international programmes – usually originating in the United States – or programmes from public and private networks are comparatively minor. This only goes to show that there is still plenty of need for optimisation and space for the courage to include more diversity. ■

All reports are available on www.childrens-tv-worldwide.com.

NOTES

1 The only recent international comparative study on gender representation in children's television compares Great Britain and Poland (Furnham/Saar, 2005).

- 2 The selection and coding of the programmes was in remit of the local partners, since they were the experts of their national programmes.
- 3 In 3 cases technical problems occurred during the recording, so that in November 2007 some additional recordings had to be added to the sample. It was ensured during these additional recordings that the programmes were similar in character.
- 4 Defined as the ones who can be seen on screen at least 50 % of the time of the duration of the episode.
- 5 Statistics South Africa: Mid-year population estimates 2007 <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022007.pdf> (20.4.2008)
- 6 Source: Henkel KGaA, Corporate Communications, Germany.

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