

# Whose story is being told?

## RESULTS OF AN ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S TV IN 8 COUNTRIES

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**The article summarises the results of the quantitative content analysis “Children’s Television Worldwide 2” in 8 countries in comparison to the findings of a similar study from 10 years ago.**

The stories children’s television offers can be a powerful tool for maintaining and restoring emotional balance in everyday life, as children’s TV is

integrated into the make-believe world of children, their identity and worldview (Lemish, 2015) and has the potential to offer strategies for resilience. Yet very much depends on the content and the main characters and the characteristics they represent. Ten years ago, the IZI conducted the world’s largest analysis of children’s TV in 24 countries (Götz et al., 2008; Götz & Lemish, 2012). The results

revealed a clear gender gap: only 1 in 3 main characters was female and the gap was even larger when the main character was an animal, object or magical creature. Girls were often blond and presented as members of a team. If they were leaders, they tended to be red-haired.

On the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this study, we conducted a “condensed version” of the quantitative content analysis.<sup>2</sup> The study “Children’s Television Worldwide 2” aims to address the following questions:

- What characterises the range of children’s TV programming that reached kids in the year 2017?
- 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?

In the following, we will present a brief summary of some of the preliminary findings in 8 countries, in comparison to the findings from 10 years ago.

### METHOD

In each of the 8 participating countries (Ill. 1) a sample of children’s TV programmes was recorded representing the most-watched children’s channels or programme blocks for a target au-

Country	Broadcaster	Hours of recording
Belgium	Cartoon Network, Disney Channel, Disney Jr., Kadet, Ketnet, Nick Jr., Nickelodeon, Studio 100, VTM Kzoom	166:41
Canada	TFC, CBC, FAMILY JR, TELETOON, TFC, TREEHOUSE, TVO, YTV	165:42
Cuba	Canal Educativo, Cubavision, Multivision	163:45
Germany	Disney Channel, KiKA, Nickelodeon, SuperRTL	178:58
Israel	Disney Channel, Hop!, IE TV, Nick Jr., Nickelodeon, The Childrens’s Channel, Zoom	213:01
Taiwan	Cartoon Network, Disney Channel, Momo Kids, YOKO TV, PTS	183:00
UK	CBBC, Cbeebies, Channel 5, CiTV	301:33
USA	Cartoon Network, Disney Channel, Disney Jr., Nick Jr., Nickelodeon, PBS Kids, Sprout - Universal Kids	196:17
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,568:58</b>

Ill. 1: Participating countries and sample of the study

dience up to the age of 12. On average 196 hours of broadcasting were recorded in each participating country, which represented the most-watched children's TV programming in that country. The recording period was between September and November 2017; all countries later used the same codebook to code the children's TV programmes.

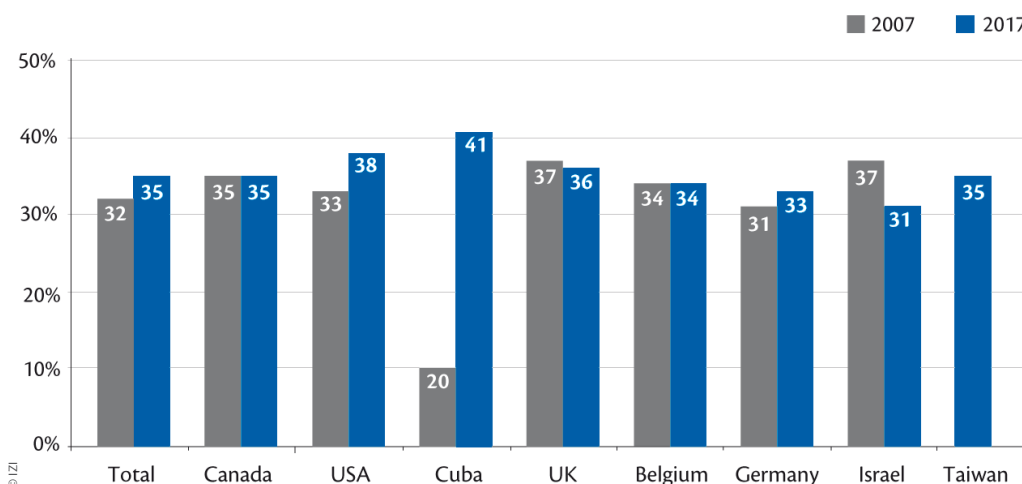
The complete sample comprises 1,569 hours of linear children's TV programming with 9,795 single programme elements. The detailed analyses presented here focus on 1,110 hours of fictional programmes, which include 3,990 shows and a total of 14,789 characters, with a special focus on the 8,055 human characters encountered therein.

### CHILDREN'S TV PROGRAMMES WORLDWIDE: FICTION AND ANIMATION

The analysed sample consisted of 3,990 fictional shows, 445 non-fictional programmes, and 161 mixed formats. Of the countries studied, Belgium (96 %) and Israel (95 %) have the highest percentage of fictional programmes in their TV offerings for children, while Germany (85 %) and the UK (70 %) had the lowest. Overall, the proportion of non-fiction shows is significantly higher on public television.

The largest share of fictional programmes consists of animation programmes (2-D 46 %, 3-D 30 %, clay animation 1 %). In contrast, the share of fictional live-action programming is much smaller (14 %).<sup>3</sup>

Around one third of all programmes (35 %) of the analysed sample were



Ill. 2: Comparison of the percentage of female main characters in fictional programmes in children's TV in 2007 and 2017<sup>4</sup>

domestic productions, another 10 % were produced in co-production with international partners, and 55 % are foreign programmes. A great difference could be found between public/state and commercial broadcasters. The sample revealed that most of the programmes (58 %) offered by public/state broadcasters are domestic productions or co-productions, whereas only 21 % of the series offered by commercial broadcasters were domestically produced or co-produced.

The country with the highest percentage of domestic production is the UK (73 %) followed by the USA (57 %). The lowest was found in Taiwan (8 %).

### HERO(IN)ES IN FICTIONAL CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

#### 1. Gender of the main characters

In our international sample, 35 % of the main characters in the fictional programmes were female, 62 % were male and 3 % neutral or not recognisable.

The highest percentage of female to male characters was found in Cuba (41 % to 58 %) followed by the USA (38 % to 62 %). The countries with the lowest percentage of female leads in

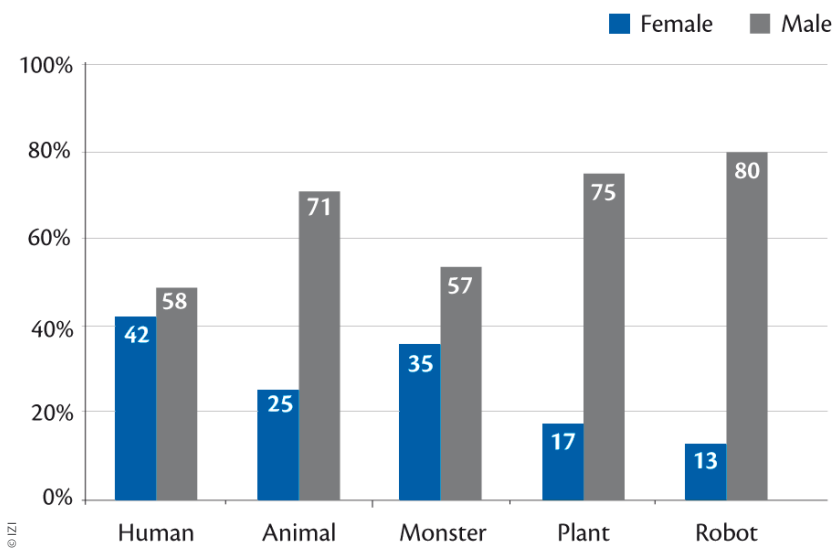
children's TV programmes were Israel (31 % to 69 %) and Germany (33 % to 65 %, Ill. 2).

Overall, public and state broadcasters provided a slightly more balanced gender ratio (38 % to 58 %) than private-commercial broadcasters (34 % to 64 %).

The ratio of female and male main characters was even worse in the non-fictional programmes (43 % females to 56 % males, plus 1 % non-recognisable).

In comparison to the sample of 2007 – in which we analysed fictional programmes only – the share of female main characters in fictional programmes has slightly increased overall (from 32 % to 35 %). The biggest changes were found in Cuba, where the share of female characters in children's programme increased from 20 % in 2007 to 41 % in 2017. Despite these changes, gender equality is far from being reached.

The gender imbalance continues in terms of other aspects of children's television: although most fictional shows (73 %) have no dominant voice-over, if there is a narrator, it is 3 times more often a male voice (17 %) than a female voice (5 %). In 2007, the narrator was twice as often a man as a woman.



Ill. 3: Gender ratio and type of main character in 2017

We also coded which type of being the main character was. More than half of all main characters in fictional programmes are human (55 %), and more than one quarter are animals (27 %). The rest (18 %) were a few monsters, mythical creatures, plants, objects, robots or machines and others.

From a gender perspective, the ratio of female to male human main characters is the most balanced percentage (42 % to 58 %).

Female characters were more noticeably under-represented as animals (25 % to 71 %), monsters (35 % to 57 %), plants or objects (17 % to 75 %), and robots (13 % to 80 %) (Ill. 3).

This is an astonishing finding, given that for these almost one fifth of all characters the biological sex is purely constructed: whether an animal or a monster is a “he” or a “she” is entirely arbitrary and decided by the producers of the programme.

Yet, we can discern that the main characters of children’s television continue to be much more frequently constructed as male than female. It seems that the greater the degree of creative freedom, the more the gender ratio leans towards male characters.

## 2. Age of the main character

The 8,055 human characters analysed in fictional programmes were mainly

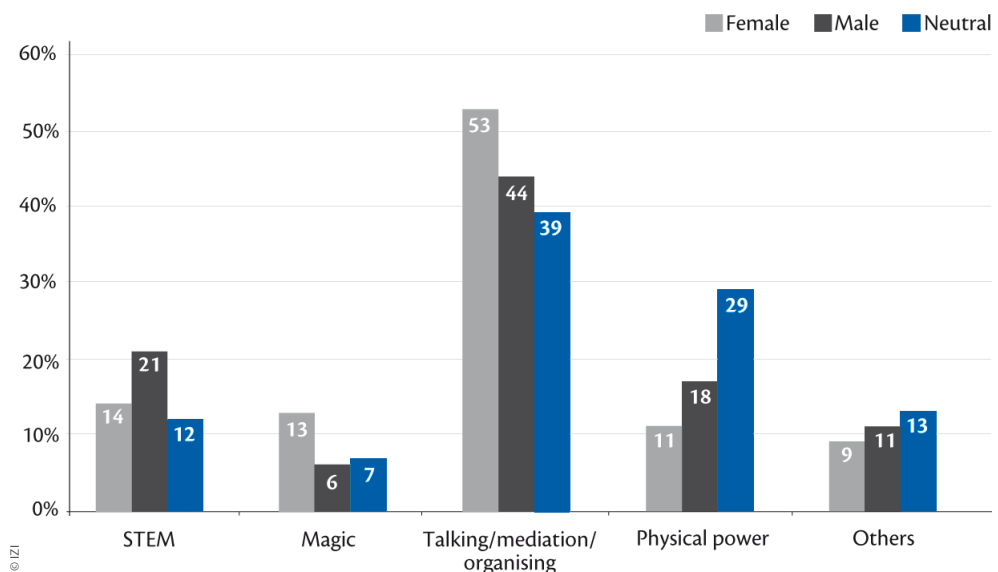
teenagers (38 %) or children (31 %). Each fourth character was an adult, very few were elderly people (3 %), babies (1 %), or were not recognisable (2 %). If the characters were female, they tended to be more often teenagers (42 % female compared to 36 % male) and children (33 % compared to 30 %), and less often adults (21 % compared to 29 %).

## 3. Social relationships

Regarding hierarchical relationships of the main characters, more than half of them (56 %) appear more or less as equals in the story. One out of 4 represents a leader (24 %), and 14 % are followers of somebody else. The gender-specific analysis reveals: while 27 % of the male main characters are leaders of a group, only 19 % of the female main characters are group leaders. The same tendency was found in the study of 2007.

## 4. Socio-economic status

It was possible to identify the socio-economic status for nearly half of the main characters (47 %). The majority of the main characters (81 %) live in



Ill. 4: Main resource to solve problems in fictional programmes 2017

seemingly middle-class conditions, for example owning a family car and wearing trendy clothing. 14 % of the characters in our sample lived in upper-class conditions, for example with a swimming pool, a house in famous areas like Malibu Beach and more than one expensive car. The gender comparison revealed that female characters more often live in upper-class environments than male characters. Only a small minority of the main characters live in seemingly lower-class conditions, for example in very small flats or difficult neighbourhoods, or in poverty (6 %). Commercial broadcasters present nearly twice as many characters living in upper-class conditions than public or state broadcasters.

The highest percentage of “lower-class” conditions presented in children’s TV can be found in Germany (14 %) and the UK (11 %). The largest share of main characters from the “upper class” is shown in the USA (26 %).

### 5. Resource of power

In the storyline, the main characters are usually confronted with a problem they have to solve. We coded which resource he or she was using to obtain this goal. Talking, a form of mediation and understanding of different perspectives, appeared in 47 % of the problem-solving cases. Using technological and engineering solutions could be found in nearly 2 out of 10 cases (19 %). A few main characters were using physical power (15 %) or magic (8 %) to solve their challenge, plus other ways which do not fit into the categories above (10 %). Female characters (53 %) use mediation and understanding as a resource significantly more often than male characters (44 %). Science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) are used more often by male than by female characters (21 % compared to 14 %), as

is physical power (18 % of the male characters compared to 11 % of the female characters). Female characters use magic and supernatural powers twice as often as males (13 % compared to 6 %) to make impossible things happen (Ill. 4).

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## WHAT MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS LOOK LIKE

### 1. Skin colour of main characters

In the fictional programmes revolving around human beings as main characters, the characters normally represent an ethnic background, visualised in the colour of their skin. The majority (68 %) were Caucasian. Characters with brown or black skin (with Sub-Saharan African physical traits) make up 10 % of the analysed sample, 8 % of the fictional human characters in the sample represent Asian physical traits, 5 % were classified as Latina/o, 3 % as Middle Eastern and 2 % as South (East) Asian.

The highest percentage of black characters in fictional programmes was found in the UK (16 %) and the USA (12 %). Countries with the highest percentage of white characters are Germany (83 %) and Belgium (78 %). Cuba has the highest percentage of Latin characters (14 %); Taiwan has the highest percentage of Asian characters (47 %). This is as expected, given the geographical location and the demographics of these countries.

In comparison to 2007, the proportion of Caucasian and Asian characters has slightly declined whereas the percentage of black characters has increased.

Compared to males, female characters are significantly more often represented as Africans, Asians or Latinas. In this way one character can respond to the need to diversify the screen – being both female and a member of a racial minority.

### 2. Hair colour of main characters

Black, brown, and blond were the dominant hair colours of the main characters in fictional children’s TV. The countries with the highest percentage of blond-haired girls are Germany (21 %) and Belgium (19 %) followed by Cuba (17 %).

Female characters are twice as often blond (22 % compared to 11 %) and red-haired (12 % compared to 6 %) as male characters. If a character has pink or purple hair it is nearly exclusively a female character, as these colours are culturally associated with femininity. Red head girls are also characterised by unique personality traits that allow them to break gender stereotypes and be more fiery, adventurous, and assertive.

### 3. Main characters’ body shape

Most main characters in fictional programmes have a body shape that can be described as within the normal range of TV reality (58 %). However, 8 % of the characters were very thin and 6 % (very) overweight. The share of particularly skinny characters is a little bit higher in international productions than in domestic productions.

The gender-related findings are quite unambiguous: with a percentage of 11 %, female characters are twice as often presented as very thin as their male counterparts (6 %). Obese girls or women scarcely appear at all in the entire sample. Male characters are more than 3 times as frequently overweight as female characters (8 % to 3 %).

### 4. Main characters with disabilities

In our sample, 3 % of the main characters have an obvious disability. While we found no gender tendencies, there were clear cultural differences. The

highest percentage of main characters with a disability could be found in Cuba (11 %), followed by Germany (6 %). The lowest percentage of main characters with obvious disabilities were found in Canada (0.0 %) and the USA (0.4 %).

To summarise, human characters presented on children's fictional programmes are typically Caucasian (68 %). Girls turn out to be very thin more often, tend to be teenage characters more frequently, and are more likely to be presented as Latinas or African than their male counterparts. Boys, however, are more often Caucasian, and they are presented as overweight to a higher percentage.

### WHO PRODUCES, WRITES AND DIRECTS?

With the help of investigating the credits and further research in the Internet in terms of the sex of the producers, writers and directors, we analysed who wrote and directed the shows of children's TV. Overall, in 48 % of the analysed programmes the scripts were exclusively written by men, in 13 % they were exclusively written by women and in 27 % of the fictional programmes they were written by a team with at least one woman. Canada revealed the greatest dominance of male writers (with 63 % of programmes authored exclusively by men).

When it comes to directing, only 7 % of fictional children's television was directed by a female director or a team with at least one woman (7 %), while 79 % of the programmes of fictional children's TV were directed exclusively by men. Overall, public and state broadcasters have with 9 % female directors a slightly better ratio than the private-commercial broadcasters (5 % female directors). With around 85 % of programmes exclusively directed by men, Israel

(86 %) and Belgium (85 %) show the greatest imbalance, followed by Canada and Germany (both 82 % exclusively men).

### SUMMARY: WHOSE STORY ARE WE TELLING?

According to our study in 8 countries in 2017, children's TV programming mainly presents children in animated fictional stories. In comparison to 2007, the diversity has slightly improved, mainly in the representation of human girls' characters, but still the stories are mostly centred around white adolescents and children, with twice as many male as female characters. When it comes to fantastic creatures, the gender gap is still at 1 female character for every 8 male characters. If the characters are human, 7 out of 10 are Caucasian and most of them live in middle or upper-class living conditions. Compared to male characters, female characters live more often in wealthier socio-economic conditions, are less often leaders of a group, and solve problems more often by talking and applying magic and less often by using STEM or physical power. Male characters have a greater diversity in terms of their body shape, whereas female characters are skinnier, tend to be a little bit more diverse in terms of their skin colour, and more often have blond hair.

In comparison to the study of 2007, very little improvement could be found regarding gender equality. 10 years after our previous study, and despite advocacy, research, and education about the importance of equality in gender and racial representation, children's TV, which is mainly dominated by men, continues to present white boys as "the normality" and girls as "the other". Can we hope for a different picture in the next 10 years? ■

### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> The complete study "Children's TV Worldwide" consists of 10 countries and will be published at a later time.

<sup>3</sup> Additionally, 6 % are mixed formats and 1 % puppet shows, other formats 2 %.

<sup>4</sup> Taiwan was not included in the sample of 2007.

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