“WHAT REALLY ANNOYS ME ABOUT THE WAY GIRLS AND BOYS ARE PORTRAYED IN CHILDREN’S TELEVISION”
Children from 21 Countries Write Illustrated Letters to TV Producers

Maya Götz and Margit Herce

To date, analyses of children’s television programs are undertaken by adults. It is they who earn their living by creating and investigating media. They have tools at their disposal to conduct extensive analyses of media, they are capable of drawing theoretical connections, and they have the privilege of the time and resources to consider these matters. On the other hand, the target audience of children’s television, children, are involved to a very limited extent in such studies. For example, children might be subjects of gender-related media reception research; asked to select and then label their favourite characters, according to their traits (e.g., Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Calvert, Jordan, & Cocking, 2002; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997), or, given the possibility to engage in a creative exercise and explain themselves (Götz, Lemish, Aidman & Moon, 2005). However, rarely do researchers ask them directly about their perceptions of a research category, such as gender. Those few studies that provided children with dedicated space to grapple with this category (e.g., Currie, Kelly, & Ponerantz, 2009; Hains, 2008; Kearney, 2011; Mazzarella, 2005; Zaslow, 2009) have shown how elucidating their feedback can be.

Following the lead of these studies with direct involvement of children, this project solicited their responses to representations of gender. Since the overall study is international in scope and seeks to provide an overview, we selected a method that enabled children from diverse countries to share their feedback with television producers. This process was guided by the following two research questions: What do children throughout the world criticize about the ways boys and girls are shown on children’s television? What changes would they like to see?
I. Method

Sample

In total, 1131 children from ages 8-11 from 21 countries and all major religions around the world took part in the study. There were 638 girls (56%) and 493 boys (44%). Where possible, the sample sought to account for diversity within individual countries. For example, in Germany and Hungary city children from Munich and Budapest, as well as, children from village schools in Altöbfern (Brandenburg, Germany) and Tötvárszony (Komitat Veszprém, Hungary) took part. In India and Ukraine, it was possible to involve children from New Delhi and Kiev, as well as, from other parts of the country (e.g., children of the Koi people in Uttar Pradesh, India, and children from the village Ulyanovka in Ukraine). Care was also taken to include children from well-off families, as well as, children from socially deprived backgrounds. In Argentina, for example, schools with a very diverse social intake were involved and their pupils interviewed. Several private schools (from Pakistan and Fiji) as well as orphanage schools (Déva, Romania) were involved. Additionally, many children from immigrant backgrounds from a range of schools in Munich, Budapest and Suva, for example, participated. But, let us be clear, we do not claim that this study is representative. Nonetheless, we do think that the variety of modes utilized reduces sampling errors to a certain degree.

Procedure

A detailed procedure was developed so that it could be conducted locally with the help of teachers. The results produced by the children, directed by their teachers, are indicative that our directions were clear. Following an introductory discussion about the children's television shows they watched and/or were familiar, and TV characters they liked or disliked, each child was given a worksheet. The children filled in their personal data (age, name, gender, country, language), and then they were instructed to write and illustrate two letters addressed to television producers. The title on the page given to the children for their letters and illustrations stated: "What really bothers me about the way girls or boys are shown on children's television." Following completion of the two drawings, the children wrote one or two sentences about each of their pictures, stating what bothered them and why, as well as what they would like to change.

In order to effectively categorize the children's statements and the shows and characters they criticized, teachers conducted short individual interviews in which they asked each child to describe the extent to which the drawings referred to a specific show or character, and if so they were asked to name them. All of the children's responses were documented and subsequently translated into English, along with the sentences each child wrote about their pictures.

Data Analysis

The analysis and evaluation of data was undertaken centrally by a small team in Germany (at the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television, IZI). The coordinators of the participating countries were available for consultation on individual details regarding the materials submitted. When evaluating the empirical data, the team attempted to take into account, as completely as possible, the full meaning of each individual student's statement or remark. The focus of the analysis process was the children's individual statements and corresponding pictures. It was not possible to gain deeper insight into their life-world or even their family background. Thus, the possibility of reconstruction is limited. Similar statements were grouped together and coded accordingly. This allowed for a limited quantitative evaluation. This having been noted, we wish to emphasize that the main aim of this study was to give the girls and boys a voice of their own, in order to allow them to express through words and pictures what it is that annoys them about the representation of boys and girls. This was the basis for determining if this documentation complements the adult views present in academic and public discussion of this topic.

Figure 9.1.

Where the children's letters to TV producers came from (with numbers)
II. What Bothers Children about the Representation of Boy Characters

The children’s criticisms are varied. Concrete shows and characters are referred to and formats on the global market (e.g., *Winx Club* [Rainbow S.p.A., Italy], *Bratz* [Mike Young Productions & Co, USA], *SpongeBob* [Nickelodeon Animation, USA], and *The Simpsons* [20th Century Fox, USA]) cited, as well as nationally produced and broadcast shows. Many children take a general stance on the representation of girls and boys on television, and occasionally (particularly in countries where there are limited offerings of children’s TV), they criticize adult programs. In the following sections, we share their main criticisms of children’s television and related exemplars of their comments and drawings.

1. They Are Always Fighting, and Are Aggressive and Violent

When girls and boys criticize the way boys are represented on television, they most frequently mention their aggressive behavior. Boys on TV are “only waging war” (boy, 10, Germany 114) and “fight with their friends” (boy, 10, Turkey 603). They are represented as “too aggressive” (boy, 10, Brazil 299) and “destructive” (boy, 10, Pakistan 310). Thus, many children conclude that “boys are shown as too cruel and angry” (girl, 9, Mongolia 1124). Children know that “it is bad to fight” (girl, 8, Kenya 171), for “it brings violence into people’s minds” (boy, 10, India 739) and “it persuades boys to fight” (girl, 10, UK 901).

The aggression of male television characters is also seen in the context of gender relations: “Men are too aggressive with women on TV” (boy, 10, Brazil 300). This includes sexual violence against girls and women, an act clearly rejected by children as wrong behavior: “They abuse us” (girl, 9, India 799) or “boys force girls to kiss them” (boy, 9, Kenya 156).

Suggestions for improvement offered to producers are simple and convincing: “Change violence into non-violence” (boy, 10, India 735); “make them more observant” (boy, 11, Pakistan 322). This does not mean they want to see only cowards, but “fearless boys” (boy, 9, Brazil 311). The boys, in particular, would rather learn how to control aggression than see violence represented: “I want him to control his anger” (boy, 10, India 773). Strength should be used for the right cause: “He should be good and should use his power against the bad forces” (boy, 10, Romania 540).
2. Not Just Stupid Losers and Wimps

However, boys' and girls' criticism of the representation of boys on television is also directed against their typical staging as "he's way too dumb" (girl, 9, Fiji 538). Boys who only have "jelly in their heads" (boy, 9, Germany 149) may be funny on occasion, but should not be characterized in such a manner constantly and exclusively: "He says rubbish" (boy, 11, Romania 520). The children's recommendation to TV producers for improvement is to "make him brainier by teaching him" (girl, 11, UK 903). This does not mean that girls and boys wish that the boys portrayed on television be "softer" or more feminine; on the contrary: "It bothers me when boys are too soft-hearted" (boy, 10, Hungary 23) and "boys are shown as weak and pathetic" (girl, 9, Mongolia 1117). "I think it's stupid that boys are sometimes small and weak" (girl, 9, Germany 124).

Children want to see clever, brave boys on television who are able to deal with their feelings: "They should be strong enough to do things in their way" (girl, 10, India 832), "fit and adventurous" (boy, 10, UK 919).

3. Normal Looks: Normal, Like Us

Children's criticism of the looks of boy characters is mentioned much less frequently. Sometimes the children think individual characters are "really fat and ugly" (girl, 9, UK 944) and find fault with scruffy hair: "He looks shabby" (girl, 10, India 822).

They did not approve of overly masculine styling with, for example, piercings, and earrings: "I don't like it when they wear many striking necklaces" (girl, 10, Hungary 24).

Clothing is criticized if it emphasizes the genitals too much: "I don't like that their trousers are so tight" (boy, 10, Romania 529); or, in an erotic manner: "I find it annoying when they open their T-shirt" (girl, 9, India 705). Children from non-Western cultures in particular are bothered when too much skin is shown: "I find it annoying that he is nearly naked" (girl, 10, Fiji 505). Even in a funny context this is the case, as with Bart Simpson who, for example, "was skating naked" (boy, 10, Fiji 517). SpongeBob, too, is criticized for being shown without trousers in some episodes.

Explicit criticism of the boys' body image tends to come more from girls, who find fault with characters as "too big" (girl, 8, Egypt 246) or stress that "I don't like big muscles" (girl, 10, Hungary 025). Children want television characters like themselves, both in terms of their physique and what they wear: "They should look exactly like [they do] in real life, with clothes they wear normally" (girl, 11, Brazil 330); "They should be like boys today, like me" (boy, 10, Argentina 214).
III. What Bothers Children about the Representation of Girl Characters

1. Girls with Sexy Clothes and a Lot of Make-up

Children’s main starting point for criticism of girls on television was their appearance. Every second statement is directed explicitly at their clothes, particularly in what they regard as inappropriate sexualization. Clothing shows too much skin, turns the girls into sex objects and above all is inappropriate for their age: “Girls put on grown-up’s clothes and [do not] act their age, but [are] too flirtatious” (boy, 9, Mongolia 1119). Their styling is unsuitable and characters such as those in Winx Club or the Bratz girls “look like prostitutes” (girl, 9, Kenya 194).

Criticism of very short skirts and tight or cropped T-shirts was particularly strong in non-Western countries. For example, an Indian girl (10, 816) wrote: “They don’t wear proper clothing; their stomach is shown like in Kim Possible”. A girl (9, 535) from Romania criticizes the female protagonists of the US cartoon Horseland (DiC Entertainment, USA): “It bothers me that you can see their stomach”. Children from non-Western cultural backgrounds, in particular, perceive there to be a divergence from their societies’ socially accepted dress codes. Thus, an Indian girl (9, 814) states: “Girls wear short dresses and this is not allowed in some regions.” Sexualized clothing is seen within the context of the threat of sexual violence: “Some girls are sometimes forced to wear short clothes which leads to rape” (girl, 9, Kenya 163).

Many children also criticized the heavy make-up worn by girl characters in conjunction with sexualizing clothing: “[It’s] annoying that girls use too much make-up and always show off” (girl, 10, Fiji 506). Children recommend: “Do not let them put so much make-up on their face” (girl, 9, Romania 533), so that they look “younger and childlike” (boy, 12, Turkey 610).

2. Wasp Waists and Plastic Surgery

Besides sexualized clothing and make-up, children also found fault with the body image used in portraying girl characters on television. This starts with use of the wrong proportions of the female body – “when their legs are too long” (girl, 10, Hungary 25) – and escalates with hips that are often far too slender: “In cartoons the girls are so thin, it’s not realistic” (girl, 10, UK 901). Children feel the pressure of “parents and the television telling them that thinner is prettier” (girl, 10, Argentina 226). Children prefer natural, healthier body images on TV shows: “I don’t like dyed hair, their body shape and their mouth. They should have normal body and hair” (girl, 8, Slovenia 426). “I like natural beauty, not ‘artificial beauties’” (girl, 12, Ukraine 1212). They do not want girls who are too thin. Instead, they prefer female characters with normal proportions that mirror reality.
3. Why Always Blond and Stupid, or Clever and Ugly?

When hair color was mentioned by the children, it was usually for two reasons—use of unnatural hair coloring and showing blonde girls far too frequently. This was noted particularly in countries such as Egypt and India, where the majority of the population is not blond but dark-haired. Again, it seems to be the case that children want to see more natural hair colors that are like their own (girl, 10, India 734; girl, 9, Egypt 243; girl, 10, Egypt 274; girl, 10, Egypt 267).

In countries where blond hair occurs naturally, children criticized use of wrongful and clichéd stereotypes: “Shows portray that blondes are dumb. All blondes are not dumb” (girl, 10, USA 1027). Her suggestion for improvement: “I would not make all dumb people blond. Make them brunettes” (girl, 10, USA 1027). This girl does not ask the basic question of whether girls should be shown as less intellectually capable in some marginal cases. But she does criticize repeated stereotyping. A 9-year-old boy (242) from Argentina observes that when particularly clever characters are typified the girls are purposely shown with “braces, glasses and ugly plaits”, or “they always make smart people have glasses” (boy, 11, Fiji 528). Recommendations for change: “Make the smart girls cool people” (girl, 10, Fiji 507).

4. Why Always Bitchy, Competitive and Completely Overreacting Emotionally?

Girls and boys are also bothered by clichéd representations of character traits in television characters. For example, it annoys them “that girls are shown as so bitchy” (girl, 9, Germany 124) and “rude and bossy” (girl, 9, UK 949). The Bratz girls or Sam, Alex and Clover from Totally Spies! (Marathon, France) “always quarrel with each other” (girl, 10, Romania 516). Also, “girls are shown as too intimidating and bossy and they make fun of others” (boy, 10, Mongolia 1105). Instead of showing over and over how bitchy girls can be, the children demand more socially appropriate and friendly behavior, and more friendly contact between characters: “Girls should be nicer to each other” (girl, 10, Germany 126). This can set a good example for the viewer: “All the girl TV stars should set good examples” (boy, 11, USA 1038).

But it is not only bitchiness that children perceive as an unpleasant and exaggerated cliché in the representation of girls, as excessive emotionality of girl characters also bothers them, as in: “She always cries so much [that] everything is flooded” (boy, 10, Germany 131).
IV. Criticism of Girl and Boy Characters in Comparison

It is exceptionally hard to quantify the qualitative data gathered, particularly from 1131 children from so many different cultural and personal backgrounds. Though the same set of instructions were used, fundamentally these are qualitative statements gathered in different locations, under different cultural conditions, and with different people. This important qualification having been noted, we did try to develope categories from individual statements and to group many of them under different categories. This enabled us to order and quantify certain basic elements, and then, on this basis, to compare the most general points of criticism offered by the children regarding girl and boy characters. Acting, again, with great caution, we were able to clearly code 951 comments of criticisms relating to girl characters and 880 comments of criticisms of boy characters on television (see Figure 9.1).

![Figure 9.1](image)

What girls and boys in 21 countries criticized on TV-girls/boys

Criticism of girl television characters was most frequently directed at their appearance. 44% (n=426) of the illustrated letters make statements of this kind. Fault is found with clothing (n=223; 52% of criticisms of appearance), which is perceived as too sexy, simply ugly, too girly or too adult. If criticism is directed explicitly at the body, (n=65; 16% of criticisms of appearance), the body is thought to be lacking in proportion, too thin or sometimes overweight (see Figure 9.2).

The second main point of criticism relates to the characters' behavior and how their character traits are constructed. This criticism appears in 42% of all illustrated letters (see Figure 9.3).

![Figure 9.2](image)

What girls and boys criticized on the appearance of TV-girls/boys

![Figure 9.3](image)

What girls and boys criticized on the behavior of TV-girls/boys

Criticism of the representation of boys was dominated by their behavior and character traits (56%). Criticisms of their appearance make up only a quarter of statements. This is far lower than criticism of representation of girls. Indeed, only one in every fourth statement in the entire sample refers to the boys' appearance, unlike nearly half in regard to girl characters. Clothing, too, seems to play a less important role here.
V. National Tendencies

Though the children's statements vary from country to country, we might expect there to be some similarity. While there are such themes, these are individual statements and cannot be seen as representative of all the children of these countries. Nonetheless, they do raise points that are often deeply intertwined with the respective discourses of everyday culture and media agendas, or even simply with particular preferences.

Some of the criticisms raised by children from India can be seen as culturally specific, as in the case when children miss seeing typically Indian clothing; when a female TV presenter in Pakistan was criticized several times for not wearing legal clothing or a veil; or as was the case in other Muslim societies as the case of a Palestinian boy (9, 1207): "[She] doesn't wear scarf [as head cover] and the place is full of men and cars."

Similarly, we recall the matter of children portrayed dressed in clothing that is different from local custom. This was the case of criticism made in Egypt related to the predominance of blonde girls, something that clearly differs from the hair color of most children there.

In South Africa, one of the particular themes was that girls and boys were presented as "machos" (they use the word "nigger" in this context) and in a too positive light.

In Argentina children complained that boys were dressed like adults and behaved in a rude way like stealing something from other people or drinking a lot of alcohol.

One of the most commonly mentioned criticisms in Brazil was that boys on children's television are portrayed as excessively stupid. Disapproval was also often directed to girl's clothing, like: "They should wear normal clothes not looking like a flamboyant woman but clothes they like, with not much exaggeration." (girl, 10, 331).

While children in Brazil referred to presenters in studio productions, children in Fiji expressed similar criticisms, for example in regard to cartoon characters.

One focus of criticism in Mongolia was the bad behavior and unkindness of boys. The depiction of obviously wrong behavior on the part of boys was also frequently criticized in the Ukraine (e.g., when it came to smoking).
In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, there was criticism that certain boy characters like “Perfect Peter” were too “nice and clever” and that it would not hurt if they were a bit “nasty” occasionally. Also the girl characters received strong disapproval for being too skinny. So appeal to the producers was: “Make the girls a tiny bit fatter.” (girl, 10, UK 901).

The inappropriate, erroneous portrayal of boys as too strong and too brave was bemoaned by children in Bhutan and elsewhere.

In Germany, the behavior of girls on television was a particularly frequent object of criticism. They stated that they were portrayed as too aggressive in some programs or as too passive in traditional stories.

Children in Hungary frequently criticized the depiction of too many stereotypically gender-specific jobs.

In Kenya, the sexualization of girls was linked to sexual violence several times. This is a major concern given the HIV/AIDS epidemic and associated sexual violence.

A frequent criticism from Portugal was that girls were portrayed as too self-centered, trendy, and obsessed with their appearance.

In the United States, children raised the point several times that the girls were too perfect.

Thanks to the current debate in the media, several Italian children criticized plastic surgery for girls and women. In Hungary, the theme of explicit sex videos and nudity was touched on several times, as a particular concern of girls there.

Only in Romania was there an appeal not to show girls so explicitly in impoveshed clothes. The main criticism made by children from Argentina was the excessive emphasis on crime among boy characters.

Interpreting the comments within the varied specific cultural contexts is of immense importance but is beyond the scope of this descriptive chapter (e.g., Lemish, 2010).
VI. Children Recognize Gender Stereotypes

The children’s observations and criticisms demonstrate, clearly, in our view, how capable girls and boys can be as critical viewers. When given the opportunity to share their views about the programs aimed at them (as this exploratory study attempted to do), they are definitely capable of identifying clichés and gender relations. This includes quantification, as in the assessment: “There are more boy smurfs than girl smurfs. There is only one girl smurf” (boy, 11, USA 1006); statements about their favorite characters, with penetrating observations such as – only male heroes have the main roles: “I don’t like that SpongeBob doesn’t have a girlfriend. He should have one and her name should be Bettina!” (girl, 9, Germany 109).

Children also detect gender stereotypes such as a Pakistani boy (11, Pakistan 323), who shared, first an observation: “Girls are shown on TV more at home as housewives” and, then, a recommendation: “Show them as sports people”. Children also recognize inequality: “Girls are girly and never play sports or be the hero” (girl, 10, Pakistan 314). A Romanian girl (8, 515) recommends changing this situation: “It annoys me that girls are not boys’ equals. Girls should be stronger, too”. “Girls are shown as weaklings”, according to a Pakistani boy’s (10, 310) description of the female characters.

Children notice gender differences in role constellations, and are bothered by them: “Boys are always the bad guys. I would make girls and boys the good guys and the bad guys” (boy, 10, Pakistan 309). Thus, they explicitly demand gender equality in the distribution of both good and bad characters. “The girls are defenseless and they are never the heroine” (girl, 10, Brazil 332). They notice these gender-specific tendencies precisely because they experience themselves as competent: “Boys are always more sporty and stronger than girls. Some girls (like me) are extremely strong and sporty but on TV shows they make girls frilly and prissy” (girl, 11, USA 1016). As this is not shown on television, a girl (10, 1102) from Mongolia for example supposes that “TV people prefer boys over girls and show only boys on their programs”. She suggests: “Girls and boys should be equally shown on TV”, and a Brazilian girl (11, 302) adds: “Boys and girls have the same right to be protagonists”. 
Conclusion

Children from all over the world take note of and criticize certain aspects of the ways in which girls and boys are represented. However, this does not mean that those aspects criticized are not influential. Even if noted and criticized, in some way or another they probably will become part of the children’s mental images of what it means to be a “real” woman, a “real” girl or a “real” man or boy. However, if given the opportunity to offer criticism and make recommendations, the children’s views shared in this study simply contradict the statement employed all too often, and it seems quite inaccurately, by producers: “But they want it that way, that is just what makes it attractive”.

Stated simply and directly, it is our conclusion that children take exception to many typical aspects of gender representation, and gender-specific tendencies noted here.

Girl characters’ stereotypical, hypersexualized appearance is seen, in particular, as unpleasant and diverging from everyday experience. Children certainly notice that girls on television are strongly made-up and dressed in a much more adult manner than they are themselves. Actually, they would prefer to see girls represented as they really are – maybe idealized slightly, but not (or not exclusively) in terms of hypersexualization.

Thus, the critical analyses of the body (see Götz & Herche, chapter 2) and its staging (see Prinsloo, chapter 3) by both “scholars and children” are remarkably consistent. Children criticize stereotypes, constantly rehearsing certain combinations of traits. While academic research identifies some of these in statistical terms (see Götz & Lemish, chapter 1), the children seem to employ a sharper, more critical view. Today’s girls and boys know very well, for example, that intelligence and looks are not necessarily related. Accordingly, they object to the stereotypical depiction of clever girls as ugly. The clichéd representation of female stereotypes in TV girls, who are shown as “bitchy” and “emotionally overact”, diverges from their multifaceted everyday experience of girls and the ways girls communicate and express their emotions. This is the variety they would like to see mirrored in TV characters. They would also like to see their own appearance, skin and hair color, and culturally specific way of dressing represented among other aspects. However, as the international media analysis (see Götz & Lemish, chapter 1) or the qualitative analysis of the “exotic TV-girls” (see Spry, chapter 4) have shown, girls on TV are mainly white and from a Western industrial cultural background.

Male television characters’ portrayal as constant, often purely aggressive fighting and “violent behavior” forms the main point of criticism of the representation of boys and men on TV. Children, like their academic counterparts (see Götz & Lemish, chapter 1), recognize that boy characters are more differentiated than female TV characters, but nonetheless their appearance is clichéd. The children in this study see them as appearing either as successful fighters or competitors, or as “stupid losers” who just muddle their way through. Children’s everyday experience of boys is much more varied and multi-faceted. This is the variety they would like to see in their television heroes, as well as more positive perspectives above all, such as strategies for managing conflict and everyday life.

Altogether, the present study and its various analyses can be summarized as showing a fairly clear and consistent picture of stereotypical representations of gender, none of which correspond to reality. The underlying reasons for use of these portrayals are varied and complex. But, in the interest of promoting quality and supporting girls and boys in negotiating their identity, it should be stated: In an increasingly globalized and diverse world, it would certainly do children’s television good to take note of these critical voices and analyses, and to consider them in a self-critical manner.

The global children’s TV market is clearly dominated by North America as it holds 60% of the market share in over 24 countries. Most of these programs are created by men. Of 531 programs offered internationally, 86% are directed by men. Only some of these appear sensitive towards gender issues (Lemish, 2010). Thus, it is all the more important to collaborate closely when developing the symbolic material used by children across the globe in forming their ideas and perspectives of the world and what it means to be a girl or woman, or a boy or man. For, as Spiderman says so fittingly, “With great power comes great responsibility”.
REFERENCES


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About the Authors and Their Own Favorite Character When They Were a Child

Kara Chan

Kara Chan (Ph.D., City University of Hong Kong) is Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. Her research focuses on children, youth, advertising, media discourse as well as consumer behavior. She is the author and co-author of several books, including Advertising to Children in China (Chinese University Press, 2004) and Youth and Consumption (City University of Hong Kong Press, 2010). She worked for more than ten years in the advertising and public relations industry and as a statistician for the Hong Kong Government. She has published over 100 journal articles and book chapters on advertising, consumer studies, and gender studies.

Kara was raised in Hong Kong. Her favorite children’s magazine as a child was the weekly Children’s Paradise. It resembled a child version of Readers’ Digest and published stories from all over the world that always fascinated her. Her favorite movie character was Oliver Twist.

Maya Götz

Maya Götz is Head of the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) at the Bayerischer Rundfunk (i.e., Bavarian Broadcasting Corp.) in Munich, Germany. She is also head of the PRAX JEUNESSE Foundation. She graduated from the Pädagogische Hochschule in Kiel (Germany) with the state examination as well as a Master of Arts degree in education. In 1998 she was granted a Ph.D. degree by the University of Kassel in Germany. The title of her doctoral thesis was Girls and Television. Her main fields of research are children/youth and television and gender-specific reception research. Her publications include the books Children and Media in Times of War and Conflict (co-edited with Lemish, Hampton Press, 2007); Media and the Make-Believe Worlds of Children: When Harry Potter Meets Pokémon in Disneyland (with Lemish, Aidman, & Moon; Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005); Only Soap Bubbles? The Significance of Daily Soaps for the Everyday Life of Children and Adolescents (KoPaed, 2002, in German) and the upcoming The TV-Hero(in)es of Girls and Boys (in German).