

FLIMMO: Television Through A Child's Eyes



Project summary

Striving beyond simple recommendation of child-friendly programming, the FLIMMO project develops print brochures, online and mobile resources as well as pedagogical workshops to help parents guide their children safely through use of television.

The messages and nuances of television programming that the younger generations take for granted may cause parents confusion or distress, since television as a medium has changed in leaps and bounds. This can lead to tense disagreements in the home about how television should fit into family life. FLIMMO seeks to help parents understand their children's television viewing and processing habits by giving them assistance in making informed decisions about the many sources of entertainment that television offers today.

In 18 years of operation over 12,000 reviews of television programs and 1,700 educational articles have been published, and more than 60 editions of the FLIMMO brochure have been distributed all over Germany. These brochures – cost- and advertisement-free to all interested parents and educators – are essential to bring about initial contact with the project. In combination with the online and mobile content, they provide practical and profound know-how for media education in the family.

Aims

- Bring parents closer in touch with a child's perspective on television, in order to understand how to best accompany and moderate their children's television viewing
- Promote a healthy enjoyment of television for kids without unnecessary 'babying' or interference with parents' best judgment
- Address the general questions and relieve worries parents have about television viewing options
- Provide parents with reviews of a vast range of television programs and with recommendations on age-appropriate shows
- Promote parents' overall television/media literacy and thereby also that of their children

Target groups: Parents of children of 3 to 13 years of age, pedagogical staff

Media: FLIMMO content is distributed via printed brochures, the Internet and an app for different mobile operating systems. The cost- and advertisement-free brochure is published three times yearly, with 250,000 to 560,000 copies per issue. It is distributed to roughly over 20,000 educational institutions and other family-centric locales and organizations throughout Germany, where families can get FLIMMO. The project website and app are updated continually to inform parents about the upcoming 'TV program of the week'.

Methods

- Publishing articles on children and their use of television and how parents best accompany and moderate their children's television viewing
- Evaluating and analyzing child and adult TV shows (11 channels and their programs between 6am and 10pm)
- Drawing on research from related and relevant fields concerning children, and their use of and perspective on television

- Surveying child television viewers throughout Germany regularly

Duration of the project: FLIMMO started in 1997 with the brochure and website, and has expanded continuously since. In 2013 an application for mobile devices was introduced.

Resources needed: a publisher who ensures the financial means and communication with all project partners, as well as coordinating distribution and marketing operations; a qualified institution that assures the conceptual and academic foundation and background of the project, and also produces the content involving media educators from diverse academic disciplines; also involved: a design agency, a print company, a distributor, and technical service providers.

Project description

FLIMMO is an educational guide based on a research initiative paying special attention to empowering parents to understand the messages transmitted by informational and entertainment programs the same way their children do. FLIMMO examines all forms of television shows viewed by children aged 3 to 13. This includes shows made for a mature audience but watched by younger viewers alike. The project strikes a balance between addressing parents' justifiable concerns about television and taking into account that children can benefit from television in a number of ways. FLIMMO is based on the belief that parents already have the potential to promote media literacy to their children, but still need relevant and profound knowledge to make well-informed decisions in moderating their child's television viewing.

To this end, the project's surveys and explorations into current research provide the basis for a variety of pragmatic texts, which are accessible through the World Wide Web, the FLIMMO app, and a printed brochure. They examine a wide range of issues concerning the content of television programs, children's television use and understanding, and parents' questions and worries about TV. Past topics include television depictions of (dark) comedy, the challenges associated with serial thrillers, pedagogical highlights found in individual, featured programs, and general tips for parents on screen-time, to name but a few.

More than 12,000 short reviews evaluate television programs, using three categories:

- Programs with entertainment and educational value, with a lack or complete absence of problematic material, and themes accessible to at least one of FLIMMO's target age subgroups (3-6, 7-10 and 11-13 years old) are assigned to the category *Kinder finden's prima* ('Kids think it's great').
- In contrast, programs that are too challenging, unsettling or frightening for children are assigned to the category *Nicht für Kinder* ('Not for kids').
- Programs that may be thematically suitable for and enjoyed by most children but contain potentially harmful morals and messages are assigned to an intermediate category: *Mit Ecken und Kanten* ('Rough around the edges').

Methods

To provide parents with relevant and trustworthy information, FLIMMO draws on a variety of methods. The most important are:

- FLIMMO surveys children throughout Germany on a semi-annual basis. Over the past 15 years, 28 surveys have been circulated to parents and their children throughout Germany. The results provide firsthand insights into children's views on general TV topics, or on specific shows or series, such as Teletubbies, Star Wars, or the German casting show *Deutschland sucht den Superstar* (original: *Pop Idol*). The findings are a very important basis for FLIMMO, especially for maintaining and updating the catalogue of evaluation criteria.
- FLIMMO keeps a constant finger on the pulse of research in related fields. The project evaluates the most recent and relevant research carried out in the areas of media pedagogy and media competence, as well as other disciplines focused on children's development and media consumption. At the same time, experiences from fieldwork with children and families in pedagogical contexts are taken into account.

Exemplary description of parts of project

- To keep a constant eye on children and their understanding of television, FLIMMO conducts surveys of children's viewing habits. The starting point for the research is the child and his/her experiences. Child-centric research needs special consideration of the child's world and experiences. Conducting surveys with children thus requires sensitively selected and age-appropriate methods. For surveys with children aged 7 to 13 years, we usually conduct one-to-one interviews in which we use questionnaires including both closed and open questions. Depending on the subject and research object, focus groups are sometimes used as well. For younger children, creative and playful methods are applied, taking their limited language skills into account: mixing tasks such as asking children to draw a picture relevant to the topic, or using puppets or dolls in role-play games, and observational methods. Also, we rely on proxy respondents such as parents or pedagogues.
- Although it is not inherently part of FLIMMO's content production, part of the project consists of seminars and workshops on issues of media literacy regarding children's television viewing. A total of 14 pedagogically oriented workshops, seminars and parent evenings were organized in 2014. These events take place as a by-product of the project's reputation as a trustworthy pedagogical source, and are almost exclusively contracted by parent groups and educators who want to dig deeper into the issues. This personalized form of pedagogy also manifests itself through responses to individual enquiries via telephone or email from parents and educators, which FLIMMO regularly encourages and responds to (for examples, see the quotations accompanying this article).
- In 2009 FLIMMO introduced a new web service for educators at all levels (www.flimmo-fachportal.de). The website provides basic knowledge on media literacy and practical media work with children and parents. Also available are collections of articles based on the above-mentioned surveys and the main topic of each FLIMMO brochure to enable educators to work with their target groups on the particular subject.
- The project's founding organization Programmberatung für Eltern e.V. also organizes promotions at the start of each new school year all over Germany by giving parents of first-graders a free copy of the most recent FLIMMO edition.

What needs special attention?

The significant difference between FLIMMO and other 'watchdog' family-centric outlets of media literacy and analysis is the special approach the project has adopted, as suggested in the project's title FLIMMO – Television Through A Child's Eyes. The project thrives on its constant consideration of the child's thought processes, contemporary perspectives (both social and scientific) on television viewing, and current trends of media convergence.

Project implementation difficulties

- The demand for the free brochure is so great that it cannot be met, due to the increasing expense of printing and distributing. Therefore – and in general – it is important to find other ways to disseminate FLIMMO content.
- There is a need for different forms and ways of addressing so-called hard-to-reach parents, to involve and support them in guiding their children's (and their own) television use by taking their distinct and complex life backgrounds into account.

What could be improved?

- As of now FLIMMO's content is published in German only. This might be a barrier for German citizens with other native languages, but a simple translation would not meet the needs of these parents. Therefore we see the necessity for developing a way of meeting the requirements of this target group in order to eliminate any language or cultural barriers and provide multilingual access to FLIMMO.

- Online media libraries and time-delayed or mobile TV are changing habits of media consumption. This has to be taken into account through identifying and implementing new ways of dissemination. This could help to reach (more) families through different and contemporary channels.

Information about the organizations that run the project

Initiators

FLIMMO is published by the non-profit association Programmberatung für Eltern e.V., founded at the initiative of the Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien, BLM (Bavarian Regulatory Authority for Commercial Broadcasting) in Munich in order to promote media literacy and competency together with other regional media authorities and other expert partners throughout Germany.

The association has entrusted Munich's *JFF – Institute for Media Research and Media Education* with the supervision of FLIMMO. The JFF has been investigating through research and practical experience since 1949 how younger generations deal with media. Combining empirical research and educational practice is characteristic of the working methods of the JFF. Research results form the basis of educational schemes for educational, developmental and cultural work with children and adolescents. These research activities are reciprocally supplemented by educational practice.

Publisher

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Quotes

"I'm always so excited to surf your websites! In fact, I just now took a look at what's running on television and what I can trust my child with. To me, watching less television and being selective about content is very important!" – Email, 29.08.2003

"After fighting all sorts of 'battles' with our son (6 years old) we (and especially my son) would like your opinion, since my son apparently only trusts experts. Our son absolutely wants to watch the series Power Rangers. We believe this program to be not especially appropriate for his age (or for children in general). What do you as experts have to say about the series? We look forward to your answer!" – email, 25.06.2004

I barely have any experiences from my own childhood with the programs I find today. Your advice helps me greatly with that. The overviews are short and accessible." – email, 13.01.2008

Information about the resource

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