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**Ethics and Values as national Cultures Meet Global Children's Media**

This is a workshop presentation that actually starts, and hopefully also ends, on the workshop floor. In between this start and finish, what I will present and hopefully discuss with you, is a case study. I'm not a researcher, but a media producer. I want to know what I should produce for my young audience, what strategies I would be wise to adopt. And to be able to do this, I have to be able to see my little slice of children's media as part of the big media cake that the children who constitute my audience are consuming. I really need to understand more about how the media my colleagues and I can produce relates to that huge media buffet that the young media consumers choose from.

As we know, the globalization of media has worried many politicians during the last decades. Efforts to keep globalization at bay have, for example, taken the form of quotas for nationally produced television – for example, in some European countries. As late as in the 90's, a former French Minister of Culture condemned US media imperialism in terms that bring back the self-assured 70's, under the head-line "The Higher the Satellite, the Lower the Culture". Just to mention a few examples. Today, however, the ambition to limit global media products seems almost absurd, except maybe within families with protective ambitions and lots of time to spend with your kids. Which applies to few families; at least in countries such as my own.

As I said, I'm not a researcher. But my reading has taught me that by many youth media researchers, nationality is not considered a very significant factor any more. (Stuart Hall, Anthony Giddens / Lapset, media, s 75).

Still, in my work as a producer-director-writer of children's programs for TV, web and radio I keep coming across these cultural clashes that might be undramatic, but

still feel significant. At least, they excite me.

Let me tell you about the first time I had the great opportunity to take part in the Prix Jeunesse screenings. It was the first time I was exposed to programs from all over the world. Three of the programs I still remember, because they opened my eyes for how greatly values, attitudes and priorities can vary from one culture to the other:

- First, there was this parody of the story of Little Red Riding Hood, made in Sweden. I had seen it already at a Nordvision meeting, where producer Håkan Sandberg told us, his colleagues from the other Nordic countries, that someone had made a complaint about this film to the national Media Board (?). And he made us guess: Why do you think someone felt that this film was so offensive that they made an official complaint about it? The film in question was a farce, where all the traditional elements of the folk story were changed. Anyway, the head of the Norwegian childrens' programmes (Ada Haug) said: "Oh, I can understand there was a complaint, the way Little Red Riding Hood and her boyfriend 'Wolfy' carried on in bed!" We who came from Finland all agreed that the most provocative thing must have been the way they made fun of Grandmother's religiosity. Our colleague from Denmark (Per Schultz) said he could see no reason whatsoever to complain. Then Håkan told us that the complaint – v"this is Sweden" - had been about the fact that Little Red Riding Hood actually was shown with a bottle of wine. – Our Nordic cultures are so similar. And yet, none of us could make a correct guess as to why this program had been complained about. We had different taboos engraved on our minds; different scales of importance when it came to ethical "musts" and "must-nots". – Well, this film did very well in its category at the PJ!
- Secondly, I remember a film from Iran, "Notes of a teacher". The summary of the film read: "A teacher starts his first year teaching in a remote village. He first tries a gentle approach, but later he realizes that he has to choose a rougher way, namely physical punishment, in order to get them to study." And this was really the moral conclusion of the film: Everyone was happier when the old, hard discipline was re-introduced in the class-room.

- The third program that really made an impact on my memory at these PJ screenings was from Pakistan. There were, as I remember it, two groups of children, one consisting of girls and the other of boys, the girls led by a woman and the boys by a man. They were singing songs, all about dreams of a better tomorrow. At some stages of the program these two choirs or groups met, and greeted each other. Then they walked their separate ways and continued singing. This program was not a hit with me as I sat watching it. “Why have they entered it in this competition for innovative children’s television?” I wondered. But afterwards, in one of the discussion groups, I was told that this actually was a very brave program. The producers had taken risks; They had actually made a statement of equality by presenting girls and boys in a totally equal way, and mixed together.

These were programs that had been made within one, specific national culture and which had been produced in order to bring home certain points *within* that culture: boys and girls *can* be treated equally; traditional concepts about discipline are better than foreign ones. Could any of these films have been a multinational, global product? Not on television. Today, of course, much more provocative films and clips of every kind abound on the internet, but the big global products, series, shows – no, I could not envisage any of these films there. But *if* they had been shown all over the world, I am quite sure that they would have been interpreted very differently by viewers belonging to different cultures. And some of their ethical standpoints would have got strong reactions from children.

Why is it that children don’t seem to react strongly on the ethics of global media successes? Don’t *they* contain provocative views? Don’t they advocate certain moral standpoints and priorities? - My own answer to that is: Of course they do! You can never produce a program or a game or a book that is void of values. There is always a way of looking at the world being brought forth. Values that the producers knew very well that they are communicating, *and* values that they might not even be aware of themselves. Harry Potter is fantastic in many ways, and presents many complicated moral issues in a rather refined way. But the books also make a connection, unreflected, it seems to me, between being grossly stupid and being fat. (There’s a

tradition of this in English children's literature! What were the original, hidden values behind it? A puritan "Only the lazy and gluttonous have the time to get fat"?)

Do young viewers see this? Are they aware that they are not only consuming entertainment, but different sets of values? Is it relevant that they should be aware of it? – I find these very exciting questions.

*Culture defines how we interpret media, and how we interpret media affects our culture and mental coding*

I have read many wise researchers' definitions of the relationship between culture and media. One definition that seems useful and relevant from the point of view of this presentation states that "culture is mental programming" (Stuart Hall, Geert Hofstede). Culture gives us the lenses through which we watch. There is a classical example of children being shown a drawing depicting an elephant. Children who only knew elephants from Dumbo and circus shows said: "That's an angry elephant". Children who lived close to elephants said: "That elephant is ill". Culture directs our interpretations of what we see, hear and experience. *And* through these interpretations are the values of our culture revealed.

But: What we see, hear and experience also affects and changes our culture and its values. The media we consume affects our culture. *If* our culture has provided us with media knowledge and media competence, then the media we consume will not mould us *as easily*, but it will still leave some traces. It's a never-ending two-way moulding process.

This would mean that it makes all the difference in the world what our culture stands for, what mental programming and models of interpretation it gives us. *And* it would also mean that it really matters what we see, hear and experience.

In a survey a few years ago, called *Children, media and symbolic interchange* (Raisa Koivusalo-Kuusisaari, 2007), young children in Germany, England and Finland were giving their interpretations of a Canadian animation film about a boy who takes care

of an injured wild goose. The children's reactions were *alike* in the sense that they all referred to themselves while watching, and used the film to mirror their experiences. On this point, I have always turned to literature theory, because there I have found inspiring models that help me see what we are doing as children's media producers. What you do when reading - or watching film, or playing a game - is that you learn how to tell a story. You learn ways of constructing stories. And this knowledge you use when constructing the story of who you are, the stories you consume are tools that you build your identity with. That's why the choice of who you identify with in a film or game, is quite relevant.

And in this survey I mentioned there were differences in focus between children from different countries, which led to different interpretations. English children commented on the abstract level of the film. Finnish boys paid much attention to the sound effects; The English children identified with the main character that was a boy, the Finnish children identified with the other main character, which was the injured bird. According to the survey report, differences like these in the process of interpretation and identification have to do with differences in values hidden in the different cultures.

### ***Interviews with children***

My interest, as I said at the beginning, is to find out what strategies to adopt as a media producer within a very small culture, a culture whose children to a very high degree use and consume media that has been produced very far away. I have spent some time this spring interviewing children and young people from my target audience, trying to get a better idea of how they interpret the media they consume, and how conscious they are about cultural differences as expressed, in the first hand, in films and games.

I tried different kinds of interview situations, e.g. questions to school classes I was talking to. In the end I decided to stick to the principles of the NABC (needs-approach-?) method that I have had good experiences of in the development of program concepts and scripts. One of the principles of the NABC is that when you

find out what specific program one, chosen specific child needs, and produce this program for him or her, then you will reach the many. You make only a handful of extensive interviews, and you choose your “audience representative”. This is close to what I did. I picked a few active media users of ages between 9 &10 and 15&17. I made long interviews with them, trying to find out how they experience cultural differences in media. Since the field is endless, I chose to focus on two things: *humour* and *embarrassing things*.

I structured my questioning so that in every topic I asked them about, I started with their closest culture, their own as defined by language and background culture: The Swedish-speaking minority population in Finland. A group that is in every way totally equal with the Finnish-speaking majority, but as a minority has cultural traits which are closer to the Scandinavian, especially the Swedish, culture than to the Finnish tradition. – I then asked them about the same topic with reference to their identity as Finns, Finnish citizens. Then I widened the field to other Nordic countries, then to Europe and the rest of the world, then to the global. I wanted to find out what concepts and images they had of the differences in media produced on these different levels.

Certain media products came up frequently in these interviews, and I want to show you a couple of clips. This does not mean that the films and games I use as examples are *the* most watched or played by Finnish children; but they were mentioned by several kids I met and also by some of those I made long interviews with.

Let me *screen* some examples: clips from *Madicken*, *Home Alone 2* and *Friends*.

Three different approaches to nakedness and three different types of humor. The target audience might seem to be quite different in Astrid Lindgren’s films and in *Friends*, but the 9-10-year-olds I met didn’t make that distinction. They could talk about Ace Ventura one minute, and Moomin trolls the next.

I think that today the threshold might be higher here in Scandinavia, too, to open a children’s feature film with a long sequence with naked children than it was in ’89, when *Madicken* was made. At least, it is so for me as a TV producer. This is because

the pedofile aspect has become so much more visible in our culture.

What did the children and teenagers say about cultural differences in media?

- their first reaction tended to be much along the lines of the research I mentioned, stating that national cultures are not an issue. They reacted with slight surprise as I asked them about differences in films or TV shows or other media produced in different parts of the world. They didn't seem used to think along these lines; Their groups of reference when it came to media were not based on their nationality or background culture, but, in the case of the 9-10-years-old, on friends (and certain internet sites), and in the case of the teenagers, on peers with the same interests – very important here were internet, and on the net both facebook, youtube and specialized sites, e.g. role play sites. Not surprisingly.
- still, they did, of course, have concepts about different cultures and countries. And one thing that I found interesting was how they related their observations of films and games to their images of the cultures where they knew these films were made. Especially the teenagers had so clear definitions in their minds of what Finns, Swedes, Japanese or Americans are like, that they judged such things that didn't suit this image as “un-typical”. *Example: Girl, 17*: “You would think that the Swedes make happy films, you know, “the happy Swedish people”, and Finns more sour films. But we watched a Swedish film: Everyone was just angry in it.”
- another dominant reaction: I don't get influenced by things I see or games I play. “Maybe weak kids get influenced. Kids who get bullied, and are used to take things to themselves.” They also thought that games influence you even less than films. “If you play because you enjoy playing, you don't get influenced. Maybe those who play because they like to watch get more influenced.”
- I asked the teenagers whether they thought a film or a game can be neutral in terms of values or a world view. They thought many of them are neutral, even

dramas.

- and, more surprising: They didn't think that they identify very much with characters in films and games. *Example: Boy, 9*: "In comedy series, people are sometimes like you, but I mostly watch fantasy worlds." *Example: Girl, 17*: In some cases I might think: 'That's how I do, too'. But most of the time, everything is totally unrealistic. Things are supergood – superbad – supergood and so on." – In other words, these young people tended to think that identification and getting influenced doesn't really happen if the settings and characters look unrealistic. The packaging means I'm unattainable by what's in the package? *Example: Boy, 15*: "It's not important to me to recognize myself in the films I watch. Sometimes I may recognize myself in a character, but I don't think it helps me."
- **What about humor?** Will I feel estranged if the humor used is different from what I'm used to, the humor of my own culture? The first answer to "what kind of jokes feel strange to you?" was in several cases very concrete: "Jokes about people and things I don't know". And indeed, it would seem that humor today is remarkably universal: *screen examples from the Prix Jeunesse Guessing Games*
- However, humor was actually the only area in which most of the young persons I talked with actually thought that they *were* influenced by films and games and video clips. *Example: Boy, 9*: "You start thinking it's funny when their butts are burning" (about the crooks in *Home Alone*) Also: "The first time Kevin throws a brick in the head of the crook you think 'ouch!', but then he throws many bricks in his head and you start laughing."
- *Example: Girl, 17*: "When I have been watching *Friends* for several hours, I've noticed afterwards that, 'oops, I'm saying a lot of sarcastic things'."
- *Example: Boy, 15*: "Media puts down the boundaries for what is funny."
- What about offensive things in the form of humor, jokes you don't like? At least some kids react on that, too: *Example: Girl, 17*: "You shouldn't laugh at

really serious things”; And: “Some jokes can only be understood where they are told. Local things, maybe religious stuff”.

- *In conclusion, humor* does offer points where these kids occasionally experienced that their values clashed with main stream, global media. BUT we should remember that, at all ages, the question of what is funny gets all kinds of answers. in Denmark, for example, there are some extremely popular children’s books for small children by Oscar and Dorte Karrebaek, where all limits and taboos concerning what you may joke about are being blown up. There is sex, there is kannibalism, there are autistic children, there are pedofiles. And, I have read, a lot of children just love it, and they don’t draw the conclusions that the persons that are joked about are despicable or ridiculous.
- And even if the kids I talked to felt that some of the humor wasn’t funny, no-one protested or indicated that something should be done about jokes you don’t like. Many things they said gave me the impression that the world of media entertainment was regarded by them as something that just is there. You go there for entertainment and fantasy and excitement, but you don’t expect this global media to mirror yourself or your own culture.
- The idea that we, in Finland should try to produce entertaining programs and show them to the world was turned down. *Examples: Girl, 17*: “We wouldn’t be able to make productions as good as they; No-one except we would think it was funny.” *Boy, 9*: “Films are best in English. In the USA they have more things to make films with. They can afford more. They don’t quite understand Finnish jokes in America” *Girl, 10*: “American films are good! Because they talk American, because they are funny.”
- **What about ethically unfamiliar things?**

Some spontaneous examples that the kids came up with were actually very positive clashes of cultures. Unfamiliar behavior that you understand to be part of another culture. *Example, Boy 15*: “I don’t think it plays any great role of you see how people live in different parts of the world. What *can* influence

you are stories of persons in a certain historical situation. They can make you identify and understand what it felt like, why people who were there just can't forget about it." I asked him for an example, and he said: "Like the Japanese and Hiroshima". – But this also applies to less dramatic issues: *Example, Girl, 17*: The cheek kissing in Friends feels a bit embarrassing. "You don't do that here. At least, I don't." *Example Indian director Vinod Ganatra (the film Harun-Arun)* told me the only negative response he has had from children on behavior or values was when a German girl reacted very strongly against drinking water out of your hands. But she at once walked away to try it out, and then came back into the room and said: "You're right. It works."

- I tried to find out about cultural clashes that might feel disturbing, or even offending, by asking "What kind of things do you find embarrassing in films? And have you ever experienced that in a film something is portrayed as being embarrassing or inappropriate that you think is quite OK?"
- embarrassing things for 9-10-year-olds were kissing, love scenes (at least if your parents are watching), and childish stuff. *Example: Boy, 9*: "Sometimes children's programs are so childish and embarrassing that it is what makes them funny" And: "In Seinfeld there are 1000 embarrassing things. You just *have* to press the pause button before you go on watching."
- inappropriate things that these young people mentioned that they had reacted against were cruelty to animals, cruelty to people, scenes with a lot of blood, and, on the part of the teenagers, also sexual abuse and unfair roles between men and women
- It was interesting to hear what they said about these things that to bigger or lesser degree had offended them morally. I found three main strategies :
- 1) you invent explanations for things that don't match your values so that they do match, i.e. you make them part of your own cultural codes. Mostly the 9-10-year-olds. *Example: Boy, 10*: "At the beginning of Ace Ventura there is a dog, and he *steals* it! – But that is actually good, because it's a terrible home that he steals it from." *Example: Boy, 9*: "It's illegal to show women's breasts

on TV in Finland. I don't know if it is, but I think so. Because they don't show them. And if they show the front side of the behind they make the pictures all blurry. But *I* don't think it's unsuitable to show it." *Example: Girl, 17*: "My boy friend told me that in (the computer game) *Half Life*, you can now shoot those who are calling for help, as well. That wasn't possible earlier. I suppose they programmed it like that by mistake."

- 2) you draw a line between the elements that confuse you and the reality behind it. Mostly the teenagers. *Example: The Swedes are sunnier than we, but "their films about young people all have to be dark, about drugs and stuff". And: Girl, 17: In American films, being naked is more prohibited than here at home, but in reality we have a bigger problem with it". (They are not as shy).*
- 3) you state: this I couldn't understand. *Example: Boy, 9: In Family Guy, someone had made a drawing of Mohammed. And then everyone was afraid that terrorists would come. Didn't understand this. Example: Girl, 16: In Sims City, one of the earliest versions, when I wanted to make the dad stay at home and look after the baby, they came and took the baby away from the family because it hadn't been looked after. Example: Girl, 17: "In Friends, they are sometimes so super manly or super female. Once they were playing poker, and only the boys knew how to do it! I have been able to play poker for ages!"*

What did I learn from these interviews?

**The children and young people I met are very well aware of the fact that the bulk of media that they consume is produced by multinational, US or other foreign producers.**

**Nationality is not an issue in their media world; although in various other areas of their lives it is.** (clear identity both as Swedish-speaking Finns – jokes, TV programs and as Finns - sports)

**Very significant is the question what kind of social networks the children relate**

**to as they make their media choices. The elder the children, the more they lean (also) on internet-based social networks. Since your contacts in these networks tell you what is god-bad-cool-boring and hot, they probably define many of the cultural codes that become part of the children's identity.**

**There is a great guilelessness in their attitude to the influence of media on themselves, and a strong tendency to regard especially games, but also films and TV-shows, as ideologically neutral.** (And these were hand-picked children with comparatively wide knowledge of media and how it works.)

**Children and young people do encounter values and attitudes that are unfamiliar to them. Some of these they import into their own culture, sometimes through false assumptions, which then strengthens inaccurate views of the world or our society.**

**These children, belonging to a small background culture with limited media production in their own language, made a clear division between what kind of media products they want from where: They were totally fine with the huge entertainment machinery being run globally and in English, and did not wish for local versions of these products. One consequence of this is that the role models and the stories that the children unconsciously adopt, and then use as material in building their own life story, contain a lot of cliché heroes, a lot of confusing information and I some cases values that are in conflict with the children's home culture.**

I want to point out at this stage, that children from a different small culture might have other opinions. That's why, among other things, I'm looking forward to the report from a study that I recently heard professors Rebecca Haines and Judi Cook (US) are doing about how pre-adolescent girls of immigrant backgrounds residing in the US negotiate the tensions between the dominant western culture and their family traditions. Evidently, one could expect that a culture which is characterized by stricter religious principles than the one I work within would clash much more with the global entertainment buffet. On the other hand, who knows? I also just recently learnt from a scholar at the University of Helsinki that many of the world's global products have

their own muslim version today: from Barbies to web sites and soft drinks.

## Conclusions

Back to the starting point: What should I, producing media for an audience within a small culture, go for? What should we, who do not produce global media, focus our limited resources on? What does our target audience primarily need from *us*?

During this presentation, the following needs and answers have come up.

- Since the children get much of their mental programming and values from reference groups, and these often seem to favor a limited type of stories and heroes, we need to give these kids
  - **material that will help them choose, construct and tell good life stories as independently as possible.**
  - **A wide range of identification objects**
  
- Since many young persons show a marked guilelessness in their attitudes to being influenced by entertaining media we need to give them
  - **a wide range of media skills that develop the kids' ability to interpret stories and give them lingual competence. This inoculates the kids against strong mental and social impacts of media.**
  
- Since our target audience has a different set of consumer expectations for their local producers than for the global media wizards, we may go and put our resources into the things we do best. Because: **What did the young people that were interviewed say for themselves that they wanted from us, who produce media for them within their own society, in their own language?**
  - **Three kids out of four said: "I would like a program where people of my age discuss things. You know, interesting things: hobbies, and friends."**

That's what they said. They don't want local wanna-be global formats. Their global

media is there for entertainment and escapism. From the media produced within their own home base they want – mirrors. Mirrors that help them write and tell the story of who they are. It's somehow so simple and old-fashioned, although anyone who has made a show where a lot of young people function together in discussions and improvisations will know that it takes a whole lot of professional skills, and resources, to do right by these young people. Still: That is something we *can* do! And even if we don't compete with Disney, we can, and we absolutely should, keep producing drama that mirrors the real world of our kids. No-one else can do it. No one. We can give the kids good mirrors, lots of mirrors. Not mirrors that suck you into a fairy land of entertainment formats; no: Mirrors that help you recognize yourself, help you see who you want to become. Mirrors of what is, mirrors of what might be, mirrors that show you where you have come from. If you have these mirrors to look into every day, whether they have the shape of TV shows, web sites, drama series, radio broadcasts or books, then you can turn away from these mirrors and face the huge kaleidoscope of global media without fear and without the risk of drowning.

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