

GERMAN BRAINS BRING 'EDUTAINMENT' TO SE ASIAN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

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A NEW STYLE of children's television is making its mark in several Southeast Asian countries, inspired and supported by German expertise in lacing entertainment with education.

The region's programming for younger viewers has tended to be dominated by lighter, imported animated shows such as "SpongeBob Squarepants" or "Mickey Mouse".

But the 2010 launch of the television programme "I Got It!" across nine countries has proved a success with the region's children, as they watch and learn how things work, or explore human relationships alongside the show's pint-sized protagonists.

One episode follows Bounthanome from Laos, who is 12 years old and blind. In a region where disability is often taboo, and afflicted children frequently excluded from society, he introduces the viewers to his life.

"I can even help to feed the chickens," he says proudly, before showing how he uses the birds' noise to guide his way.

A young Vietnamese girl, Chi, nine, collects samples of traffic emissions with her grandmother for laboratory analysis. "Now my mother doesn't take me to school on the moped," she says. "I prefer to go by bike."

Each of the participating countries contributes elements for the educational slots, which are then pooled and shared. Each country then produces its own version with a local presenter or host.

A light touch is the order of the day. For the episode titled Bad Air, one host rode up on a moped before introducing the issue. The woman introducing the blind Laotian boy stepped in front of the camera blindfolded and carrying a cane.

Although new to Southeast Asian audiences, the format will be familiar to viewers who grew up watching children's television in the West.

In the United States, "Sesame Street" has

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been blending educational content with humour and music since 1966, while in Germany, "Die Sendung mit Der Maus" (The Programme with the Mouse) has become a yardstick for the genre since it first aired in 1971.

Despite initial scepticism, the German show was a huge success, and has spawned many imitators at home and abroad, including news programmes aimed at under-12s.

German expertise is also behind "I Got It!"; explains Norbert Spitz, head of the Bangkok office of the Goethe Institute, Germany's international cultural organisation.

"As a body dedicated to the promotion of culture, we felt we should get involved," he said. His team supports the Asian children's show to the tune of €110,000 (Bt4.8 million), and provides specialist advisors.

Ute Mattigkeit, 38, and Maike Pies, 30, have many years' experience in producing scientific programmes for German children.

They meet with the teams from Burma, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines several times a year to help with scripts and production.

"When we want to explain something to an Asian audience, we tend to try to draw the whole bigger picture," said Fatima Abdul Kareem of Malaysian broadcaster RTM.

"This is overwhelming for children. We have learned here to concentrate on one aspect," she said after attending the

latest "I Got It!" workshop in Bangkok.

"When we deal with science, we can use too many figures and foreign words," said Grace Torres Panganiban of Philippine broadcaster ABS-CBN. "But now we're learning that you don't need all that," she added.

Mattigkeit has just been showing the teams samples from German programmes for inspiration. "It's not so easy to tell a story that imparts something useful while being entertaining at the same time."

Her suggestion to structure the script around a child as first-person narrator is greeted eagerly by the Malaysian crew. They plan to produce an episode this year around Zurin Hazlin, aged seven.

"The message is, if she can overcome all obstacles, so can anyone," Haryati Hani Abdul Aziz said.

The Burmese said they are hoping to make an episode about jade, one of their country's most prized resources. After realising that they do not know much about where the precious stone comes from, Pies helps with some Internet research.

"Basic research, asking for expert opinions - these things are not so obvious over here," he said.

Topic selection is also a sensitive issue, and is done by consensus, said Filipino Arnold Limjoko. "Some things are taboo in some countries, we have to be careful," he said.

One episode on biogas hit a hurdle of national customs, as a suggestion from the Laos team to look at the exploitation of pig slurry was considered unacceptable by the Muslim countries.

So the producers interviewed a farmer working with bovine excrement instead.

The different teams also discussed at length how much of a mother's breast could be shown on a programme about milk.

The show is an "international production with local character", said Andreas Klempin, the Goethe Institute's project coordinator. A first poll in the participating countries has shown an enthusiastic response. "This is the first step towards a scientific society."