

## 5. Lilla Aktuellt

### Public service producing news for young people

Lowe Östberg

Working with news for children is inspiring. At Lilla Aktuellt, a news programme for children produced by Swedish public service broadcaster Sveriges Television (SVT), we have the luxury of dealing with a very engaged and interested audience. It's also hard, of course. Although we strive towards a constructive approach in our reporting, news can be both scary and complicated. With the rapid technical development of mobile phones, and children's dramatically increased access to them, they are more exposed to all sorts of atrocities than ever – especially older children, whom we have a much harder time trying to reach on traditional platforms than before. Our biggest challenge now, and our most crucial task, is to work out how we can reach them where they are, outside of traditional broadcast television.

We sometimes get calls or emails from upset parents. In their view, our news reporting is too complicated and/or scary for their kids. If such a call comes from a parent of a five-, six- or seven-year old, it's easy to handle. *Lilla Aktuellt*, a daily news programme on Swedish public service broadcaster SVT's Children's Channel (*SVT Barnkanalen*), targets children aged eight to twelve. If younger children want to watch our programme, we recommend that parents watch it with them so they can deal with any questions or reactions that might come up. Our advice may also be not to watch at all. News is not something you need to take part in at an early age. For some kids, it may certainly raise more

Lowe Östberg is the executive producer of Sveriges Television's news program for children Lilla Aktuellt. He is also a member of the SVT Children's Management Group.

questions and stir up more fears than you are able to handle as a parent.

Sometimes these calls come from parents of 8 to 10-year-olds, or even older. In that case another approach is required. My answer to them would be based on three important principles:

First, it is a matter of children's rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that children should have access to information. They also have the right to make themselves heard.

Secondly, our experience with children as news consumers indicates that those who have access to newspapers and adults to talk to, or even better, access to news media that operates with children's rights in mind and from a children's perspective, show less anxiety over scary news than those who don't. They are also more capable of defining themselves in the world they live in.

Thirdly (and probably most importantly), trying to protect a 10-year-old from scary or complicated news is an impossible mission. It has always been difficult to regulate children's media use, but now it is harder than ever before. And that is, of course, because of smartphones. In this chapter I will narrow down some of the challenges they have brought to us, but also some of the possibilities.

### A new window to the adult world

When reaching the third or fourth year you are often expected to go to school and return home by yourself. After school you hang out with friends, or perhaps spend whole afternoons alone at home. This is also when you get your first mobile phone.

In 2016, more than 90 per cent of Swedish 10-year-olds had access to a cellphone.<sup>1</sup> Internationally, that is a very high figure. Looking at the trend over the last few years, this figure is most likely even higher today.

This device is not only used for calling or texting worried parents to tell them your whereabouts. It's a smartphone. With this in your hand you can suddenly access things you couldn't before. It's your own private window to the adult world.

This brings fantastic possibilities. You have at hand a wide mix of celebrities, new friend relationships, games, videos and unlimited knowledge about just about anything you want to know. At the same time, you are exposed to a world full of strange rumours, nasty gossip and scary news. You see images and videos about terror attacks around

the world, in Europe, in our neighbouring countries and recently also in Sweden.

Whether we like it or not, this access to all this information makes our 9 to 12-year-olds our “youngest adults” when it comes to news consumption.



#### About Lilla Aktuellt

- SVT’s news programme for children aged 8 to 12.
- Reaches on average 100,000 viewers with the daily programme *Lilla Aktuellt* (SVT) and up to 400,000 viewers with the weekly format *Lilla Aktuellt Skola* (collaboration with UR [Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company]).
- Started in the early 90s. Has evolved from one programme per week during school terms to broadcasts and online content Monday to Friday full year.
- Up to 20 people on editorial staff.
- Links: [barnkanalen.se/lillaaktuellt](http://barnkanalen.se/lillaaktuellt), [barnkanalen.se/lillaaktuelltskola](http://barnkanalen.se/lillaaktuelltskola), [barnkanalen.se/mixat](http://barnkanalen.se/mixat)
- Daily question app: *Lilla Aktuellt Kollen*.
- News and current affairs app for children 10 to 12 years old: *Mixat*.
- Social media target group: Instagram.
- Social media adults (parents, teachers): SVT on Facebook and Twitter.

## A strong relationship through dialogue

SVT and *Lilla Aktuellt* have a long history of bringing news to kids. We still have a large TV audience and a strong brand when it comes to credibility. Our viewers like what we do; they are interested and committed. In recent years we have, in addition to our TV format, also invested in different methods to build a long-term relationship with our target group through dialogue and interaction. We do this on our online platform, in social media and through our app *Lilla Aktuellt Kollen*, a tool strictly built for dialogue.

On this stand-alone platform (in addition to commercial social media platforms where we are also present) up to 20,000 daily users answer questions about what they know, what they think and how they feel about different topics. We use their answers daily in broadcasts and we often act editorially on the results. This app, *Lilla Aktuellt Kollen*, gives us greatly improved knowledge about, and a close connection with, our target group. It also offers our users the opportunity to have a direct impact on our editorial work. It empowers them.

With this said, things should be good. We should be pleased. And we are, at least when it comes to reaching our audience up to ten years of age. Our problem starts after that, since traditional TV watching decreases significantly from this age. When it comes to 12- and 13-year-olds, they have pretty much quit watching public service TV, and the ecosystem, consisting of our broadcast format and other digital platforms, is broken.

## Leaving traditional platforms

A recent study by Insight Kids, a youth and family unit at the global research and strategy firm Insight Strategy Group,<sup>2</sup> confirms what has happened. It concludes that kids leave traditional media platforms earlier than ever before. A 10-year-old simply doesn't watch TV any longer, especially not programmes for kids. With your first smartphone in your hand you go instead for Youtube, social media or similar platforms. We have also learned that many 10-year-olds use various news apps intended for adults.

So, with this new device in your possession you have what you need. At least you think you do. The problem is that for major domestic news providers such as *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen* and *Omni* – or SVT's main

news app for that matter – children are not their first consideration when they report news. They don't consider children's rights, needs or realities as *Lilla Aktuellt* does.

What can we do, then, to maintain the position as the main news source for children in this situation? How can we be relevant for the oldest in our target group and fulfil our public service obligations towards them? Well, like the rest of the media industry we must expand our focus from evening broadcasts to a greater presence on digital platforms at all times. This is not an easy task, since we need to do both at the same time. Our younger target group is still watching our programmes, they can't be left out. But the older children need a different approach.

### Being there, “here and now”

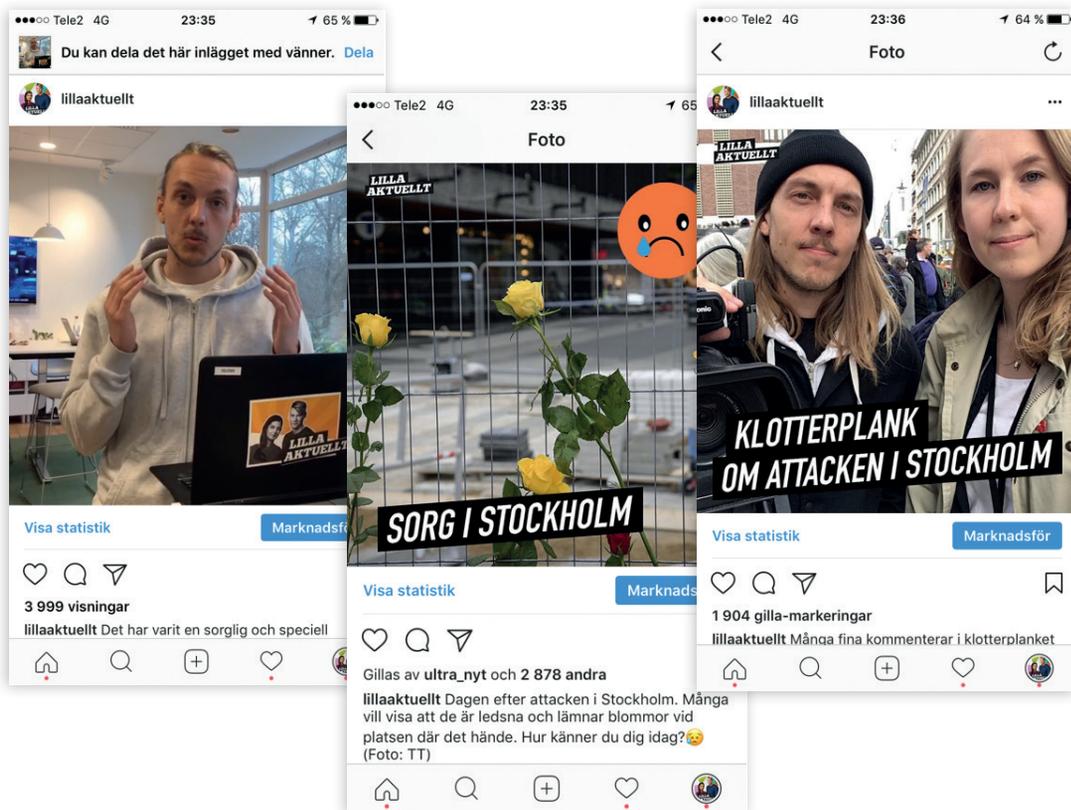
*Lilla Aktuellt's* Instagram account has 35,000 followers who interact actively with comments and likes. Our Snapchat account is smaller, but very useful for interaction. On these platforms we can be certain that we are dealing with the ten- to twelve-year-olds. Most importantly, the activity on these platforms is not limited to broadcasting hours. We meet the children in the morning, at midday, in the afternoon and before they go to bed.

Encouraged by this development, we have experimented with new content online. We have shut down our separate website and joined the SVT Children's Channel's (*SVT Barnkanalen*) portal together with other programmes aimed at the older target group.

The keywords have been “here and now”. The aim is to provide older kids with news and other stories from early morning to evening. We meet them daily with various types of interactions, such as polls, reactions and live chats. We also want this to be the place where they go when something extraordinary happens. The first try-out for that was tough: it was the terror attack at Drottningatan in Stockholm.

### Live reporting on digital platforms

That attack in central Stockholm took place at 14.53 on Friday 7 April, 2017. Almost everyone at the *Lilla Aktuellt* office had left for the weekend. Fridays are special, since we only have a morning edition aimed at schools and no evening programmes. Thus, our normal window for reporting news was not available.



The few of us still at the office had to act instantly. Another programme at the SVT Children’s Channel (Random Mix), targeting the older group, had their afternoon chat going on online. It featured a popular youtuber, but right after the attack they were bombarded with questions about what had happened.

We quickly decided that *Lilla Aktuellt* would take over the chat room. Within 15 minutes after the attack we could present facts as they came in and respond to questions and reactions from users. At the same time, we made several posts on our Instagram account where we moderated comments and gave answers. These windows on our digital platforms were open long into the evening. The questions and comments were like the following:

I'm downtown near the attack and don't know where to go. Is it safe to go home?

Who does such a terrible thing?

I know someone who died. I'm so sad!

I left school to meet my mother downtown, but I can't get in touch with her. I'm so afraid something has happened to her!

I'm afraid and worried. What can I do to not feel so afraid?

### Ease and confirm fears

Dealing with these kinds of questions is not easy, however the editorial staff at *Lilla Aktuellt* are experienced. The focus was mainly on responding to the children's fears. You can often do that by putting what has happened in a wider perspective. For instance, we tried to explain that this was a very rare and extreme event and it's not likely this will happen to you. We also encouraged them to talk to someone they trust, to never carry your fear alone.

Furthermore, confirming fear is helpful. In this case the event was not in another country far away, we couldn't say that. But just being there, confirming their fears, telling them we were scared too, was helpful. One wrote: "Now I have talked to you and to my parents. I feel better. Thank you!"

During this weekend, Instagram and the Children's Channel's portal were the main windows for our reporting. The response from our followers and users online was overwhelming. It wasn't until Monday that we could send a TV report on the attack, but that didn't matter. We had reached them, with balanced information, responding to fears and stopping rumours surrounding this horrific event. And we did it in their window to the adult world, alongside with all the news flashes and terrible pictures spreading in social media. We were there, "here and now", in their smartphones.

### A new news and current affairs app

To our previously established platforms – our TV programme, our question app *Lilla Aktuellt Kollen* and our social media accounts – we

have now added a new app called Mixat. What used to be a subsection of the Children's Channel's portal has now become a news and current affairs app for children aged nine to twelve. The strategy is mobile phone first, be "here and now", and meet the users in the morning, at midday, in the afternoon and in the evening. The focus is on dialogue and interaction.

The aim is for Mixat to be the main online news source for the upper range of our target group. We don't know yet whether they will check in with us as much as we want them to, but the first user statistics indicate that we are on to something. Downloads are climbing steadily. The number of returning visitors is increasing. So the Mixat app may be one answer to reaching the pre-teens with news and other content with a child perspective. With this new platform, we might be able to fulfil our obligations towards them.

### Looking ahead

Our efforts on digital platforms notwithstanding, the TV format is still our main product. It probably will be for several years to come. *Lilla Aktuellt* is closely linked to schools, and each week we reach up to 400,000 intermediate-level school pupils with our programme. If the teachers continue to include us in their tuition, *Lilla Aktuellt* will remain strong.

The Mixat app, however, takes us in new and very interesting directions. It develops our storytelling. It opens up new ways of communicating with older children. We reach into their private lives, outside school. Where there used to be a gap, we are now present. To become relevant to pre-teens, given the technical development surrounding media consumption, this might be an option. And we are at it.

### Notes

1. Davidsson & Findahl (2016).
2. Insight Strategy Group (2016).

### References

- Davidsson, Pamela & Findahl, Olle (2016). *Svenskarna och internet 2016*. Stockholm: Internetstiftelsen i Sverige.
- Insight Strategy Group (2016). Youth Now and Next. Available at <https://insightstrategygroup.com/about>. [Accessed 16 October, 2018].