

“If I was making the news”: What do children want from news?

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Abstract:

What do children growing up in Israel think about the genre of news and how would they wish the news to become more child-friendly and relevant for them? This article reports on two complementary studies: A response to an open ended question from a large representative national survey of Israeli children and a series of focus group interviews with a selected sample of middle-class Jewish children. The results suggest that children in Israel have an understanding of the value of the news but would very much like to see them tailored to their needs and interests. They expressed a desire to be informed on core national news issues, but asked for a positive framing that removes the scary and gory elements. They would like more light-hearted contents and style that avoids a condescending or infantilizing tone and wish to be treated in a serious and authoritative manner. The implications of these findings for the production of news for children on screen and online are discussed in the conclusion.

Keywords: children, citizens, Israel, news, voice

While the genre of news is considered an essential source of information that helps protect citizens from existential threats as well as inform them on central issues such as politics, the economy, and policy in order for them to formulate their attitudes and decisions, it has generally been perceived as inappropriate and even dangerous for children (Gunter, Furnahm & Griffiths, 2000; Seiter & Pincus, 2004). This approach is grounded in the perception of children as naïve and a-political who should not be bothered with the complexities of the world around them (Lemish, 2007; Carter & Messenger Davies, 2005). Children are assumed not to have the necessary cognitive tools to handle such contents:

they are not mature enough emotionally, they have not developed critical thinking skills, and they lack the necessary knowledge to absorb the information. Overall, children are generally not perceived as citizens, or even citizens in the making (Buckingham, 2000). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to hear from children what they think about the genre of news, from their own point of view, and in their own voices, in order to facilitate the creation of more child-friendly news that will engage young people in the public sphere in meaningful ways for them.

Israeli society, the context of this study, is of particular interest, given the existential and long lasting conflict between the state of Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and the neighboring Arab countries. News and news consumption have a central role in Israel and are influencing the perceptions of children growing up there and their attitudes and expectations. Earlier studies have documented that Israeli children as young as kindergarten are more aware of the role of news in national discourse (Lemish, 1998), and internalize its framing of the conflict (Lemish, 2007, Lemish & Alony-Pick, 2014).

Children and news: An estranged audience?

Three main groups of reasons constitute the rationale for shielding children from news. The first group focuses on the nature of the news genre, particularly in its more popular televised form, which is the focus of much of the research on children. Viewers of news are faced with many cognitive challenges: multiple visual and audio stimuli, often conveying unrelated and even contradictory messages; short segments and quick transitions; multiple visual effects such as charts, graphs, photos, maps; fragmented and fast linguistic exchanges that make use of complicated terminology requiring previous knowledge; use of voice over and background noises; dramatic and sensational reporting – all of which overstimulate viewers' audio-visual senses and cognitive capacities (Cohen, 1998). In addition, the topics themselves being covered usually have little relevance for children and do not interest them, thus their motivation to make the effort to attend to news is severely diminished (Rayemaecker, 2004; Vandebosch, Dhoest & Van Den Bulk, 2009).

The second group of reasons focuses on children as an audience and is grounded in the belief that childhood is a period of naivety, pleasure, and worryless play, and children as vulnerable, sensitive and easily traumatized. Thus, children require protection from the facts of life, and particularly from war and violence (Pincus Kajitani, 2007; Seiter, 2007; Seiter & Pincus, 2004; Strohmaier, 2007). Finally, the third group of reasons argues that children are just entirely disinterested in news topics, perhaps due to their lack of social, political and economic power. The accumulated evidence suggests that children seldom actively choose to view news on their own (Garitaonandia, Juaristi & Olega, 2011) and when asked they express complaints about and disinterest in news (Buckingham 1997b). News-reports around the world have consistently presented results of surveys suggesting decline in news consumption by young people (Buckingham, 1997; Jones, 2007; Katz, 1993; Patterson, 2007; Raeymaeckers, 2004). A related concern voiced is that young generations today are becoming less engaged in politics, more indifferent and self-centered, which threatens the

stability of democracy around the world (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1998; Buckingham 2009b; Mendes, Carter & Messenger Davies, 2009).

Despite these arguments, there is ample evidence that children are exposed to news, directly or indirectly, more than research has acknowledged in the past (Buckingham, 2000; Cantor & Nathanson, 1996; Messenger Davies, 2008); and that television news serves as their main source of information about current events (Lemish & Götz, 2007; Buijzen, Walma Walma van der Molen & Sondij, 2007). Furthermore, more recent studies suggest that children are often pro-actively seeking information in news on topics that are of interest to them and are even eager to express their own opinion about them (Blankemeyer, Walker & Svitak, 2009; Carter & Allan, 2005; Carter, Messenger Davies, 2005; Carter, Messenger Davies, Allan Mendes, Milani & Wass, 2009).

The role of news in children's lives

The existing literature on children and news has mainly focused on three areas that bear relevancy to the current study: Children's comprehension of news, the emotional reactions to news, and the role of news in political socialization and civic engagement.

Children's comprehension of news: Research in this area concentrated on cognitive development and children's ability to comprehend news content, and on a variety of ways that news can become more easily accessible to children (Buckingham, 2000; Gunter et al., 2000; Walma van der Molen & van der Voort, 2000a; 2000b). Related is the developing ability of children to distinguish between reality and fiction on television (e.g., Chandler, 1997). Research suggests that news is one of the first television genres that kindergarten children learn to identify as "real" and thus also "important" (Lemish, 1998).

Emotional reactions to news: Research evidence based on both parental as well as children's reporting document that children demonstrate fear and anxiety following exposure to some news items (Adoni & Cohen, 1980; Cantor, Mares, & Oliver, 1993; Cantor & Nathanson, 1996; Smith & Wilson, 2002; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). News reports of war and crisis, more specifically, stimulate in children feelings of sadness and anxiety that often express themselves in restlessness, crying, and nightmares. While young children up to middle childhood react more strongly to visual stimulants and express anxiety over more concrete threats to themselves and their loved ones, older children are more fearful of more abstract threats such as nuclear war (Cantor, Mares & Oliver, 1993; Cantor & Nathanson, 1996; Smith & Moyer-Gusé, 2006; Cantor & Nathanson, 1996; Hoffner & Haefner, 1993; Smith & Wilson, 2000; 2002; Wober & Young, 1993; Wright et al., 1989). It is no surprise, therefore, that children of various ages are reluctant to view news because they perceive this genre to be focused on the negative and the fear-inducing content which they prefer to avoid.

Political socialization and civic engagement: Studies of the relationship between consumption of news and children's political socialization and civic engagement provide non-conclusive evidence. Earlier studies suggested that children who watch more news are more knowledgeable about the political world, demonstrate greater curiosity towards news,

and are more motivated to actively pursue additional information (Atkin & Gantz, 1987; Conway et al., 1981). Media were also found to contribute to the development of national and civic values (Adoni, 1979; Barnhurst & Wartella, 1998). Additional studies complicated the process by suggesting that television news contributions are mediated by a host of variables, such as family communication patterns, economic status, child cognitive development and personal interest, as well as level of political efficacy (Buckingham, 1997; Chaffee & Young, 1990; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Ribak, 1997). The role news media play in children's political socialization and civic engagement become even more acute at times of war and crisis, as research evidence suggests that children internalize the national discourse they are exposed to through the media and which is being reinforced by their social environment (Lemish, 2007).

Clearly then, scholars have been arguing that the news media are contributing – directly and/or indirectly – to young people's engagement in the public sphere and thus the decline in news consumption among children and youth is perceived as a worrisome phenomenon (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Cushion, 2009; Weintraub Austin, 2013). Therefore, finding ways in which news can be more child-friendly has become a question of interest for scholars.

Children's Television News Programs

Television news programs aimed specifically at children and youth have been in existence in several countries around the world since the 1970s - including Austria, Germany, Israel, The Netherlands, UK, and the US (Buckingham, 1997; Messenger Davies, 2007). Such specially designed programs attempt to face the challenge of presenting complicated current events in an accessible way to cater to young viewers' cognitive and emotional development (Greenberg & Brand, 1993; Mendes et al, 2009; Walma van der Molen, 2004; Walma van der Molen et al, 2002). Many of these efforts were geared specifically towards engaging young people in political and civic processes (Buckingham, 1997; Manning, 2000; Matthews, 2003; Vandebosch, Dhoest & van den Bulk, 2009). Additionally, the call to empower children by providing them a voice in current events and an ability to influence social agendas was also a driving force of these efforts (Buckingham, 2000; Carter et al., 2009).

The approach taken by creators of such programs is to adapt news content to the audience by presenting the items in a simple and direct manner, avoiding complexities and ambiguities (Matthews, 2003; 2005; 2007; 2009b), as well as providing more background information that helps ground the individual episodic occurrence in social, historical and process oriented contexts (Buckingham, 2000; Messenger Davies, 2007; Walma van der Molen et al, 2002). Children's news programs also make an effort to synchronize the visual and verbal texts, to avoid gruesome visuals, present difficult events from long-shots that are less disturbing emotionally and to minimize strong audio effects (Messenger Davies, 2007; Strohmaier, 2007; Walma van der Molen & De Vires, 2003).

Another important strategy is to personalize the topics and include emotional appeals, softening the rational appearance of general news in order to help facilitate

interest and identification (Buckingham, 1997; 2000b; Matthews, 2005; 2007; 2009a; Mendes et al, 2009). Producers also attempt to break difficult news in a “softer” and more easily “digested” way for children by using more optimistic language and avoiding discussion of harsh consequences (Nickken & Walma van der Molen, 2007; Strohmaier, 2007; Walma van der Molen & De Vires, 2003).

While the perspective of scholars as well as producers of children’s news has been documented quite substantially in the above studies, what is still notably missing is the voice of the young viewers themselves regarding the genre of news: What do they want from the news? How do they perceive the need to adapt the news content and formats to their interests and abilities? One exception to this lacuna in our accumulated knowledge is a study of the BBC leading news program for children – *Newsround* (Carter et al., 2009). Interviews with children revealed that they actually do want to be informed on issues such as politics, environment, transportation, health and education. They expressed anger as well as provided rationale for why they feel excluded from the news.

Following that line of work, we set out in this article to explore what children think about the news they are exposed to and what would they like to see changed about them, if it was up to them to do so.

Method

This paper integrates results from two complementary studies conducted in Israel during 2007-2009 that focus on children’s opinions about news and what they wished could change about them. The Israeli context is of particular relevancy here, given the intensity of the lasting Israeli-Arab conflict and contested political culture of Israel, as well as the centrality of news in the lives of Israelis.

Study 1:

The first study included a large survey with a representative sample of children from Israeli society and explored the role of news in children’s lives. The survey included an array of questions on news consumption, attitudes and civic engagement, but also featured several open ended questions. In this article we present an analysis of only one of these open ended questions namely, “If you were in charge of the news, what kind of changes would you have made?”

Overall 1,657 completed questionnaires were collected from all regions of the country including both Jewish majority and Arab minority children. The sample was comprised of 497 3rd graders (8–9 years old) 30% of the sample; 434 6th graders (11–12 years old) 26% of the sample; 383 9th graders (14–15 years old) 23% of the sample; and 343 12th graders (17–18 years old) 21% of the sample. 55% (885) of the sample were females and 45% (728) were males (44 did not complete gender information). The sample included 38% (625) lower social class participants and 62% (1,032) medium and higher class participants (identified by the location of the school, not on an individual socio-economic

basis). The questionnaires were distributed in the schools by four trained research assistants during class time and took about 50 minutes to complete. A detailed discussion of the methodology and analysis of the differences between majority and minority children is available elsewhere (Lemish & Alony-Pick, 2014a); as is an analysis of gender differences in the consumption of news (Lemish & Alony-Pick, 2014b).

Of the entire sample, 34% (562) of the children and youth provided written responses to the specific one open-ended question analyzed in this article. More specifically: 21% of the 3rd graders answered that question (105 children); 52% of 6th graders (227 children); 29% of 9th graders (110 youth); and 35% of 12 graders (120 youth). The responses were recorded verbatim in word-processing form, and a file was created for every respondent and grouped by age.

Study 2:

The second study included a multi method exploration of children's news in Israel via interviews with producers of children's news, content analysis of children's news, and focus group interviews with children. In this paper we report only on one aspect of the findings from the focus groups, i.e., their reflections over their own interest in the news and its relevancy for their lives. Forty-six children 3rd to 6th grade (aged 8.5 to 11.5 years old, 21 boys and 25 girls), were interviewed in ten focus groups (ranging in size from three to eight children) about their views of children's news programs. All interviewees were Jewish, secular and middle-class children, given that middle-class children were found to be more interested in news, compared to their working-class counterparts, able to discuss politics in a more complex language, and demonstrating more critical political thought (Buckingham, 2000). This convenience sample has no pretense to be representative of Israeli children and was drawn in order to serve as an in depth case study investigation. Children were recruited employing a snowball sampling method as well as through assistance from leaders of youth movements. Both methods allowed the formation of groups of well-acquainted members. Most groups were homogeneous gender-wise as well as age-wise, with two exceptions- one group included four girls and two boys, and another included three 4th grade girls and two 6th grade girls. However, even these two groups comprised children who were accustomed to spending time together, collaborating, and acting as one group, so that social interactions were not compromised. Parental consent was a requirement for participation in a focus group. Interviews were performed in participants' homes or in a familiar youth movement facility.

The focus groups opened with a warm-up introduction followed by an open and unguided discussion of news. Subsequently, participants watched 6-8 segments from two Israeli children's television news programs ("Hamahadura"- ["the Edition"] and "51/2" [broadcast time of five-thirty p.m.] lasting at most 12 minutes. The programs and specific segments were chosen so as to display various presenters (children, adults), different news reporting styles (e.g. humoristic, intimidating and educational) and paces, various studio designs and atmospheres and a variety of topics. Each viewing was followed by discussion

addressing questions such as: Was the subject displayed suitable for children their age? Did they find it interesting? Was it clear and understandable? And so on. After every segment from one of the programs was screened, the researcher asked the children for their opinions on the program in general (the studio, presenters and so forth), if they did not relate to it spontaneously. After all segments from both programs were screened, children were asked to compare the two programs.

Having watched the segments and following a short break, the researcher introduced the children to a cards activity, custom-designed for the study. During the activity the group was asked to engage in a news edition editorial board role-play. The board was to be presented with different news items and required to discuss whether each item should be reported in an “adult” news program, in a children’s news program (meaning- is it interesting and important for children to know about), in both or in neither. The children were asked to discuss each item and explain their opinions, but no unanimous decision had to be reached. Each group was presented with up to 11 news item cards in a randomized order. Most news items presented in the cards were based on those frequently featured in Israeli media. Items included national security reports (e.g., missile dropping in southern Israel), economic and welfare reports (e.g., a rise in unemployment), environmental reports (e.g., new plastic bags replacements), animal-related reports (e.g., monkeys escaping from the national zoo), new amusement parks and many others.

The session concluded with a discussion of the necessity of news programs for children, preferred show formats, and the changes or adjustments the children would have made in order to make news more suitable for younger viewers. Most of the focus group interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half (with a range of 1:15 to 2:15 hours), and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Complementary comments were documented by the researcher in writing.

Data Analysis

Analysis of all responses in the first study, and the transcripts from the second, were subjected to a grounded analysis of emerging themes, according to qualitative content analysis procedures (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Repeated reading and re-reading of all reactions allowed for the crystallization of themes described below and exemplars were selected for the purpose of illustration. Below we present the findings of the two complementary studies in an integrated manner.

Findings: A Desire for Age-Appropriate News

The most dominant finding from the analysis of the open ended survey question of, “If you were in charge of the news, what kind of changes would you have made?” was children’s expression of a desire for age-appropriate news programs and content. This was expressed across gender, ethnicity and age for the three younger age groups (26% of responses in the

3rd grade, 22% in the 6th and 30% in the 9th). It was only the 12th grade group that obviously had much less need for such adaptation (8%).

Responses repeatedly included simple remarks, such as “they should make news programs for different age children”; “they should make news that children can understand”; and “make news that are interesting for children”. Specific examples included: “I would have made every effort to adopt the news much better for children, except the weather” (3rd grade boy); “they should speak about things that are more appropriate for children, not just for adults” (3rd grade girl). “I would have added things for the lower age groups so more diverse age groups will watch news” (9th grade male). Or as one child put it: “I would have made the news for adults on a level appropriate for adults, and news for children on the level appropriate for children” (6th grade girl).

The desire for special news programs for children was probed more in depth in *Study 2*. The universally positive answers to the question of, “Do you find news programs for children important and is there a need for them?”, made it clear that the interviewees believed children should consume news, arguing most commonly: “So as to be up-to-date with what’s going on in the country,” as well as, “So that children don’t get bored watching the grownup news.”

Special attention was devoted to the issue of language complexity by the young children as well, urging for the use of more age-appropriate language: “I would have tried to express difficult words in a much more comprehensible way and include more things that children like” (6th grade girl); “have programs for different age groups, have news with simple language for children and regular language for adults (9th grade boy). “[...] it is important to speak in comprehensible language and simple concepts, so youngsters too could understand and form an opinion and be able to be critical when needed” (12th grade male). Interviewees in the focus groups argued that they wanted clearer explanations and a slower, lower-register kind of coverage: “With kids, you have to explain more clearly and slow” (3rd grade girl); “A different language... Hebrew, but simpler language” (4th grade boy). Interviewees also recommended using illustrations: “If they showed videos and not pictures, it’d be better” (6th grade boy). Nevertheless, interviewees did not mean to imply that explanations provided should mean longer features, quite the contrary; alongside clarity and explanations, interviewees stressed they preferred “straight to the point” reporting (6th grade boy).

Clearly, participants expressed a need to be informed about current affairs, yet also voiced a perception that deems adult news to be unsuitable for children and therefore requires adjustments and modifications both in content as well as in format and style of presentation, as will be discussed below.

Educational and Informative Topics

Most importantly, participants in both studies assigned an educational and informative role to news. They argued news were to provide current affairs updates and teach viewers about important issues in general so as to expand their general knowledge education. “The news

teaches you and it can introduce us to new stuff, which develops our brain” (5th grade girl); “This is how we learn about places we didn’t know about and also new words” (5th grade girl). Of the contents typical of news today, interviewees emphasized a variety of subject matters, such as what they perceived to be major events (e.g., presidential or prime ministerial elections, royal weddings), locally and globally alike. “For me it is interesting to know who’s going to be elected to be our prime minister” (4th grade boy). Another interesting subject they believe should remain in news programs for children is the environment: “We’ve got environmental education class [in school]... and it’s important to know this stuff” (6th grade girl).

Other duties the interviewees attributed to news were encouragement to engage in pro-social activities and to inform and alert them to dangers and problematic situations thus re-confirming the “surveillance” function of news. To cite a 3rd grade girl: “Children should be told about poverty in Israel so that they can donate to the poor”; or in the words of one 5th grade girl: “They should tell children that a Mom was murdered there and they should be careful. Because they can hang around in the street and be murdered.”

The arguments voicing the value of young people’s interest in news and engagement in civic life and a sense of having a voice and mattering to society became even more pronounced with the two older age groups. From the first study: “I would have tried to pay attention to youth so they will also be included and there will be something special for them so they can also feel that they belong to this country” (9th grade female); I would have added news for youth so they will see what happens out there and learn what not to do” (9th grade female); “I think that if there were news for youth it would have been good, because more and more youth would have been interested” (12th grade female); “I would have tried to reach a larger audience, not only adults. It is important that youth will become involved and will know what is happening in the country” (12th grade male). The teenagers who participated in the survey thus expressed a clear need to provide attractive news for younger children as a form of supporting engaged citizenship and involvement.

A related discussion surfaced in the focus group interviews in relationship to news regarding the mandatory conscription to the Israeli Defense Forces upon high school graduation. In regards to the occasional news reports regarding decline in the numbers of youth conscriptions, a concern was voiced by the interviewees that presenting such content to children might have negative implications for them: “Children don’t need to know it, because it will get some ideas inside their heads about not joining the army, and then we’ll have a real small army” (4th grade girl). Thus, this type of news content was classified by some interviewees as “not educational”, as were reports of violence and incidents of murder: “It’s [murder case reports] not for kids... It’s not that educational to show it” (5th grade girl). Clearly, the younger children and youth in both studies recognized the socializing role news can have in promoting both pro-social as well as anti-social behaviors, yet focused on a more “indoctrinational” role of news to good “obedient” citizenship.

Interesting topics

Strongly related to the need for age-appropriateness of news was the argument that adult news, as it currently stands, is boring and should be made more interesting. This view was strongly age related, as the younger children were the ones that mentioned it more often. Of the 3rd graders responding spontaneously to the open question in the questionnaire, accounted for 11% of the responses, 5% of the 6th and 9th graders', and only 2% of the 12th graders. Similarly, interviewees in the focus groups also believed that children and adults show interest in different kinds of contents. Therefore, not everything presented in the news can interest children, while some contents that they do find interesting are not included in the news at all. "They should only show some of the news and have stuff that can interest us as well" (4th grade girl). The subject matter's specific relevance to children constituted a key factor for interviewees in deciding what news topics were suitable for children. For example, items about international travel warnings were perceived by many of the children as irrelevant. "Kids are not the ones deciding whether to go there or not... The parents decide if their children are going" (4th grade girl). Reports of decline in the numbers of youth conscriptions to the Israeli Defense Forces received similar responses: "It's got nothing to do with us... We'll have to know about it when we go to the army" (6th grade girl) which of course, was only six years away, but deemed "ages" away by the young respondents.

The most boring topic cited in the responses was "politics" (referring to internal politics – news, commentaries, interviews, and discussions about parties and individual politicians). Many of the suggestions just said, "I would have had less politics." While 3rd graders did not mention the concept of politics as a category, it surfaced from 6th grade on: "I would have added topics that I am interested in such as celebrities and taken out things related to the Knesset [Parliament] which are not interesting at all" (6th grade girl). The older youth also provided a rationale for their distaste of politics: "I would have covered a lot less politics and such things and talked more about things that interest all walks of life" (9th grade male); "Talk less about private issues of politicians and just generally less about politics all the time!" (12 grade female). "Enough with politics, it's all lies and corruption anyway, and it really doesn't interest anyone!" (12th grade male).

Interviewees in the focus groups were also quite unified in their lack of interest in the topics of politics, government and the Knesset: "Government is not interesting" (6th grade boy); "I don't like having these politics and stuff all the time... We don't know about them politics, so why show us this stuff?" (6th grade boy). Even financial and economic issues were ruled out, perceived as they were as irrelevant to children and therefore not interesting. One common reply among interviewees in the focus groups was the statement that "most children don't find money interesting." Even in cases where economic and financial items had direct implications for children themselves, such as a teachers' strike over low pay, interviewees noted that the issue should not be covered in news for children, as far as they were concerned, or should otherwise receive a low-profile coverage, to cite a 6th grade boy, "it's not for kids. So maybe they can just say there's a strike and there'll be no

school, they don't have to talk about the money thing." A similar attitude was recorded in regards to reports concerning the rising poverty rate and number of poor children in Israel. Interviewees felt it was pointless for them, believing these issues should only be reported if reports involved ways children could assist poor children, and even then, not in all cases.

On the other hand, interviewees indicated that some topics were of particular interest for them, adding they would have liked to see more of them in the news. Topics that were listed as not boring for children, and on the contrary, could be conceived as interesting; included music, television, movies, computers, celebrities, sports, and animals. For example, "I would have included children's topics, not only adults', the way it is now. For example, I would have included a segment about adopting animals and all kinds of other things that are related to children" (6th grade boy); "I would have included news about youth and made news about famous people in the world and the country, performers and celebrities on television, shows for children" (6th grade girl); "news about art and culture and discussion with children our age" (6th grade girl).

Indeed, many girls said they wished news to engage more with famous people and gossip: "Famous people, now that could be interesting, like, who broke up with who" (6th grade girl). The more mature boys wanted more extreme and action reports: "I'm interested in stuff like this-explosions, tanks and stuff" (6th grade boy). Mostly boys, but also some girls, indicated they were very interested in sports, wishing this category to be more widely addressed by the news: "If they had something about Maccabi [basketball team], now that could be interesting" (6th grade boy).

A content category which most children cited as interesting and meriting elaboration in children's news was animals. For example, focus group interviewees said: "I think animals must be, like, the most interesting for kids" (3th grade girl); "Kids like animals" (6th grade boy). Nevertheless, children stressed that they were not going to find animal items universally interesting, merely those concerning surprising details: "to talk about something new, like a rabbit with a color that doesn't make sense ... like light blue" (3rd grade girl).

The question of incorporating items associated with children in the news evoked a similar reaction. Interviewees indicated again that specific children-related items should be more widely incorporated, yet stressed that such items were not enough in of themselves to arouse their interest; they had to be unique and include new, preferably surprising or unusual information: "Kids that do odd and freaky stuff, maybe even scary stuff... then it's interesting" (4th grade girl).

Positive and Humorous News

With a desire for news to be more interesting came also a request for news to be less serious, "heavy", scary and sad, and more entertaining, positive, humorous and to include news that can offer some sort of comic relief. This appeal for news coverage style that focuses on optimistic aspects of different eventualities rather than being intimidating and scary was a central theme in both the questionnaires as well as the focus groups. The quest for "happy news" was evident in 26% of 3rd graders, 17% of 6th graders, 12% of 9th graders

and 18% of 12th graders. “I would have added news for pleasure, so it will be fun watching the news and not that when I run into the news I immediately know that some disaster has happened and I need [in the sense of – have no choice] to see it. There should be happier things” (6th grade girl); “have less scary stuff and more optimist news” (6th grade boy); “more funny things and less seriousness” (6th grade boy); “cover happy news that happen around the world (6th grade girl); “I would have added optimism. I think they are doing an excellent job except for optimism, which is missing” (6th grade girl); “I would have added a bit of happiness so there won’t be such depression among the people” (6th grade boy). In the 9th grade, there was more specific mention of the hard topics they wished to avoid hearing about: “I would have not talked about the Arabs (except for terror and wars), and I would have not talked about the ministers in the government because that’s really!!! Not interesting!!! And I would have talked about good things for a change!” (9th grade female); “I think news need to cover also happy things, not only sad things about war and such” (9th grade female); “I would have added something happy to overcome the scary stuff” (9th grade male).

More specifically, children suggested adapting news for younger viewers by injecting them with humor. Interviewees stressed it was not about rejecting serious coverage, rather a matter of incorporating humoristic anecdotes where possible: “When you make it for kids, put some sense of humor in. Don’t be too serious” (5th grade girl). Interviewees recommended featuring amusing contents in the news, as well as contents that inform viewers of different pastime options, such as cinema, books, and recreation and holiday sites attractive for children. Interviewees indicated that they found diverting items, similarly to those featured often by the end of the major news editions (like the world’s largest hamburger contest or the launch of a new aquatic park), suitable and interesting for them.

A few of the 12th graders added a dimension of “national pride” in their discussion of the “happy news”, perhaps as they were gradually preparing to graduate from high school and most would be joining the mandatory military service. “At least once a week broadcast good news, to talk less about all the crummy stuff of the Israeli society and add some good things in the news that don’t create anxiety” (12th grade female); “I would have reported more happy news, I would have tried to show how good is our society and less about what’s wrong with it” (12th grade male).

Avoid Scary News

As we have seen above, avoiding scary news complemented the appeal for more light-hearted news, particularly a desire to refrain from covering violent news. Apart from their perception as being anti-educational, reports of violence and murder incidents were also ruled out by focus group interviewees due to fear that they are too scary for younger viewers: “I don’t think it should be [in the children’s news], they shouldn’t show things that kill people and send them to hospitals... It’s only for grownups, this scary stuff” (4th grade girl). In their opinion, the intimidating tones typical of the news, as well as the emphasis placed on the adverse implications of every event, are inappropriate for children, who

should have issues presented to them in a different way. They would rather have the news presenters delivering them with a reassuring, calm voice, offering some positive aspects of the issue. In the case of high-profiled assassinations, for example, some 3rd grade girls explained during the focus group interview how the event should be reported in their opinion:

Orit: They can tell he's dead, murdered, without saying "murder", that somebody murdered him, shot him... Not a shot, without pictures of shooting and death.

Rona: I think they should show it, but not the shooting, like they said, and explain it in a way that won't scare us. So we don't end learning how to murder.

Yarden: They shouldn't show us the stuff with the blood; they should explain why they did it.

This was particularly evident in children's attitudes towards incorporating national security-related contents, such as incidents of missile attacks, terrorist attacks, or soldier kidnappings. Most interviewees argued it was important for children to know about many of these cases, yet added these should be covered in a non-scary way. "Some kids can see it and have trauma" (4th grade girl).

In reference to a discussion of missile attacks, the 3rd grade girls explained:

Yarden: So maybe they can say it without scaring [assuming a serious, somber and intimidating tone] - "Children, do you know what happened, eh... Do you know a Qassam [a missile shot from the Gaza Strip] fell? Do you know there's war going on? And you shouldn't this and you shouldn't that" and so much stuff... and say stuff with no people hurt. Nothing happened or...

Rona: Like suppose when they keep talking in the news about the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] and stuff, it's scary. Like, when they say, "badly wounded"- that scares us for real. Like, if it's someone from the family, it makes us nervous. So in the kids' news you can give more reasons for it.

Referring to the news coverage of a soldier kidnapped by a terrorist organization, the girls continued with the same approach of focusing on the positive aspect of the story:

Orit: It isn't that scary for me, because I understand that he was kidnapped, so I'd like to know more, not in a bad way, in a good way [...], that he's still alive, that he's not dead ... About good stuff.

Religious-Nationalistic Appeals

While other miscellaneous suggestions appeared in children's responses, we turn now to paying closer attention to one unique segment of our *Study 1* sample - a group of children from religious-nationalistic backgrounds, some of them living in the occupied territories and/or their families are strongly identified with supporting the settlements. The responses in this group had some unique characteristics that hardly appeared in the general population of young people. These can be described in two recurring themes: First, was an echo of a discourse about the "lefty" character of the Israeli media. In the Israeli context, "lefty" usually refers to a position that opposes the occupation of the Palestinian territories, opposes the political settlement movement and the settlers' violation of Palestinian rights, and is supportive of a peace agreement that mostly accepts the two states solution. While scholarly critics actually argue that the Israeli news coverage, on the whole, is quite mainstream-hegemonic-nationalistic in the perspective it generally takes, it is nevertheless attacked regularly by the right wing parties in Israel for being "lefty". The children raised in this context, obviously internalized this dominant discourse, as we have seen in other studies related to conflict and war (Lemish & Götz, 2007). They talked about lack of objectivity in the news, bias, lies, smears, etc. "I would have included more truthful reporting because the media changes a lot of what's happening in reality. For the good of the country I would have stopped talking about the settlers and the religious people as if they are bad" (6th grade girl); "they should express less personal opinion, not to say negative things and less slander" (6th grade boy); "I would have told only the truth" (9th grade male); "I would have stopped filming the Arabs as if they are miserable; start showing what's happening in Sderot [a Jewish town near the Gaza strip which has been regularly bombarded for years by missiles] and in places where the Arabs are hitting us so the world will know that the Arabs are not the underdog. I would have taken out all of the slander and gossip until someone is really found guilty by the court [making a reference to a right wing politician that has been on trial at the time] (12th grade male); "I would have less screwed my own country and provide national information, and I would have made the reports a lot less lefty" (12th grade female); "enough distorting the reality against the Jews in other people's eyes and start presenting the Jewish side of things so the bad thoughts will be directed elsewhere" (12 grade female).

The second theme that emerged related directly to religiosity and religious values and expectation that news will be serving an educational-religious role for society, be more "modest", "truthful" and avoid "slander and liable". "I would have added a bit more about God and Judaism" (6th grade girl); "News should offer more Torah [Old Testament] and less lies and aberrations" (12th grade female). No similar ideological attacks on the news were evident in any of the other group of children and adolescents. Clearly then, the social context in which children consume the news influences their meaning and expectations, an argument to which we will return in the discussion.

Structural Preferences

Alongside desirable and appropriate news contents discussed above, interviewees stressed the style of coverage and presentation of the subject as no less important than the content itself.

In both studies, children provided specific format and structural advice of how to improve the news and make them more appealing to young audiences, including suggestions such as: present shorter news programs; devote a special part of the newscast to children's news; and broadcast during children's hours.

A more in depth discussion of this topic was developed during the focus group interviews, in relationship to tailoring specific children's news programs. One dominant topic of discussion was the suggestion to integrate young people in the news programs in different roles: as presenters, reporters, studio guests, or participants in different items. "They should have kids there, even if it's the news [...] because it's an extra something... so that it doesn't get boring" (6th grade girl). Many interviewees believed that children featuring in the news could make it more interesting, enhance news content reliability and render it better adapted for children, since children, so they argued, share a common language and knowledge base that differs from that of adults: "Kids have an opinion like ours [children viewers]" (4th grade boy); "Adults don't know what children know" (3rd grade boy).

Nevertheless, some interviewees in the focus group discussions, all boys, firmly objected to the idea of featuring children as news presenters. The arguments against it stemmed from the perception of children as lacking the adults' insight into the news, as one 4th grade boy stated: "Because a kid doesn't know what he's talking about. He has to give it after they spend a whole year explaining it to him". Other concerns raised included the suggestion that children can get over-excited in front of the TV cameras (6th grade boy: "Kids get over-excited"), be too unprofessional (6th grade boy: "You don't want to have a kid presenting, because they could get silly while at it and don't talk about it like they should") or fail to be interesting and engaging enough (4th grade boy: "[When kids talk] you get really dumb subjects and it's boring").

But even those vehemently objecting the on-screen presence of children were mostly in favor of children's involvement in news production, allowing them to contribute their own perspective and thus assist in adapting contents to younger viewers: "You can have a kid in production to say what is or isn't [suitable for children]... if it's boring or not" (4th grade boy).

As for news presenters most attractive for children's news, most interviewees recommended familiar figures, such as different celebrities, as a 6th grade girl put it: "If a famous guy presents the show, they'll probably watch [it]". In addition, interviewees cited the importance of appointing an adult that could understand the world of children, with their preferences and tastes. Interviewees furthermore stressed that despite the importance of inserting a touch of humor to the presentation, the presenters selected must "take their job seriously" (6th grade girl) and give the impression of commitment to their job.

Most interviewees even recommended to have a team of presenters, rather than a single one, perceiving this option to allow a wider diversity of subjects: “If there was another presenter, there would be more things to talk about and you could learn more” (3rd grade girl), and also as something that would take off some of the pressure placed on a single presenter: “If there’s only one presenter, they sometimes stutter, because it’s just one of them and it’s too much pressure” (3rd grade girl).

A host of other changes also came up in the focus group interviews. For example, interviewees recommended getting rid of the papers that most news presenters hold, supposedly reading from them, rather than from a teleprompter. They argued that the papers give an unreliable, staged impression. As far as they are concerned, there is no need for papers and anyway, they would like children’s news to differ as much as possible from “grownup” news.

A further recommendation involved a change in the order of presentation of the different items. Interviewees recommended having the interesting items at the beginning, leaving the less interesting ones to the end of the news edition, or having them interwoven between the interesting items towards the middle. To cite a 6th grade girl: “They can have the not-so-interesting feature after these two. [A feature about] Britney Spears is something anyone would watch so this is what they can show there.”

Other recommended changes introduced by the children concerned the news’ studio design and the opening tune. Most interviewees recommended a colorful studio, alternating backgrounds and graphics and video-like elements featured throughout the show. “I’d like a more colorful studio” (5th grade girl); “It’s not interesting when you have the same background all the time” (4th grade girl). The desirable opening tune, as far as they are concerned, is also music video-style, comprising many graphic elements and images, yet also clearly marking it as children’s show: “They should have more pictures for kids” (4th grade boy); “They should have an explanation of what it is [in the lead] (4th grade girl); “If I saw the opening tune of the show, I would see what’s later on, because it’s a video” (3rd grade boy). Clearly the various recommendations were geared towards making the news programs both more entertaining as well as more accessible to children, and above all – different looking than those addressing adults.

Conclusion

Findings from our two complementary studies – one focusing on children and adolescents’ attitudes towards news programs in general and the second on special children’s news programs – suggest that young people have an understanding of the value of news but would very much like to see them tailored to their needs and interests. While much research has focused on young children’s emotional vulnerability and lack of cognitive maturity as reasons for shielding them from current events, children’s discourse in these studies focused on their strengths: they want to know, but they want to know on their own terms. They are primarily interested in light-hearted contents drawn from their personal world (as children and as Israelis). They show an interest in contents related to animals,

sports, action, celebrities and gossip (the latter two are constructed as mainly attracting the young female viewers), technology and risk-taking (areas regarded as mainly drawing the attention of the young male viewers), as well as contents perceived by them as important, such as environmental issues. In regards to hard core news – particularly those involving the Israeli-Arab conflict, which are at the heart of daily existence in Israel, children clearly expressed a desire for information, but in a positive framing that removes the scary and gory elements.

The general style preferred by the viewers is light-hearted, colorful, young and technological, accompanied by humor and wit. At the same time, they resent being addressed in a condescending or infantilizing tone, and wish to be treated in a serious and authoritative manner. In short, they want news topics to be relevant to their own lives, presented in a more positive and attractive way, in clearer and straight forward language. The findings thus lend support to the perspective that argues that it is not children's inherent social indifference and disengagement from the public sphere that is keeping them away from news consumption. Rather, that there is a need to redefine what constitutes age-appropriate news and to seek ways to include children's perspectives in them (e.g., Lemish & Götz, 2007; Carter et al, 2009; Buckingham, 2000). It is interesting to note, however, that when children have a very clear ideological framework of reference, as our nationalistic-religious group demonstrates, they expect the news to confirm with that worldview, and see any deviation from it as an untruthful presentation of reality. This is particularly revealing, as it highlights the role of context in children's reception process and the immense importance of ideological socialization processes. Another strong case-study to that effect is the group of Arab-Israeli children, included in Study 1 whose sources of news as well as interpretation differed greatly from their Jewish-Israeli peers, a topic we discuss separately (see Lemish & Alony-Pick, 2014a).

The findings also lend research support to the views and practices of professionals engaged in the production of children's news who rely primarily on personal experience and intuition, but with little substantiated testimonials from their child-audience (e.g., Matthews, 2009a; 2009b; Patterson, 2007). Thus, children's perspectives could provide producers with means to make research-based decisions about television news programs for children and fill an important void: The findings provide valuable information on young viewers' motivation for watching children's news; the contents that interest them or that they would prefer to avoid; the style of presentation they prefer; and their views regarding incorporating children in the programs.

It is within the discussion of our changing constructions of childhoods on one hand, and the reconceptualization of the nature of politics and civic life, on the other, that these studies can best be situated and understood. In a world where children have access to unlimited sources of information at the tap of their touch screens and where there is a blurring of civic lives and leisure, the definition of the public sphere requires a much broader notion of engagement (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Papaioannou, 2013). Children's participating in online communities, for example, has been discussed by some scholars as

manifestations of commitment to a collective that fosters responsibility and voluntarism essential for any social and political life (Agger, 2013). Their casual writing online expresses their anxieties, their alienation from civic life and democratic processes, and their hopes for the future. These activities can be interpreted as an appeal to the adult world for attention, empathy, and understanding, as well as for guidance and mentoring. Efforts to increase participation from this perspective require, among others, consideration of the mismatches between adults and youth's expectations and understanding of their place in society (Livingstone, 2009). Age appropriate news genres that cater to young people's needs and interests, that respect their perspective of life, that voices their concerns and help them make sense of the world around them, can facilitate their presence in this new public sphere and engagement in emerging new forms of citizenship.

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