A MISSING LINK? THE IMAGINED AUDIENCE, NEWS PRACTICES AND THE PRODUCTION OF CHILDREN’S NEWS.

Julian Matthews

Authors’ final version of:

Abstract

Based on a production study of the distinct and unique children’s news programme, BBC Newsround, this paper explores the place of the professional understanding of the target audience as a ‘missing link’ within the news making process. Approaching programme production with this concern uncovers the particular understandings of the target audience that inform journalists’ news culture and professional views. Further revealed is how such ideas when traced within the news production process explain the particularised practices that condition and shape ‘appropriate’ news representations for the audience. The paper concludes with an assessment of the impact of these professional ideas on the dialogical possibilities of the children’s news programme.

Key words: Children's news, imagined audience, news form, news mediation
Introduction

This paper explores the complex nature of news production. It adopts a case study approach of the BBC children’s news programme, *Newsround* purposefully to look closely at the role of professional knowledge in the processes of news manufacture. This focus complements the growing scholarly interest in the ‘imagined audience’ as a missing link within news manufacture. Its emphasis on the production of news representations for instance brings sharply into view the images of the imagined audience in the production of news ‘appropriate’ for this constituency. Also, the study reveals the particularised production process of the children’s news programme. This up-to-date insider view of programme manufacture describes the way that news professionals’ understanding of children’s ‘childhood’ mediates information about the ‘adult’ news world that is included within the programme. These insights will be discussed at length after introducing first the academic discussion of the ‘imagined audience’ and the case study on which this paper is based.

The Audience and News Production

This discussion of the news professionals’ imagined audience begins with an introduction to recent news production studies. These new and important accounts offer an interesting way to understand the relationship between journalist ideas and practices within news manufacture. Their focus on news forms, in particular, offers new insights into programme production including the manufacture of those programmes assumed simply to present the classical elements of the news genre in a static form. This sharpens our view of changes in identity underway within established programmes and how these have been sparked by changing views of the news audience. Evidence from recent production accounts of UK news organisations reveals, for example, how the changing demands and preferences of users (audiences) are encouraging the presentation of national news with a different content and style (Born 2004; Harrison 2006). Similarly, the professional concern with the imagined audience has been described as important within programme production generally. Online journalistic forms, for instance, have been introduced as indebted to such professional understandings. As Deuze and Paulussen (2002: 234) outline views of ‘audience oriented' and 'service minded' news content shape their production. Likewise, the professional reproduction of particularised forms, including the shaping of alternative (Atton 2002), popular and tabloid varieties (Conboy 2002) also mention the importance of professional views of the audience. These professional ideas appear then as crucial for an understanding of the character and content of programmes within the news ecology. But, clear evidence of the relationship between the imagined audience and news practices within programme production remains scarce. In particular, we have a limited grasp of the professional motivations that inform such trends on account of the few studies that have explored the imagined audience from a production perspective. Also, the research that has been carried out has followed different research aims and produced very different accounts of production. But, despite their different
approaches, studies have offered important insights into the professional shaping of news copy, as we shall see.

As it has been explained, the research into producers’ views of the news audience provides an interesting, if not presently limiting, view of media production. This contrasts sharply with the now orthodox arguments of previous news production work (see for example Epstein 1973; Altheide 1976; Schlesinger 1978; Tuchman 1980; Gans 1980). An obvious distinction lies in the focus placed on the imagined audience and news forms rather than the standardised news routines and professional ideologies. Emphasised here is the importance of the imagined audience in informing the constituent elements of production cultures and news values (e.g. DeWerht-Pallmeyer 1997; Min 2004; Wieten & Pantii 2005). Further, this culturally differentiated view of news production sharpens our understanding of how the character and content of news is shaped by these professional concerns. Production studies of regional programmes, for instance, describe the constructed audience as playing a seminal role in the selection of news (Berkowitz 1992) and in the construction of the visual appearance and mode of address of the populist regional news story (Cottle 1993). As this illustration suggests, such work showcases the importance of news professionals’ constructions of the news audience within news manufacture. In a similar way, academic studies of children’s media programmes appear to do the same.

Academic work on children’s media has discussed an inferred audience as important within media production. The understanding that the producers’ view of an imagined audience shapes the textual properties of children’s programmes is well referenced here, but the process has been addressed rarely from a production perspective. However, the academic accounts that do this produce very interesting insights into professional ideas and activities. For example, the work of early American researchers introduces the professional views of children’s desires that were used to craft children’s programmes (Cantor 1974; Greenberg 1976). Equally, a professional sense of audience requirements appears in a refined form of producers’ ‘rules of thumb’ (Wartella 1994) in later work. This explains how professionals’ profile of the audience tends to reflect children’s cognitive ability (Lewis 1992) as well as views on their liking of particular qualities including comedy and repetition and gender specific elements (Wartella 1994: 52-55). In a similar way, research into the production of specific programmes, particularly information-based forms, discusses the professional view of the audience that plays an informing role in the gatekeeping duties of programme producers. Noble’s (1975) study of the BBC factual magazine show Blue Peter, in particular, uncovers how a public service broadcasting paternalist view of the audience informs producers’ selection and presentation of material. This emphasis is reflected within Buckingham’s (2000) discussion of the children’s news programme, which hints at the professional views of childhood that construct programmes’ news stances and agendas. Walha Van De Molen and De Vries’ (2003) when discussing the children’s news programme similarly introduce as important news professionals’ strategies to console the young news audience. Other studies offer further insights into professionals’ views and practices. Published professional memories and recent academic research (Carter and Messenger Davis 2005) for instance describe the professionals’ concerns with covering traumatic news for children. A view of the general
reporting of memorable and groundbreaking news events by children’s news is also offered (Home 1993) as well as insights into the professional reasoning that guides such selections (Price 2001; Prince 2004). On the whole, then this literature on children’s media (including the children’s news programme) has developed a general sense of the professional views of children that shape programmes. But, when considered in terms of production, studies appear to offer a rather underdeveloped understanding of the production process that conditions and shapes the children’s news story. As knowledge of the links that exist between imagined audience, news practices and the shaping of representations within production appear absent from the literature on adult news programmes also, these will form the focus of this discussion. This account will address how producers’ views of children shape the dialogical possibilities of the children’s news programme. Its discussion is based on a production-based study of the BBC children’s news programme Newsround, which is introduced below:

Methodological Considerations

A study of the children’s news programme over a two-year period informs this account of the imagined audience and news production. The project examined the production of BBC Newsround with field observations, in-depth interviews with programme producers and a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of the news programmes broadcast across the period 1972-2000. Aspects of the case study including news observations and interviews appear as evidence within this discussion. The news professionals’ voices that feature for instance were recorded in interviews that took place in various social settings including the newsroom, offices, and coffee shops. The standard interviews followed a schedule of questions and lasted for over an hour and a half. Then, these were analysed to compare professionals’ views of the news audience and news practices. The sections of interview transcript that appear below have been examined across the team and verified against observations of the news production process. These are presented as representative of a collective professional view of the children's news programme.

Children's News: Form and Target Audience

The following examines the production of the BBC children's news service Newsround, to understand the processes that shape news for a particular news constituency. This uncovers the ideas that circulate with programme production and influence its form, including the general communicative news repertoire of 'narrative, visualisation and talk' (Corner 1995) found commonly in traditional flagship news programmes. Also addressed are professional assumptions about the young audience and their relationship with news that influence other programme features. Indeed, academic studies of children’s news programmes to date have outlined already these unique features in their descriptions of this form. The Newsround form, these suggest, intermingles the seriousness and authority of adult news with the features of the BBC children’s programme (Buckingham 2000; Harrison 2000). This observation offers an accurate snapshot of the programme. But,
missing from these discussions of the BBC children’s news programme generally is an explanation of the professional motivations that shape the production of its textual proprieties. With this in mind, the following will discuss the children’s news programme from a production perspective and, in turn, reveal the importance of the professional view of the target audience in news manufacture.

**Imagining the News Audience**

As has been introduced, this discussion draws on a production study of BBC *Newsround*. Such insights into the children’s news programme reveal the prominence of particular views in the process of producing news for a young audience. Significantly, this uncovers how a constructed age range of the programme’s target audience appears essential to its production. As a *Newsround* reporter describes the BBC children’s news programme ‘knows whom it is talking too…you don’t get that on other news programmes’. This comment reflects a general view within the newsroom that *Newsround*’s advantage over other news programmes comes from its opportunity to define the age range of its audience which here has been traditionally seen as children between 8 and 14 years old. However, such views have been undergoing a process of re-evaluation. With the competition for audience share increasing between children’s programmes, the professional definition of the audience has been placed under review as the producer describes:

One of your objectives as a programme maker is to get the highest audience figures for what you are doing ... so we wanted to try and really define a mental image of who we were broadcasting to and have come down to children aged 10 years old. *(Newsround Producer 1)*

The comments introduce how an aim to compete for audiences has focused the professional view of the audience toward the competencies, interests and needs of 10-year-olds. This insight into the age of the majority audience, which was deduced from audience data, has encouraged professional efforts to:

…sit in the morning meeting and try to think of the programme through a 10-year-old’s eyes - to sort of see what they would like. *(Newsround Journalist 2)*

However, my production observations reveal that news workers experience difficulties with achieving this end. Attempts to visualise the programme from the child’s perspective as well to ascertain news interests from impromptu discussions with children, for instance, has produced only a very sketchy understanding of this audience. In short, these practices have had a limited success and significant gaps remain in the professional understanding of the audience of ten year olds. Helping to fill the knowledge gap are insights into children’s popular cultural tastes as well as news workers’ experiences of having been children, as is reflected in following exchange:

Assistant producer 5: Do you think mum’s buy clothes from Asda or kids?  
[...]  
Editor: … I went into my local Tecso’s and there were loads of teenagers all round the underwear section …
Assistant producer 5: It used to be a bit of joke at school if you got your clothes from Asda. You used to get the piss taken out of you …

Assistant producer 5: … I don’t think children buy their own clothes. I think it’s the parents that buy the clothes

Illustrated here is how news workers will scramble around for knowledge of children’s lives to help inform news decisions. As a consequence, their professional outlook retains a view of children as generally uninterested in news material. Forming the nucleus of professionals’ understanding, this view offers a framework onto which contemporary ideas of children’s interests, lifestyle and media literacy have been situated. Thus, new insights into the Newsround audience simply lend support for, rather than undermine, this ensconced view. In short, this particularised idea of children continues to play an important role within the news making process.

So this discussion so far has revealed that the Newsround audience is understood generally in terms of its relationship to the content of the programme. The vast potential audience of children is seen, for instance, as uninterested in the material that the programme has to offer. But, significantly there is another view of children that complicates this general outlook. An imagined audience grouping onto which news workers project their professional pride questions the assumption that children should be seen as a mass of uninterested news consumers. Considered to be predominately intelligent and middle class this ‘ideal audience’ for the news programme exhibits the following qualities:

… quite interested in the news agenda, quite good at school, you know all those sort of things; someone that comes from quite a stable background, whose family probably read newspapers and has general newsy things around in the house. They’ve got a little bit of willingness, and appreciate an explanation. (Newsround Journalist 4)

Moreover, the characteristics unique to this group mark their difference to that of other children who watch children’s programmes. For instance, their willingness to watch and enjoy the news programme contrasts significantly here with news workers’ general view of the audiences’ experiences and motivations. Subsequently, their enthusiasm for the programme is considered to be a secondary concern when deciding over the Newsround news agenda as is described below:

I think you have to be a certain type of kid to want to watch Newsround. That is why we give the audience different things to watch because we want to catch the ones that don’t necessarily want to know what’s going on in Serbia. So like the idea of the roller-skating dog. (Newsround Journalist 7)

It follows then that Newsround’s news policy is directed toward finding strategies to maximise the potential audience such as the reporting of the ‘entertaining’ news story as is revealed above. The important dilemma for the programme is to appease the mass audience’s limited attention spans and liking of entertainment media. In addressing these concerns attention has been directed to the character of Newsround’s programme ‘imperfect’ presentation. In this way, Newsround programme policy has dictated that a style consistent with other children’s programmes has been adopted, believing this change
would maintain a dialogue with vast numbers of children uninterested in the news programme. Such a view is described aptly in the following:

The [Newsround Editor] wants it to be populist, more tabloid, more funky … It’s [BBC children’s news] got to be hip, happening, funky, lighter. As a consequence, we are doing more pop groups like the *All Saints* [British girl pop band] when they got pregnant, which previously we would have never done. (*Newsround Journalist 7*)

The redirection in programme style that is described here is the subject of the discussion that follows next:

**Imagined Audience and News Style**

Aware of the professional ideas that shape the programme we can now scrutinise the *Newsround’s* presentation through its ‘mode of address’. This construction we can observe is different to that described by traditional news studies. The general presentational strategies observed of *Newsround* and of other popular news programmes (Dahlgren and Sparks 1992; Langer 1998; Bird 2000) it is important to add, bring into question the accepted descriptions of a news presentation that reflects authority and objectivity (Hartley 1982; Corner 1995; Harrison 2000). *Newsround’s* mode of address having been shaped from popular as well as traditional news elements specifically for children presents a strong sense of informality. Further, its connection with the professional view of the imagined target audience can be uncovered with further study.

**Mode of Address**

At this point we begin to realise that *Newsround’s* mode of address is informed by particular views of the audience. This observation can be explored further by examining the history of the production of its news style. Historically, the professional strategy to adopt a specific news presentation for children was devised and implemented throughout the elements of the programme in the early 1970s. Shaping this process was a professional willingness to introduce a youthful news presentation that would counteract the formal conventions of the adult news programme as well as children’s experience of teaching within school at the time. From this point onwards, this design ensured that a presenter with a different dress style, demeanour and body position delivered the news. In a similar way, the character of the simplified *Newsround* news story was shaped as part of the desire to enthuse without patronising the new news audience. Indeed, the overall upbeat presentation including the unique introduction and conclusion to the programme was produced as a way to address professional concerns with children’s attention span. These important ideas have thus continued to shape *Newsround’s* news presentation throughout the last few decades. Nonetheless, in recent years an increased effort has been made to address what is now considered to be the ‘changing’ needs of the media consumer.

At the present time, the presentational style is being developed to satisfy the perceived ‘interests’ of the available audience. This new thinking emphasises the presenter’s news role in addition to the general presentational quality of the programme as is described here:
My bosses want me to be a friendly face for Newsround. I’m supposed to be the person who people can relate to in that … I’m not austere in any way. I’m supposed to be authoritative, but friendly and approachable, and not too much of a stiff. At the same time, I have to have the authority of someone who is actually giving you information that you believe. So people have got to be able to trust me as well. I also have to be able to sustain boring stories or what are traditionally held as boring stories, and at the same time trying not to be square. (*Newsround Presenter 1*)

The comments explain how *Newsround* is shaping a mode of address that it is assumed will entice the audience to watch. This preferred style creates presenters’ onscreen roles that embody the essential characteristics of trustworthiness, authority and fun. Appearing then in the guise of the ‘older sister or brother’ the *Newsround* presenters work hard to communicate the new identity of the BBC children's news programme. Their personas it is assumed serve to enhance significantly the audience’s experience of the news programme.

Also, the use of audience data has helped to develop an image of audiences’ preferences for news presentation. For instance, within programme production the data gathered on audience preferences is used to reconfigure the presenter and audience relations created by the programme. Over the period of research its impact on programme presentation was observed several times. On one occasion, for example, emerging data on the low level of recognition of the names of *Newsround* presenters by the audience was taken extremely seriously. These results were equated with low interest in the programme and were followed shortly with the introduction of a new policy to adjust news workers’ presentational responsibilities. Its solution was to create a small family of presenters (a main presenter and two reporters) and to further emphasise their onscreen performance. At this time then the responsibilities of presenters shifted to include a heightened onscreen personality as is discussed here:

In the last year or so, we have been looking at the way we can make changes; the way that I can present the programme more in keeping with my personality. Because I stand up and move around already it’s slightly more relaxed then sitting behind a desk as is done in traditional adult news. In terms of the way I present it, I’m being encouraged to put personality into it - where I can. Also, I’m encouraged to use, which all presenters should do anyway, my own words and my own phrases so as to make it more natural. I will be given more opportunity in the future to rewrite scripts and be given more opportunity to make them my own. (*Newsround Presenter 1*)

Explained is how this new *Newsround* policy places emphasis on creating onscreen personalities that the audience will recognise and like. As has been mentioned, these fit within the more general view of the ‘family of *Newsround* presenters’. Appearing within this new structure, individual presenters engage in scripted dialogues between handovers, onscreen role-play, and humorous discussions over others’ onscreen personalities purposely to emphasize their onscreen presence. It is believed that this change has ‘increased’ the level of the audiences’ recall of the presenting team and, in turn, has with it advanced the programme’s success.

In sum, this discussion has shown that *Newsround* takes advantage of close audience feedback loops. Gaining knowledge on audience recall has informed professional decisions to adjust the presentation of the programme.
However, at this point it would be wrong to suggest that Newsround in a similar way to observations made of other programmes (e.g. see Min 2004) is developing a more accurate and defined audience perception. It can be argued that such a view seems to oversimplify the complexity of the matter, as on the contrary, it appears that Newsround professionals are altering on this basis the news presentation rather than news content of the programme. Decisions, then, taken over news content are informed by the established understandings of the audience outline earlier. As my observations of news production show, these determine the operation of news practices and, in turn, the production of appropriate news representations, including an effort made to personalise news stories.

**Personalising News**

Aware now of the importance of the imagined audience for the children’s news programme, the discussion will examine its role within the production of news representations. As has been discussed, BBC Newsround broadcasts a news programme that is considered suitable for a young audience. Observations of this practice uncover the particularised shaping of the programme that aims to personalise the news story. For instance, when selecting stories an emphasis is placed on identifying ‘relevant’ adult news events for children. Reflecting a public service duty of the programme, news workers will ensure first that:

… if there is a big development in a big international or national news story then this would be included in the programme. (Newsround Journalist 12)

The reporting and explaining of large events such as the conflicts, crimes and terrorist actions as the comments reflect is a significant and highly publicised aspect of the programme that should not be overlooked. But in addition to the selection of these large, important and also infrequent news events, professional ideas of newsworthiness mediate the rest of adult news stories in a rather different way. A view of the relationship between children and real world events is expressed in the way that news is selected here. For news workers, it is the audience’s limited understanding of the world that makes the politically focused adult news story seem irrelevant for Newsround. This extends to issues over institutions that contact directly with children’s lives such the school and the family as well as others. Indeed, considerations of audience interest generally overwhelm that of the relevance of adult news stories in the selection process.

Therefore, news workers select news that is considered to be interesting for the audience and shape Newsround stories to attract their attention. This practice involves placing an appropriate ‘news peg’ as the focus of the newly devised children’s news account. As is described below these offer approved entrance points to the news event for the audience:

If you were doing Wimbledon this year, you might try and find an up and coming Wimbledon player - a young LTA [Lawn Tennis Association] champion, for example. Rather than just going through and talking to people in the crowds, you would be looking for someone that our audience would be able to identify with. (Newsround Researcher 2)
Further, what underpins the effort to present ‘interesting’ news events is a necessity to attract the audience attention. During the period of my observations, it was noticed, for instance, how professionals introduced children’s voices into the programme to partly achieve this goal. Over this time, stories were crafted to include children’s emotional reactions and produce compelling versions for the audience as the following suggests:

Obviously, it is more compelling for the audience to see words coming out of a twelve-year-old than from the mouth of a twenty-year-old. Children may not have the authority of knowing all the ins and outs of the arguments but they certainly know what their emotional response to it is and the impact that it has on their everyday lives. *(Newsround Journalist 4)*

The comment outlines how journalists assume that the presentation of such voices stimulates a general interest in the children’s news programme among the audience. Similarly, it is believed that children’s limited knowledge and abilities must significantly restrict their news access opportunities to being able only to voice emotional reactions to events within the programme. Together these views explain the consistency observed in news access over the research period and, in turn, introduce the general news practices used to select and shape news stories that will be discussed further below.

Again, observations of programme production offer rich insights into the professional writing process, uncovering in this case the way that ‘relevant’ news accounts are produced for the Newsround audience. Revealed in the comments below, for instance, is how the common practice to personalise news representations shapes the general presentation of the ‘relevant’ news event:

You have to consider what is relevant about this story for children, and how to get that across. It is all too easy to forget the basic thing that is going to be of interest to children. So you have to hold on to what is interesting about the story and what has to be explained and how it is to be presented. *(Newsround Journalist 4)*

The principles that inform the professional transformation of children’s news story are introduced in the above comments. These guide the essential news writing practice to produce ‘interesting’ news events that have strong connections forged with the lives and experiences of the audience. Further, their impact on the children’s story is considerable as is demonstrated aptly in following example of a children’s account of the UK government’s campaign to pledge money to improve road safety.

Time spent observing production reveals how the following example is typical of the general writing of Newsround stories. On this occasion, then the journalist worked busily to transform the news copy into a personalised news account. The new news version when completed emphasised the ‘campaign’ for children’s road safety after having changed the opening line of the original story that read as ‘a new million pound campaign to make our roads safer’ to appear in the children’s story as ‘more than six thousand cyclists were killed or seriously injured last year - two thousand of them were children…’ As a representative example of the production of the children’s news story, this introduces the considerable effort made to refocus news copy within the news writing process.
Further, the strategy to personalise news also requires the produced story to include written parallels between events and the lived experience of children as the series producer comments on below:

You know the adult news story may not explain what children need to know and there may be more interesting other factors that you might pull into it. A good Newsround journalist would go beyond the news copy and will think what is really interesting about this story. Are there any other stories I can bring in? Any other parallels that I can draw in to give a proper background? (Newsround Series Producer)

The comments suggest that writing for children involves the introduction of relevant themes that will of course redirect the original focus of the adult news copy. The following example of the professional mediation of a story demonstrates the impact of such professional practices. This uncovers how the government's announcement to lower pollution is personalised within a new account for the audience. In this case, the produced story introduces a link between pollution levels and the possible effects on children who suffer from chronic asthma as its focus. The finished version opens with the following:

An ordinary day in London, as usual it’s raining and there's loads of traffic. Most of us never think about the air that we're breathing in areas like this. But for people with asthma it's a different story. They say that air pollution is one of the things that makes their asthma much, much worse. (BBC Newsround, 8 June 1999)

As the story continues the link between the quality of the air and asthma sufferers is made explicit:

Asthma is causing breathing problems for more and more young people. A shocking one in four children suffers from asthma - a figure which has almost doubled since 1990. No-one knows why - but we do now pollution makes symptoms worse. (BBC Newsround, 8 June 1999)

The rest of the story (below) outlines how the new emphasis placed on asthma sufferers and pollution further redirects the original focus and news line. In this way, the government announcement about the reduction of pollution and environmental groups' reactions appear as almost an afterthought at the end of the account.

The Government's announcement today that they want to cut down on dangerous chemical from car exhausts ... but though that news has been welcomed by environmental groups, they say the real answer is to reduce the number of cars on our roads (BBC Newsround, 8 June 1999)

The example demonstrates the impact that the change in focus has on the general understanding of this news issue. What can be said about the issue of pollution is significantly shaped here. For instance, the new news focus places government and environmental groups’ comments behind the discussion of children, asthma and the rise of pollution. In effect, this particular arrangement renders the news topic apolitical by redirecting the discussion of government plans to the end of the item and offering an edited version that
dislocates the pollution issue from any informing social context and political processes.

This section then has discussed the professional strategies used to shape the programme. What follows next introduces another prominent professional strategy used by news workers within the production of the BBC children’s news programme. This outlines the professional shaping of news copy into the simplified ideas and narratives of the children news story that it is assumed will allow the inexperienced audience to consume news with ease.

**Simplifying News**

My observations of programme production uncover that the *Newsround* news style encourages the professional practice to simplify news for the audience. For *Newsround* this strategy is considered as simply essential to its wider goal of producing news that is ‘intelligible to children’ (BBC 2000). But what is overlooked here is the considerable impact that the practice has on the condition of stories. For instance, the views of children’s competences that informs news making significantly shape the selection and presentation of news material as is observed below. Take for example, the professional view of the children’s understanding of the causes of environment problems and the suggested way to present such a story for instance that is address here:

The fact is, how do they [children] understand that we as nations have caused the infrastructure to be fucked anyway? … So we have to do it in a way that is palatable.  
(*Newsround* Journalist 4)

According to the news worker the practice to make news intelligible to children is extremely difficult. The programmes’ solution to this is to offer a ‘palatable’ version of news that replaces the context to issues with simple reporting of the event. Although the *Newsround* website is configured to offer valuable supporting explanations of key issues, the programme, operating within tight time constraints, generally does not. Subsequently, it is the online presence of information that provides an opportunity for news workers not to tackle issues that require detailed explanation in the programme. In a similar way, by overlooking such issues, news workers can maintain a preferred upbeat and fast moving news style that is becoming an essential part of the programmes’ news presentation. Furthermore, the practice to simplify news features prominently within the various stages of news story production.

Observations of programme production reveal how several stages of editing produce the simplified news account. This process starts with the basic selection of the inappropriate news language within news copy and follows with the explanation or substitution of troublesome terms or phrases as is outlined below:

Working on the programme you actually get away from all the news jargon that bands about. Phrases like ‘arms to South Africa’ that is used all the time in main news and means nothing. People that work in news use these phrases to get around things. On *Newsround* you cannot use ‘Arms to Africa’ or a phrase like that. Here you must think about the story and how it can be told without using jargon and phrases that are meaningless. (*Newsround* Journalist 7)
Further, the practice of simplification involves another stage after the rewriting of selected words or phrases. A secondary process of mediating news language into the Newsround news style plays an important part within this complex undertaking. Its influence on the production of news copy is demonstrated in the following example of the production of a story about the failure of students to reach government standards in school maths.

The particularised rewriting of news copy for the BBC children’s news programme is revealed in what follows. This uncovers the professional mediation of a story over the news day. The example starts early in the morning meeting, when, the news producer in charge of the news production process initiates a general discussion of the previous days’ news programme followed by an introduction to a potential story about maths tests that includes the following observation:

I don’t think it’s showing what they can do but rather showing them how they are performing. I suppose it does raise the question: is this going to widen? And is it going to be depressing to show children that they are failing? (Newsround Producer 2)

At this point, the potential reaction of children to the story features as a concern over its production. However, this slight objection is soon forgotten and the story is placed within the provisional news bulletin as sometimes happens within the newsroom. By moving forward in time to the end of the morning meeting, we observe the news producer offering production advice to the journalist who has now been placed in charge of the story. This informal conversation references the news copy that would be suitable for the Newsround version, entitled 'primary school maths results worse’i. A section that is recommended as pertinent by the producer is outlined here:

Mr Blunkett put the decline in maths results down to a tough mental arithmetic test made compulsory this year for the first time for 11 and 14-year-olds - and acknowledged that these tests would make the numeracy target harder to meet

‘This has made it harder to achieve the target we set, but we make no apology for this. This change is long overdue. Mental arithmetic skills are essential part of numeracy’ he said.

Next September, a similar back-to-basics numeracy strategy emphasising mental arithmetic and whole-class teaching is to be introduced. Over the coming year, the government is to invest 60 million in preparing for the numeracy strategy, employing 300 numeracy advisers to work in schools and setting up 3000 numeracy summer schools. (PA News, 9 October 1998)

The next stage of the process involves the rewriting of the copy. At this time, the journalist uses an understanding of the appropriate news style to make significant changes. Appearing within the finished story, a section that was appropriated and shaped from the news copy reads as follows:

The result in maths may be slightly worse, but the government says THAT’S to be expected … For the first time this year children were tested for mental arithmetic - the government says that’s made things harder - and to make things worse new lessons designed to help still haven't been introduced in many schools. (BBC Newsround, 9 October 1998)
Studying the example reveals the implications of the simplification process for the audience’s understanding of the issue. By comparing the two texts, the finished story, it is observed, presents changes to the description of the test results. Included is the paraphrasing of the Minster for Education's speech into the words 'government reaction' and the omitting of the critics of the government's handling of education that was outlined later in the news copy. The phrase 'failing to meet political targets' into 'slightly worse' is also shaped and accompanied by other changes. In sum, this analysis has uncovered how the effort to simplify news themes and language actually delimits the audience's understanding of the educational issue.

In the same way, my observations of news production point to the professional practices used to simplify the presentation of information and facts. These practices are justified as essential on the basis of the following principles of news style:

You need to boil the story down to what you are going say and tell it in way that is truthful but gets the interesting things across. Obviously, as you do not have half an hour to tell the story, you have to really get back to first principles in order to explain it. (Newsround Journalist 5)

The comments describe the professional intention to identify and then report on the principal elements of the story. A case study example of the professional production of the maths test story exemplifies this process in action. This reveals how a journalist uses figures found within news copy (outlined below) to write a children’s news account:

The government's targets specify that 80% of 11 year-olds should hit the expected level of achievement in English by the year 2002, and 75% in Maths.

In this year's test, sat in May, only 65% of 11-year-olds achieved the expected level in English up to 63% last year. But the rate of increase has slowed significantly. In 1996, 58% of 11-year-olds hit the expected level, up to 48% the year before.

Achievement in science test for 11-year-olds remained static at 69%.
In maths, only 59% of 11-year-olds achieved the expected level this year, down from 62% last year, and again bucking a trend of continuous improvement. (BBC Newsround, 9 October 1998)

The journalist having identified and simplified the important facts of the news story produces the visual graphic of “Maths Target … 3/4 by 2002” and a voice over that explains how:

Three-quarters of all children are supposed to reach standards set by the government for maths by the year 2002. (BBC Newsround, 9 October 1998)

The produced account simplifies the representation of the students’ achievement to appear as 3/4's rather than the ‘75%’ that is outlined in the news copy. The journalist involved when questioned justifies this practice by explaining that the figures provide a better understanding of the significance of the numbers. However, it is important to ignore the commonsense appeal of this description and consider the practice of simplification critically. Contrary to the journalist’s accepted wisdom, observations show that these efforts routinely exclude rather than 'make simple’ important information. The
editing of the statistic of 59% of 11-year-olds that did not meet the
government expected levels for maths is an excellent example in this case.
Furthermore, we learn that these omissions are made consciously within a
general effort to satisfy the accepted norms of the programme’s news
presentation. The consequences of which restricts the information given to
audience over examination achievements and government policy in this
example. Thus this brings an appropriate end to the discussion of the role of
the imagined target audience in the shaping of the BBC children’s programme.

Conclusion

BBC Newsround is an important programme that offers children an
entrance point to world of adult news events. At best, this unique service
introduces large events in a manageable news form for this audience. But
generally, the programme seems to shape news output in a rather different
way. This discussion has sought to look beyond the general usefulness of the
BBC children’s news to examine critically the role of the imagined audience
in the production of its general output. An analysis of production in this case
has revealed how its constructed visualisation of children helps to manufacture
news stories considered ‘appropriate’ for this audience. Amidst producers’
comments of their understanding and knowledge of an audience of 10 year
olds, it has uncovered how children’s relationship to news content remains a
core professional understanding of this group. Noticed is how attention is
directed from the minority audiences’ interest in news to the enticements that
the majority audience require to tune in and watch. As has been explained, this
view underpins efforts to shape the children’s news programme. The news
practices that follow eschew the political focus of adult news and build an
agenda considered ‘interesting’ for the audience that includes great amounts of
popular and child-related news. Similarly, also, the content of stories is
purposefully mediated according to this preferred news style.

Keeping the imagined mass audience interested then has become a
primary preoccupation for journalists when shaping Newsround news stories.
As a result, Newsround produces personalised news accounts that purposely
focus news from the political ‘issue’ to reporting its relationship with
children’s experiences. These constructed accounts avoid discussion and
debate, contentious phrases or figures - which are assumed to be inappropriate
for this news constituency. Also within these the voiced emotional reactions
rather than opinions of children feature in token ways so as to attract audience
interest. Although efforts are made to cover and explain important news
events within the programme these instances run counter to the general trend
to personalise and simplify news. Thus, on this basis it can be suggested that
Newsround generally delimits the audiences’ access to information,
exploration and participation, which Murdock (1999) has described as
citizen’s ‘cultural rights’. Adopted is a professional perspective that overlooks
how the programme’s audience of would-be citizens (Messenger Davies 2001)
require the same rights to be regularly informed or at least introduced to the
important issues of our time. So, while we must continue to commend BBC
Newsround for offering a news service for children, we should also be mindful
of the consequences of its actions to produce news for an imagined audience
that must be attracted and entertained.
References:


MESSENGER DAVIES, MAIRE (2001) "’Dear BBC’ Children, Television and the Public Sphere’ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press


NOBEL, GRANT. (1975) 'Producers: Gatekeepers to the Wider Society' in Grant.Noble (ed.) Children in Front of the Small Screen London: MacMillian


---

i A further discussion of the study can be found in Matthews (2003, 2005, 2007).

ii The programme’s title was originally John Craven’s Newsround and was changed to Newsround after 1989.

iii Authored by Tim Miles, Education Correspondent , PA News