NEGOTIATING NEWS CHILDHOODS: NEWS PRODUCERS, VISUALIZED AUDIENCES AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE CHILDREN’S NEWS AGENDA

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Abstract

This paper, based on a case study of the production of the BBC children’s news programme, Newsround, examines the importance of professionals’ views of children’s “childhood” within programme production. Approaching media production with this concern brings sharply into view how understandings of the young audience develop within journalists’ culture. Further, the case study approach reveals how news practices inscribed with professionals’ understandings of children’s cognitive abilities, their interests and relationship to the news programme shape the production of the BBC children’s programme. The paper concludes on the basis of this study that the news agenda conditioned in this process restricts children’s access to knowledge, information and debate about important adult affairs.

Key terms: BBC Newsround, childhood, children’s programmes, media production, news agenda, news form, news programme, visualised audience
Negotiating News Childhoods: News Producers, Visualized Audiences and the Production of the Children’s News Agenda

Introduction:

This paper adopts a case study approach to the production of the BBC children’s news programme, *Newsround* to explore the complex cultural understandings that shape programme production. What follows uses a concept of “childhood” purposefully to grasp the particularised images and expectations of children that journalists use in their daily news work. This helps to understand how news practices informed by these assumptions condition the dialogic possibilities of the children’s news programme. Further, it reveals in particular how professionals shape a news agenda appropriate for a visualised audience of young consumers uninterested in news which actually delimits the *Newsround* audience’s access to news discussions of important adult issues. These insights will be outlined further after first introducing how a concept of childhood will be used to explore the news production process.

Childhood: From Effects to Production

The following discussion uses a concept of “childhood” to examine the production of a children’s news programme. This adopts then a contrasting approach from other accounts that discuss “childhood” and media. Most studies within this literature, it is important to note, reflect a well-established view that sees “childhood” as a measure of the impact of the electronic media on children’s lives rather than a concept to comprehend professionals’ visualised view of children as is adopted here. Thus, early accounts within this approach have introduced the media as producing deleterious effects on children’s childhoods. Television, for example, has been described as a ‘plug in drug’ that powerfully disrupts family life (Winn, 1980, 12), or a powerful technology that reveals ‘the exclusivity of world knowledge’ to children and therefore aids in the continued loss of their childhood innocence (Postman, 1983, 84). Later studies in a similar way have introduced further anxieties about childhood basing their views on the proposed influence of the “harmful” media text. These have described how advertisements encourage consumer culture (McAllister & Giglio, 2005), how programmes reinforce gender and racial stereotypes (Bell, Hass, & Sells, 1995; Giroux, 1997; Johnson & Young, 2002), and how action films ferment anti social thinking (Philo, 1999).

Overall, this work has reinforced a sense of the adverse impact on children’s childhood of a pervasive and powerful media industry. Other commentaries, however, have questioned this account of the relationship between children and electronic media.

Thus, a contrasting approach emerging later than most of the aforementioned studies has sought to conceptualise the relationship between children and electronic media differently to those outlined above. After simply opposing the view of deleterious media effects on children’s lives, this has moved to describe the general activity, understanding and abilities of young people as skilled media audiences (Messenger-Davies, 1989; Buckingham, 1993; Howard, 1998; Marsh, 2005). Following its introduction
to the literature, the term “childhood” has been forced to the centre of academic debate over the “effects” of the media. This has also encouraged others to step back from these discussions and to criticise their informing views, such as the idealised conception of childhood that emerges within effects studies (Goldsen, 1997) and the overly optimistic account of electronic childhood offered within later work (Buckingham, 2000). However, such discussions despite offering views of the media and audience relationship have overlooked the great potential of a concept such as childhood. As is reflected in the approach taken within this paper, the application of this concept with production research helps to reveal how professionals’ shape cultural resources for children.

What I am proposing here is that such a concept should be used to explore how professionals’ conservative view of childhood shapes programme manufacture. As a useful addition to our theoretical armoury, childhood can identify the cultural understandings of children that become inscribed with professionals’ practices and how these condition the mediated experience for the young audience. However, although the importance of professionals’ views of childhood has been discussed in textual studies of children’s media (e.g. Bazalgette & Buckingham, 1995), these have been addressed rarely within production research. Thus, the following will introduce production scholarship and highlight those studies that offer relevant insights into the professional motivations that shape programme production.

**Childhood and Media Production**

As has been argued previously, a concept of childhood can be used to understand the character of professionals’ views that shape the production of children’s media. Most production research, however, has followed theoretical and conceptual foci different from the approach outlined above. Studies that have examined political economic processes (Pecora, 1998; Wasko, 2001; Buckingham & Scanlon, 2005) or news workers’ views on particular aspects of production (Gauntlett, 1996) or their concerns with programme quality and the changing media environment (Blumler, 1992; Buckingham, Davis, Jones, & Kelly, 1999), for instance, have offered few useful insights along these lines. Nevertheless, in contrast to such work, other studies have presented relevant insights into the operation of professionals’ views within production. Early production discussions, for example, have outlined how particular considerations help to produce programmes popular with children (Cantor, 1974; Greenberg, 1976). Equally, a more refined view of professionals’ working knowledge described here as producers’ “rules of thumb” has been put forward by later work. Detailed within these accounts are professionals’ working assumptions about children's textual preferences, including those of comedy, recognisable (gendered) characters and stories, repetition and branding (Wartella, 1994, p. 52-55) and their cognitive abilities and educational needs (Lewis, 1992). Research has also developed a discussion of the complex range of influences that inform professionals’ understandings including the importance of broadcasting ethos and the programme genre (Noble, 1975; 1976). Most recently, studies have discussed professionals’ views and motivations that are particular to the production of
the children’s news programme. Thus, as these appear to be relevant to the case study, we will discuss this literature further.

As part of a recent research trend, academic discussions of children’s news provision have provided particular insights into the motivations that inform its production. Strohmaier’s (2007) study of producers’ reactions to the reporting of war, for instance, has demonstrated the tensions that exist within the production of news provision. By examining a variety of international children’s news programmes, her research has uncovered the particular motivations that divide their production approaches including willingness on the part of some producers to inform children and to produce guidelines to this end, and a concern among others to offer a protective ‘safe haven’ (p154) from the realities of the ongoing conflict. In the same way, other studies developing the former theme have explored the guiding understandings that have helped to produce serious news topics for a young audience. Dafna Lemish (2007) having conducted interviews with broadcasters in Israel, for example, has noted their intentions to produce programmes that will manage children’s anxiety, including efforts made to produce programming that will provide children with clear and brief explanations of conflict.

Another feature of the children’s news programme that is described within this literature is an encoded concern to console the audience. Walma van der Molen and De Vries, (2003) and Nikken and Walma van der Molen (2007) have both discussed the professional use of “consolation strategies” within programmes and how these have become manifest at the level of the selection and organisation of news items as well as in the use of voices and selection of news visuals within news items. Further, the observations made of European, US and Israeli children’s news programmes presented within other accounts have shown how these in comparison to adult news programmes offer a greater explanation and contextualization of issues, different stances and linguistic addresses and news agendas (Bourne, 1985; Buckingham, 1999; Messenger-Davies, 2007). While international children’s provision has also revealed some potential for discussing conflict resolution (see P. Lemish, 2007), their websites, certainly that of BBC Newsround, as Carter has described, offers children ‘news and a public space to engage in political discussion with each other and the news team …’ (2007, 139).

Adding to this work we also have retrospective practitioner overviews of the development and career ‘highlights’ of the children’s news programme (Home, 1993) and published accounts that have featured journalists’ explanations of their news programme’s official position on the reporting of serious news topics such as war (Price, 2001; Prince, 2004).

Taken together this literature has built a reasonable overview of the various motivations and characteristics that are associated with the production of the children’s news programme. Despite such insights, however, we continue to lack an understanding of the finer points of programme production. In particular, what appears to be lacking from this literature is a detailed and in-depth discussion of the process that shapes the children’s news programme. Thus, to understand production we require insights into how professionals’ views of the audience, the institutional broadcasting ethos and the news genre inform news making practice. Similarly, we need know more about the particular news practices that shape news output in accordance with
these views. What follows will address these matters in its overview of the production of BBC *Newsround* after first outlining details of research study on which its discussion is based.

**Methodology**

The discussion that follows is based on findings from a study of the production of the BBC children’s news programme, *Newsround*. This research included non-participant observations of news practice (from 1997-2000), interviews with past and present members of the news team, analysis of newroom discussions, meetings and documentation and a quantitative and qualitative study of the programme output from 1972 – 2000. Evidence from the observations and interviews conducted over this period appear frequently in the discussion below. Both methods were used here to produce an account of professionals’ understanding of the production of the BBC children’s news programme. The impromptu and formal semi-structured interviews with members of both past and present *Newsround* news teams, in particular, played a significant part in this endeavour. The thirty formal semi-structured interviews within the project recorded the views of thirteen journalists, five researchers, graphic and video editors, six producers, four editors and one former Head of the BBC Children’s Department. These lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and 30 minutes in length and were conducted by the author in a variety of settings including the BBC television centre in London, UK (for present team) and others at other places of work or by phone (for past members). At the start of each interview, it was agreed that the research publications that would follow the study would not reveal the identities of the interviewees. After these were completed, the author transcribed the interviews and sub divided the written data into common descriptions of the production process. Following their preparation, these insights were then cross-referenced for validity with observations of news practices and the recorded morning meeting discussions to produce an accurate account of professionals’ understanding of the news making process.

When the research was completed, the author set about developing aspects of the case study into academic articles. To date, these have discussed the professional selection and mediation of particular news stories (Matthews, 2003) as well as news voices (Matthews, 2005) and environmental problems (Matthews, 2007). However, this paper offers here a general overview of the construction of the BBC *Newsround* news agenda in contrast to the specific focus of these discussions. It uses evidence collected within the project, to describe how continuity exists within the production of the *Newsround* news agenda over time. As the programme’s content has not changed dramatically over the seven years since the research was completed these insights remain relevant and useful to understand the features of the present programme. Thus, the practices that will be described, it suggests, operate presently within the production of BBC *Newsround* to manufacture a news agenda that reflects professionals’ views of childhood. The paper will discuss these features after offering first a brief introduction to the subject of the case study - the BBC children’s news programme, *Newsround*.

**Newsround: A Case Study**
The BBC children's news programme *Newsround* is the longest running news service for children. After appearing first on a six-week trial in 1972 as *John Craven’s Newsround*, and shortening its name to *Newsround* after a successful run up until 1989, the programme has effectively maintained a place within the BBC children's programme schedule. This successful programme, commissioned first to fill a time gap within the schedule left by other programmes, has expanded to include other features over this time. Steadily increasing the number of bulletins per week through its first broadcasting decade, for instance, the eight and a half minute programme was to develop later a series of small documentaries called *Newsround Extras* in the 1980s. A *Newsround Newshound* club for young journalists was created at the same time, which shortly after was transformed into the *Newsround Presspack* that exists presently. Furthermore, in 2000, amidst the development of online services for other BBC news programmes’, *Newsround* created a website to house summaries of its daily bulletin, background explanations of key news issues (or ‘explainers’ as they commonly referred to) and competitions. In the years that have followed, smaller bulletins and spin-off programmes such as *Sportsround* have appeared on the BBC children’s digital channels (CBBC). Nevertheless, against these changes the BBC *Newsround* form has remained consistent as will now be explained.

**Reproducing the BBC Newsround News Form**

A feature of the BBC children’s news programme, *Newsround* is the consistency of its presentation of news. As devised specifically for children, the characteristics of this unique form has been maintained consistently by the meticulous efforts of the various *Newsround* news editors. Such individuals seeking to replicate the sterling work of their predecessors have passed forward to their contemporaries a preferred understanding of the particularised form of the BBC children’s news programme. As is reflected in the experience of an ex *Newsround* journalist below, their efforts made in communicating an understanding of the children’s news programme has resulted in its successful succession:

“We had a very clear idea of what we were there for. That came very much from [the present editor] who had got that ethos from the previous editor, and from John Craven as [the present editor] spent a lot of time with John Craven. So I think we were quite a cohesive team in that respect”

Ex *Newsround* Journalist

Furthermore, editors through their leadership and teaching have instilled a view of the principles of the BBC children’s news programme among news workers. News teams as made up from individuals schooled in this way have an ability to articulate a sophisticated understanding of the BBC programme which describes *Newsround* as the compromise between its main informing elements. Below, seen as testament to the success of this teaching process another ex journalist outlines the focus that the programme must retain:
“There wasn’t a great debate about whether Newsround should primarily try and be funky and excite like every other children’s programme, or whether it should be grown up and serious like other news programmes. We knew we were somewhere between the two and that if we tried to be too serious and too newsy we would lose our audience and similarly if we tried to be too entertaining and too oriented to children that we would lose our credibility. So we knew we had to strike a balance”

Ex Newsround Journalist

The above description offers an insight into how knowledge of the programme is disseminated among the team. The process that it describes, however, is different to the “professional socialisation” of journalists that is outlined within existing discussions of news production. For example, here professionals as part of the Newsround news team must develop a ‘professional visualisation’ (Cottle, 1993) of the programme. As my observations of news production reveal, these must be able to visualise a working blueprint of the BBC children’s news programme to then shape and condition news stories in the way that is expected. Their visualisation of the children’s news form, moreover, is a complex formation. Professionals understand that Newsround is constructed from the informing elements of a BBC view of public service adult news provision and a view of the popular and entertaining children’s programme. Hence, from their perspective, BBC Newsround should be:

“One, to be a core public service news provider for children in an accessible and interesting way and, two, to provide a little bit of news about children or news about things that would specially interest children such as stories about pop, fashion, fun - subjects that wouldn’t make it on to the main BBC news”

Newsround Presenter

This reveals how an institutional view of the BBC’s public service broadcasting mission informs the focus of BBC Newsround. This includes a BBC paternalist outlook that plays a significant part in the way that the programme understands its broadcasting role. Producers use this preferred view, which originated within the BBC Children’s Department, to safeguard the audience from certain knowledge and events when producing the children’s news programme. In a similar way, another aspect of the wider BBC professional culture shapes their news making efforts. The BBC public service approach to news provision is also used to inform the character and content of the programme’s news output. As contrasting directly with BBC paternalist concerns, this encourages the professional reporting of significant world news events, and is explored further below.

As has been discussed, the BBC public service approach shapes the BBC children’s news programme. This is embedded within the professional outlook and encourages news workers to view Newsround as important with the BBC news provision and as unique and unrivalled among children’s news programmes more generally. Subsequently, it is suggested that other children’s news programmes by ignoring their preferred approach produce subjective and partial news accounts which miss “the facts” and focus wholly “on the emotional responses of children” (Newsround Journalist’). The marked differences that exist between these programmes, however, do not appear to reassure or quell concerns about the future direction of BBC Newsround. Rather, on the contrary, many ex Newsround news workers working outside of
the BBC have voiced worries over the impact of the competitive broadcasting environment on editorial policy and the direction of the programme. Mentioned within interviews, for example, were concerns that Newsround’s originality and relevance was being undermined from within the BBC as a result of recent news policy decisions. The example below offers a common view among these of the consequences of these transformations:

“If actually Newsround becomes another TV programme that happens to cover news in inverted commas, then I think that it would cease to be relevant. That’s my view”
Ex Newsround Editor

So far, this discussion has outlined how particular ideas inform the Newsround professionals’ outlook. This has introduced how particular institutional views shape the programme form and its efforts to protect children from particular news happenings as well as to present to them news shaped within a particularised BBC style. What follows then will explore how these ideas have become amalgamated with professionals’ changing view of the young news audience. Then, the discussion will offer a complete picture of how this new formation shapes the production of the programme and its agenda.

Visualising the Imagined Programme Audience

News professionals believe that Newsround reflects the news requirements of its audience and as such remains unique among news programmes. When describing its production, for instance, they accentuate their ability to draw upon a collective view of children to shape the news bulletin in accordance with their needs. Such a unique view, it is suggested, creates possibilities within news making that are unavailable to their adult journalist counterparts:

“Working on Newsround you know your audience. That’s one of [the programme’s] big strengths - it knows whom it is talking to. You don’t on any other news programme –really. One of the big problems with news at the moment and a cause of all the upheavals is that they are trying to decide to whom they are talking and to redefine and adapt the programmes to those audiences”
Ex Newsround Reporter

The comments describe how professionals sidestep uncertainties common to the production of news by drawing upon a collective understanding of the news audience. As my research reveals the confidence that comes from understanding their audience develops during the early stages of their professional training and is reinforced further within daily news making rituals. Within this ongoing process then they acquire a general set of assumptions based around the age, interests and needs of their audience and also learn a way to comprehend the characteristics of different groups within the news audience, as we shall see.

Researching the production of the programme has uncovered how news professionals identify groups within the BBC Newsround audience and then use such views to shape programme production. Within this process, they focus a professional pride on a small section of the visualised audience that they described as “mature, academically able and middle class children with an interest in happenings in the world” (Newsround Journalist 2)

However, despite their sympathies with this group, professionals when
developing programme content do not consider the group’s interests to be important. Rather their creative energies are directed to the far greater numbers of children within a “potential audience”. It is important to add that they consider this group to exhibit particular behaviours and characteristics such as lower attention spans and intellectual wherewithal in addition to insatiable desires for entertainment rather than information-based programming. Moreover, within the production process, professionals meet these requirements by introducing the production values of the entertainment programme within Newsround’s output. Such a process has submerged the public service news approach within a wider view that assumes that news should be shaped to attract the audience. The discussion of the production of the Newsround news agenda that follows will further illustrate the process.

Visualising the News Agenda

My observations reveal that the production of the BBC children’s news programme is a complex process that involves the professional application of a shared news making knowledge. For instance, within the news selection process a view of the preferred news agenda is used to determine what stories will be selected. This includes the use of several ideal story types that can be introduced as (i) the news story that is considered to be relevant or interesting (ii) the story that features or includes children and (iii) the story that has the potential to entertain. The unique character of these story types is discussed in the next section that begins with a discussion of the stories that are assumed to be relevant for the Newsround news audience.

Relevance: The Selection of Adult News

An appropriate way to start a discussion of the news agenda is to examine the view of Newsround’s news selection process that is offered within the programme’s press release material. These descriptions of the selection of adult news stories, it is important to note, represent the programmes’ activities in a discernible way. Noticeably, these overviews tend to overemphasise Newsround’s reporting of adult news and the programme’s intention to report these news happenings “in an interesting and intelligible way to children” (BBC, 1999). Similarly, these descriptions fail to mention the standardised news judgements that (de)select adult news topics for the programme which appeared to be significant within my observations of programme production. So, by discounting these accounts and by observing the news selection process we begin to see how standardised news judgements condition the character and content of the Newsround agenda by simply evaluating the presumed significance of an event for children’s lives. This is often reflected in the decisions taken over the selection of adult news for the lead story in the programme that are described in comment below:

“The lead story might be a story such as the shooting in Colorado. This is a must run story on a particular day as is the murder of Jill Dando or the war in Kosovo because it is nationally or internationally significant. Or that it might be a story that is really interesting or particular to children”

Newsround Presenter

“
The complexities involved in selecting a lead story for the children’s news programme are revealed in the above comments. These include an intention to introduce “significant adult news events” (disasters, war and some crimes) as part of a news coverage that is considered to be as credible as adult news coverage. Also revealed is how significance is given to news events that relate to children’s lives or stories that will interest the Newsround audience. The general decisions that shape the news bulletins’ character, however, differ to these made over the lead story. At these points, routine news selection questions are asked about the appropriateness of adult news stories for the bulletin. Their focus ensures that news workers will justify their decision to introduce adult news within the news bulletin as is shown below:

“Should they know that it's happening? How much should they know? Should we use that as an opportunity to explain what is going on? Should we do a long piece, or should we recognise that they don’t really find that very interesting and that we might lose quite a lot of viewers?”

Newsround Journalist

In the selection process then, professionals use an understanding of children to judge the newsworthiness of various adult stories. Professionals’ view of children’s limited understanding of the world, for instance, informs their decision to exclude stories with an industrial or political focus from the children’s news programme. Additionally, it is a sense of children’s limited cognitive ability that colours their view of adult topics as “unattractive” and “incomprehensible” for their audience. Generally, then, these judgements tend to exclude most adult news stories including those that reflect issues which impinge directly on the experiences of children such as school class sizes, legislation over children's working hours, the relationships between children and parents and the financial and social aspects of their leisure actives.

Furthermore, when discussing the selection of stories we should also consider how privilege is given to stories that can attract the attention of the Newsround audience. For example, it was in responding to a question about the absence of genetically modified food stories from the news bulletin with the statement that these stories are “a bit dull to look at”, that a news worker reveals the significance of the news presentation of stories within the news selection process. As the comment shows, news workers will deselect significant news stories that do not meet the required level of presentation for the news bulletin. Equally, professionals’ views on the audiences’ news interests also shape their judgements on the acceptability of the adult news story, as we shall see.

**Interest: An Alternative Agenda?**

Within the production process, news workers sift through the adult news stories that are available for selection. In doing so, they purposefully disregard substantial quantities of stories in an effort to find and select those with qualities that will attract their audience. After being selected from a mass of non-newsworthy fodder, these stories are placed on the prospective story list together with details of their fittingness for the news bulletin. As this process reveals, news workers apply particular news judgements based on ideas of audience interest to select “interesting” news stories. However, their
decisions are not made arbitrarily but draw on understandings of the audience’s news interests that have been passed forward by various news teams as examples of best practice. As in attendance at the first *Newsround* news meetings, the original programme presenter describes in the comment below how these decisions about audience interest were first developed:

“We did not have a great consultation panel or anything like that when the programme was set up. Instead, we covered what instinctively we thought the audience would want. Edward (Barns) was a great one for instinctively knowing the audience. His background was Blue Peter and things like that. I knew roughly that children would be interested in wildlife, adventure, sport and space and all of those sorts of key areas. So, we build the bulletin around the things that we thought the audience would be interested in. We put in what might be the most significant [adult] news stories of the day but not necessarily as the lead on Newsround rather as half way through the bulletin or as not at all”

Ex Newsround Presenter

These “instinctive” understandings of children's news interests remain relevant to the present selection process and continue to encourage the selection of these story types for the children’s news agenda.

In addition to these concerns, however, my observations of news practice reveal how professionals’ views of children’s interests based on their assumptions about the relevance of stories for children’s lives feature prominently within news selections. Thus, when selecting the news, news professionals use their limited understanding of children to make decisions about the newsworthiness of particular topics. Further, observations show how these practices do not simply illustrate a competency and skill on the part of the *Newsround* journalists as many news professionals have argued that it does within interview. Rather, a different view is revealed here where uncertainty about such matters shapes such decision-making. The example of a discussion over a shopping story illustrates this, below:

Assistant Producer 6: how many kids do you reckon get clothes from Asda?
Assistant Producer 2: not many
Assistant Producer 1: No I disagree Asda now is … one of the biggest clothes retailers in the country. I'm just telling you it’s massive.
Editor: they have some famous designer
Team: George
Assistant Producer 2: George invented Next
Assistant Producer 1: I've got George pants on
Assistant Producer 5: Do you think mums buy clothes from Asda or kids? I very much doubt that kids go to Asda.
Editor: I did it when at *Short Change* [BBC Children's Current Affairs Programme]. I went into my local Tesco and there were loads of teenagers all round the underwear section, (laughs). There were loads of girls …
Assistant Producer 1: What’s that man doing in the lingerie (laughs)? Did you not get followed by a policeman?
Editor: I observed loads of girls buying men’s Calvin Klines, because girls wear men’s Calvin Klines
Assistant Producer 6: It used to a bit of a joke at school if you got your clothes from Asda. You used to get the piss taken out of you
Assistant Producer 5: Do children buy their own clothes? I don’t think children buy their own clothes. I think it's the parents that buy the clothes
Assistant Producer: yeah, kids choose the clothes and parents buy them
This extract epitomises the news team’s discussions about the newsworthiness of news stories that take place within the news day. It shows how professionals draw on knowledge as well as recollections of their personal experiences of childhood to assemble a view of children’s lives which is then used to assess the relevance of the proposed news story. Here, for example, a collective understanding of children’s inexperience of clothes shopping develops within the discussion which then informs the news team’s decision that the story should be dropped. In short, we learn here how an understanding of children’s lives forms randomly within these discussions and how the insights produced in this way shape the production of the news agenda along with other concerns. However, in contrast to their efforts within these lengthy discussions, news professionals appear to arrive at quick decisions over the newsworthiness of stories that include children.

**News that Features Children**

In addition to the stories outlined above, the *Newsround* also includes a story type that “is focused around and centred on children” (BBC, 1999). Featuring prominently within the BBC children’s news agenda, this unique and alternative source of news symbolises the unique identity of BBC *Newsround* for news workers. Its significance within the programme, for instance, is outlined within the programmes’ original presenter’s statement, below:

“… One area that we particularly developed is that which surrounds the life of a child: going to school, issues at home, pocket money, the exploitation of children, and so on. But we are interested if the teachers go on strike, or if school meals go up in price, because that directly relates to the daily experiences of the audience” (Craven, 1978, p 7-8).

However, contrary to the view echoed here that the programme includes news particular to children in a variety of forms, BBC *Newsround* actually produces standardised news accounts of children. For the most part, the programme follows the reporting of prescribed themes that are agreed to be particular to the lives of children. BBC *Newsround* includes then accounts of children’s achievement in developed countries and their disadvantage within less developed countries. The practice to include the former category of story within BBC *Newsround*, for instance it is thought, produces a “more accurate picture of the world” (Etchingham, 1996) for children.

In a similar way, professionals’ views of the sensibilities of the young audience shape their reporting of stories about children in developing countries. A sense of the audiences’ emotional fragility, for instance, conditions their news coverage of children that face disadvantage in particular ways, including that of the victims of poverty, war, famine, earthquakes and child labour in developing countries. In this case, news practices encode news items with a prescribed stance that embodies a sense that “nothing is ever hopeless” (*Newsround* producer 3). Professionals’ efforts to shape such coverage is made infrequently, however, due to the intermittent flow of stories that come from other news programmes which act as news sources for
Newsround. Nevertheless, in addition to these, other stories that feature children emerge more regularly.

Another example of a newsworthy story is that which includes the voices of children, as is explained below:

“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\textsuperscript{xx}

The comments describe how professionals’ view the introduction of children’s voices within the programme as a positive practice as well as how they consider that these voices should play a prescribed role within BBC Newsround. Within the newsroom, for instance, professionals ensure that voices appear within particular story types within the agenda and rarely, for instance, within politically based news topics. Additionally, within the process they use children’s voices to offer emotional reactions to news events rather than analysis or commentary within the story. Further, they position voices to compliment the news reporter’s role rather than encroach on the telling of the news story (Matthews, 2005)\textsuperscript{xx}. That is, unless the news report is devised and voiced by children reporters (called “Press Pack” reports). As unique reports produced with assistance from the news team, these follow a pattern similar to vox pop interviews where children comment on entertainment stories rather than serious adult news topics. Thus, this brings an end to our discussion of the importance of professionals’ assumptions about the interests and emotional state of the audience within news production. Next, we can discuss the related concern of the introduction of the “fun” news story within the Newsround news bulletin.

**Fun Stories and the Changing Agenda**

The “fun” story is a stable ingredient of the programme that introduces unusual and entertaining news happenings within the programme. In doing so, it helps to accomplish important functions within BBC Newsround. For example, its entertaining coverage is placed within different positions of the bulletin purposefully to meet the audience’s demand for entertainment news and to encourage a “positive” view of the BBC news programme more generally. In similar way, situated as the last story in the bulletin, the “fun” story is used to lighten the mood of the audience after watching serious news stories and to place them smoothly within the content and flow of the children’s programme schedules. Generally, then, the story’s ability to maintain their attention, it is thought, allows Newsround to compete for audience share with other programmes within the increasingly competitive media environment. The programme’s editorial policy, moreover, has recently championed this story as a vehicle that can increase the popularity of the programme’s agenda, as we shall see.

In addition to the particularities of the news selections described above, significant shifts within the focus of the editorial stance originating in the late 1990s and early 2000s has encouraged the programme to incorporate
qualities of other children’s programme provision. Editorial policy reflecting a more general view that Newsround has become incongruent with children’s media interests and the media presentation of other provision for children has encouraged an increase in the reporting of the “popular” and “interesting” news story. Below, a Newsround journalist introduces the new approach taken to producing a news agenda for children:

“The [Editor] wants it [Newsround] to be more populist, more tabloid, more funky. He’s got a perception of “funky” that has come from above [Head of Children’s Department] and requires that the programme becomes more attractive to children or to a particular kind of young person. It’s got to be hip, happening, funky, lighter. As a consequence we are doing more about pop groups like the All Saints [British all girl pop band] when they got pregnant, which previously we would have never done”

Newsround Journalist

Further, my observations of production reveal how the editor and senior representatives of the Children’s Programme Department have made efforts to encourage news workers to popularise the news agenda. For example, the Head of the Children’s Department has regularly recommended particular news stories that the Newsround bulletin should introduce to increase its presumed appeal to children. Similarly, the senior news producers have encouraged the selection of news topics congruent with the new editorial stance when leading morning meetings and other newsroom discussions. Thus, together these efforts have helped to produce a recognisable shift in the programme’s news agenda. The following comments introduce the alterations made to the proportions of different types of news story, for example:

“In the past, the emphasis was on explaining the day’s news to children which took about sixty percent of the bulletin and then including news about children about forty percent […] Now what’s happened is that it has changed round. There is about sixty percent of news about children and less for the daily adult news”

Newsround Producer

The producer comments here on the changes made to the quantity of “popular” rather than “relevant” news material within the news agenda. Thus, we can see how these considerations along with others within programme production have worked successfully to restrict the coverage of adult news topics within news bulletin. BBC Newsround appears then on this basis to have created a news programme that increasingly restricts children’s access to important adult news issues.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how a concept of childhood can be usefully applied to the study of the production of children’s media. As has been explained, this helps to understand the complex nature of the production of children’s programmes by focusing attention on how professionals’ understandings guide their efforts to negotiate media representations. Further, the paper has used a case study of the production of the BBC children’s news programme, Newsround to outline the particulars of the production process. Studying BBC Newsround then has revealed how a professionally ensconced
view of childhood, developed within news professionals’ culture, is used within production to shape and condition its’ news agenda.

In other words, the paper has discussed how news professionals’ view of childhood conditions the audience’s access to news issues. This discussion has introduced, for example, how news professionals increasingly question the relevance of serious adult news topics and feature these less frequently within the news agenda as a result of this process. Also discussed is how their assumptions about the audiences’ understandings, interests and their relationship to the news programme shape the news selection process. Professionals’ particularised view of the young consumer uninterested in news has ensured here that stories about children or entertainment topics with upbeat presentation are privileged over others. Similarly, their view has encouraged efforts to reduce the amount of information, explanation and discussion of important news topics that is included within the BBC children’s news programme. Moreover, in addition to describing the production process, these insights have helped also to rethink ideas about the media and children relationship.

In particular, the discussion has assisted in re-examining previous academic views of the relationship between children and media. Its findings, for instance, help to question the established idea that television is having a corrosive effect on childhoods by providing unmediated and unlimited access to “unsavoury content” as well as the view that children live as an “active” media audience within electronic childhoods. Both claims when seen in light of these findings appear to have overlooked the importance of children’s television programmes in the lives of children and professionals’ motivations that inform their production. As has been discussed above, media professionals’ negotiate children’s access to particular content and in doing so mediate the presentation of “unsavoury” or “harmful” material in the news that some suggest corrodes childhood as well as restrict children’s access to knowledge and understanding of issues and thus shape their ability to be an “active” news audience. Hence, on the basis of this discussion, we can conclude that the relationship between children and television is far more complex than has been previously acknowledged.
References


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the production of environmental issues *Journalism Criticism, Theory and Practice* 8 (4), 428-448.


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i Interviewed 3rd September 1999
ii Interviewed 6th July 1999
iii Interviewed 29th July 1999
iv Often news workers refer to popular news magazine programmes such as *Nick News and Wise Up* in their comments rather than the public service news minded focus of *First Edition* (which appears in schools programmes on Channel 4, UK).
v Interviewed 23rd August 1999
vi Interviewed 30th July 1999
vii Interviewed 2nd September 1999
viii Interviewed 13th September 1999
ix Interviewed 17th December 1999
x Interviewed 13th September 1999
xi A BBC magazine programme (currently running).
xii Interviewed 19th November 1999
xiii Asda is British supermarket (food retail outlet) which sells clothes in addition to food.
xiv Next is British high street clothes retail outlet.
xv Tesco is a British supermarket that sells clothes
xvi Recorded 6th July 1999. The story being discussed here was described in the prospect story list as “The supermarket ASDA is planning to sell more discount designer goods in its Wakefield story, despite the Ban by the European Court on the import of cheap merchandise from outside the EU”
xvii An Ex Presenter talks also of the desire to avoid painting ‘a picture of a very bleak world’. He adds that the news team recognises that “there’s a lot of good things happening in this world, a lot of happy events that are of major importance” (Craven 1978: 33).
xviii Interviewed 17th November 1999
xix Interviewed 30th November 1999
x Matthews (2005) describes how this is a common feature of the way that news access is devised for children in BBC *Newsround*
xxi Interviewed 14th November 1999
xii Interviewed 23rd November 1999