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The Future of Children's TV News Programs

The Canadian case study based on Japan's 2011 disaster

Following the natural disasters that happened in Japan, researchers at the Center for Youth and Media Studies joined Maya Götz's initiative concerning a study on "Children Watching the Disaster in Japan".

The Canadian contribution to this study – which took place in Montreal, Quebec – was limited by time and financial constraints. This led us to do the study some 3 weeks after the event and could only include a limited number of children (4 girls and 5 boys, ages 9 to 12). Despite these constraints, the results of the face-to-face in-depth interviews allow for an interesting understanding of children's exposure to news programs on television.

Methodology

This qualitative study was conceived with a scaffolding approach. First children were asked to spontaneously draw what the recent events in Japan meant for them and to describe their drawings afterwards. Then, in-depth interviews were conducted covering the following points:

how children learned about these events, how they felt toward the images and the information they received, what they learned or would have liked to learn and their interest in a television news program created for children of their age.

Quebec's TV news programs

Although there have been in Quebec a few children's TV news programs in the past such as *Le Petit Journal* (which ended in 2004) and RDI junior (on the air from 2000 to 2009) at this moment, French-speaking children in Quebec have no news programs devoted specifically to them. Currently, in terms of traditional TV media, children must almost exclusively rely on information sources dedicated first to an adult audience.

The events that occurred in Japan were predominant in Quebec's media headlines for the weeks following the March 11th 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Hence, Japan and its related topics easily reached the news story ranking's highest position according to Influence Communication Media Prominence Score¹ for the week following the event (9.36%). During the week of March 8th, this story's presence in the news was well above the general average (4.30% over the last nine months) and even more present than news concerning the Arab Spring (3.85%). However, compared with Haiti's January 12th 2010 earthquake, Japan's disasters occupied a smaller place in the media (21.83% for Haiti vs. 9.36% for Japan).

Results

As described above, children were asked to draw whatever came to their minds with regard to the events that

happened in Japan. Children were very conscientious about their drawings, taking several minutes to think about what the recent events in Japan meant to them. For example, in **figure 1**, the young girl chose to illustrate the tsunami by drawing a large amount of water covering buildings and trees. Waves and flowing leaves, branches and flower petals are illustrated in the water's strong currents. **Figure 2** contains both the earthquake and the tsunami: while the first one tears down buildings and houses, the second one swallows everything in its path. Unlike in figure 1, scared people are running away from the city. **Figure 3** is one of the most interesting we encountered because of the two very distinct elements it contains. On the right, we find a building where people seem trapped and are screaming for help, while on the left, a huge wave is descending upon the building, with a person surfing on it. This is the only drawing that included a humorous element. Finally, **figure 4** is very detailed and portrays the consequences of the earthquake and the tsunami. Hence, the boy drew a collapsing house, a boat brought into the city by strong currents, a car turned upside down and an uprooted tree. This is the only one where a rescue plane is drawn and refers to the on-going rescue efforts and the search for survivors, whereas all the other children spoke solely of the dead, wounded and missing people.



Figure 1: Drawing by an 11-year-old girl from Canada

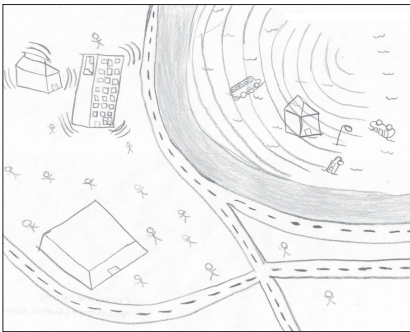


Figure 2: Drawing by an 11-year-old girl

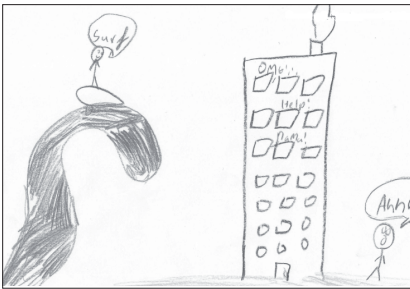


Figure 3: Drawing by a 9-year-old boy



Figure 4: Drawing by an 11-year-old boy

In the end, however, the drawings appear strikingly similar on a few points. For example, none of the children chose to draw a scene involving themselves, such as how they heard of the disaster or what impact it had on them. For these children, the events that occurred in Japan were

synonymous with earthquake, tsunami and the destruction of buildings, all of which are easily identifiable in all drawings. As a matter of fact, half of the drawings represented the events in themselves and the other half, the consequences. Surprisingly, some children even managed to draw the earthquake itself. We also noted the complete absence of references to nuclear plants in the drawings. This subject will be discussed later.

The interviews

In the structured interview part of our study, we inquired about the children's sources of information, their interest in the news and their opinion regarding the possibility of having a television news program created for them.

Children's sources of information

When children were asked what their sources of information were regarding these specific events, television was the most mentioned. The Internet was also mentioned, but in a serendipity fashion. In fact, three brothers learned about the events in Japan while looking for a new Pokémon game.

Ma (boy, 11 years old): "I was on a website where my video game was supposed to be released and they said that they couldn't release it because of the recent earthquake in Japan. It was a website for my video game..." Moreover, children who mentioned wanting more information automatically thought of the Internet as the best way to find what they were looking for. Although only one child actually did the extra research, it seems obvious for children that the Internet gives quick access to information.

Interest in the news

While candidly speaking with parents before the interviews, they often mentioned to their dismay that their children were not normally interested in the news. This is an impression that was strongly represented during our interviews.

Boy, 11 years old: "I saw it on the news. In the morning, my parents always watch the news [on television]."

Even though most said they sometimes watched the news, explored the Internet or read newspapers, a blatant lack of interest on the topic was easily observable through the little information they had and the few details they knew of the events that occurred in Japan. For example, discussions on nuclear plants never came up spontaneously although it was the topic concerning Japan that received the most coverage (Sartor, 2011). The strongest visual elements such as overturned cars and destroyed buildings naturally attracted their attention more than stationary images of concrete structures, perhaps because of an underestimation of the dangers related to malfunctioning nuclear installations and the absence of shocking images.

A few inaccuracies were also noted. For example, despite the clear instructions stating to draw a picture concerning the recent events of Japan, a girl subsequently referred to the events as occurring in China. She also inverted the cause and the consequence, but corrected her mistake later.

Girl, 11 years old: "There was a tsunami and after that an earthquake. Well, it's the tsunami that caused the earthquake, and after that, it flooded almost all of China."

Interviewer: "Japan?"

Girl, 11 years old: "Yeah, it was Japan. No... Is it China or Japan?"

Interviewer: "It is Japan."

Girl, 11 years old: "Oh, ok. That's it: it flooded almost all of Japan and after... well that's it, it destroyed everything."

The children's discourse often went from mature to childish. The first one was mostly used to state facts, usually heard through sources of information perceived as reliable by children, such

as adults, television or the Internet. The second more childish type of discourse was used when delicate subjects were discussed such as deaths or tragedies. The children thus used certain defense mechanisms to hide their emotional uneasiness.

Girl, 11 years old: “Well, we saw part of a video of Japan. [Her grandfather showed her a video on the Internet.] After the video, they said that many people had disappeared... and that their bodies were not recovered. Therefore, it is like if they had left, like in a boat or something. And, it made me think that it is like if there had been a gust of wind... and most of the people thought this gust of wind was dangerous. So they wanted to run away from it... And some people managed to leave.”

Boy, 9 years old: “I was afraid and I was also sad because I do karate and I want Japan to stay.”

What have children learned?

It seems as though the information children received from various sources about Japan’s earthquake and tsunami was more informative than educational: children seem to have learned very few things from the information they heard on television concerning the Japanese disaster. This may have resulted, amongst other things, from the little information that children retained and by news media’s lack of adapting the content for a younger public.

Several children mentioned that the topic was raised in class. When teachers took the time to explain these phenomena, children were more knowledgeable on the subject and seemed reassured. This supports the idea that an adapted learning environment promotes learning.

Girl, 11 years old: “On the Richter scale, it is often said that starting at 5.9 it starts to do damage. And when I studied it, we said that 8.9

was much worse and that it destroyed everything.”

Girl, 11 years old: “Before, when there was an earthquake or things like that, I thought it was by magic [...], but after I learned how it was made and I started to like that.”

What about a kids’ show?

All of the interviewed children appeared interested in a news program created and dedicated to them. They even suggested some relevant content, saying that they wanted to be able to compare what happened in Japan with other similar events. They also wanted more statistical information, such as the magnitude of the earthquake or the number of deaths.

Boy, 11 years old: “Information like [...], how many people survived or died and what particular regions the tsunami destroyed.”

Boy, 9 years old: “Things that happened like what was the worst earthquake, the worst tsunami and the worst nuclear explosion.”

Being able to make external connections and situating the events on a larger scale seemed very important to them. In fact, all except one made a connection between Japan’s events and the ones that occurred recently in Haiti. They were even able to tell us which of these two disasters was the worst according to them.

Interviewer: “And which one affected you most and why?”

Boy, 11 years old: “I think Haiti because that country already didn’t have a lot of money, while in Japan they have more money, they are more prepared for this, but in Haiti they have nothing, they weren’t prepared for any of this.”

The important Haitian community present in Quebec could explain the fact that children referred to Hai-

ti almost automatically; therefore, children may have felt closer to the consequences of this disaster. This reaffirms the importance for children’s news programs to put greater emphasis on links and comparisons to events that have or can affect children in their personal lives.

Conclusion

The various elements and examples presented in this article depict the minimal involvement these children put in discovering and learning about such events and their rapid loss of interest when it comes to the news. In light of our research, we would opt for a triangulation approach when it comes to creating a news program for children. A children’s television news program can draw their attention and interest to certain issues but this would not suffice. Linking this content in the schools would therefore be important. Also, knowing that the Internet seems such a natural source of information for the 9 to 12-year-olds we interviewed, producing short news videos or articles adapted to their level of comprehension and posting them on a web platform could be a most appropriate thing to do. We believe that creating a web platform permitting children to access information at any given time might keep them away from more unreliable sources of information, better explain various phenomena and give them sufficient basis to become well informed citizens. ■

NOTES

¹ “The Media Prominence Score is a quantitative indicator that measures the space devoted to an individual or news items in a given context” (*Influence Communication* 2010).

² http://www.journalism.org/numbers_report/japan_coverage_it's_all_nuclear Startor, Tricia. „Project for Excellence in Journalism“, 67% - Amount of Japan coverage focused on possible nuclear danger, April 20, 2011, http://www.journalism.org/numbers_report/japan_coverage_it's_all_nuclear.

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