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Newsround

Children's BBC coverage of the Iraq War 2003

The BBC children's news programme reported daily about the war events. Self-imposed guidelines enabled the channel to reach a responsible coverage of the war.

Newsround was the world's first dedicated news programme for children. It started in 1972 broadcasting just twice a week. It now broadcasts six times a day, across three different UK channels (BBC1, BBC2, and the CBBC Digital Channel). Here are the programme objectives and values, which we aim to incorporate in all our broadcasting:

- *Newsround* aims to be the first and premier source of news for children.
- We aim to find and deliver news that matters to children in a way that is interesting, engaging and easy to understand.
- We aim to equip children to handle their lives better by giving them the information they need about the world around them, in the way that they want.
- *Newsround* values: child-led first-class journalism, in-touch, reliable, creative, approachable, relevant, clear, entertaining, empowers children and furthers understanding.

Newsround guidelines for the coverage of the war

These values helped inform the way we approached our coverage of the war. We also issued specific war

guidelines in advance of the conflict. We took, for example, extreme care with casualty reporting because the first estimates are usually wrong (September 11th started with much higher figures than were confirmed). Where casualties were concerned we avoided starting an intro with "numbers". Children watching in the morning were still having their breakfast and had been watching *XChange* when we came on the air. With the biggest UK troops deployment for decades there would also be a lot of worried kids in the audience with family/relatives in the Gulf. So rather than "Hello, ten British soldiers have been killed in ..." it was better to have something like "Hello, and among the top stories from the Gulf War are new reports of British soldiers being killed in the fighting. This morning the Ministry of Defence said that ten soldiers died when ...". "Represent the Muslim community fairly" was another guideline. The community is diverse and does not have "one voice or one view". So we avoided phrases such as "British Moslems say ...". We also tried to get the "tone" of a story right: We did not use the term "our soldiers" – we used "British soldiers" instead. We referred to Saddam Hussein with both names – rather than just Saddam. We avoided "excitement" over hardware in packages (a note for the boys there ...), we always checked and double checked that facts were correct as it was more important to be correct than first with an update. Additionally, we practised careful use of distressing images and avoided emotive lan-

guage. We also considered how much and when we covered the war – weeks of wall to wall coverage from us would have been a turn-off. Where possible we led our viewers out of the war reports with other news (which was admittedly difficult in the early days). We also pointed towards the web for extra information and more background – it was also a place where children were able to express their concerns and see that they probably shared worries with other children, which in its own way was reassuring.

Re-assuring children

Our war coverage also tried to be reassuring to children here about the possible impact on their lives. Despite the war, children still went to school, visited friends, and carried on with their lives. We also had to bear in mind the children who had family fighting in the Gulf, and also children who had relatives in Iraq and neighbouring countries. There were several ways of being re-assuring – by allowing children to share their experiences, and also supporting all our TV broadcasting with further explanation and views on our website. *Newsround* also made three interactive programmes (before, during and after the war) which included children's debate, and a further opportunity for children to ask questions. As the war progressed we were commissioned to make an extra bulletin in the mornings for BBC2, so a new audience of children could find out what the latest

news was in the most appropriate way. We took part in the BBC's "Iraq Day" just before the war started, and used this as an opportunity to explain how the UK had come to the brink of a new war. As part of this programme we commissioned a special survey about children's views towards the war, which included the following results. Hundreds of children throughout Britain were asked certain questions about this war – and there was one clear result: More than 8 out of 10 of the children did not want a war with Iraq. In fact only 1 in 10 of the children did think the UK should go to war. When asked what worried them most about this war half of the children said that they were afraid of attacks in the UK. About a third of them were concerned that the war would spread to other countries.

We also wanted to know whether this war would affect people from different communities living in the UK. Nearly 7 in 10 children thought it would make things worse, but 2 in 10 did not think that it would make a difference.

Techniques of war reporting

We incorporated several regular techniques during the reporting of the war:

- One of our reporters gave the audience regular updates on the progress of the war from the studio each day. We did not have anyone in the region during the war but we did use other BBC correspondents.
- We answered children's questions on the war.
- We had supplementary material and guides on our website.
- We read out a range of children's views by e-mail.
- We represented a range of children's views from across the UK, from different communities in the UK, and also children's views from across the world.



Newsround reporter with children in Baghdad after the war

Despite the importance of the war as a news item, we started to cover other news around the UK and the world as a way of bringing some balance into children's lives.

- http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/chat/your_comments/newsid_2928000/2928473.stm
- http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/uk/newsid_2333000/2333893.stm

After the war

After the war *Newsround* sent a small team to Iraq to make a special documentary on the effects of the conflict on the children who live there. *Newsround* has continued to cover the aftermath of the conflict, including the attacks on coalition troops, Iraqi children returning to school, and the debate in the UK over the "justification" for going to war.

The programme has received a lot of positive media reports on the way it handled the challenge of reporting the conflict to children. There were several articles in the press and staff from the programme took part in radio broadcasts which explored the issue of explaining the war to children.

Here are some guides from our website:

- http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/static/find_out/specials/iraq/html/default.stm

THE AUTHOR

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