

Dafna Lemish

Preparing for war

Israeli children's television in times of war

Prior to the war, television producers in Israel had worked intensely on planning for the Iraq War, not least of all because the outbreak of a war in Israel was deemed to be just as possible. In view of the great experience with crisis situations of this kind, broadcasting stations were well prepared and tried, on the one hand, to find a way of informing their young television audience about the war but, on the other, of conveying something approaching normality and everyday life.

Months before the breakout of war in Iraq, Israeli television stations prepared themselves for various war scenarios. Past experience of broadcasting during major crises has resulted in an accumulated expertise in preparing for war. In particular, the circumstances in 2003 resembled those of the period leading up to the Gulf War of 1990 (Tidhar & Lemish, 1994). Hence, beginning in the fall of 2002 when President Bush's threat of a war became concrete, the Israeli broadcast media were faced with the challenge of planning and preparing for coverage of a war that might or might not take place. Unlike the situations leading to previous wars, there were many uncertainties: would Israel become involved in the war? If so, would it actively join the allied forces or would it be left outside the conflict altogether?

Each alternative called for a totally different orientation and plan of ac-

tion on the part of the media. Accumulated experience from previous wars focussed media attention on battle zones at the frontiers. In such war situations, the media fulfilled three central functions – providing information, commentaries, and tension release (Peled & Katz, 1974).

As was the case prior to the 1991 Gulf War, the media in Israel reported politicians' claims that Iraq possessed non-conventional weapons – such as biological, chemical, and even atomic warheads – and was able and prepared to attack civilian populations. At the same time, there was also a possibility that Israel's hostile neighbours as well as terrorist organisations might take advantage of the situation to attack Israel. Facing such a complicated and uncertain reality, the broadcast media were faced with a significant burden and responsibility: how should a television or radio station effectively prepare itself for the unknown?

The needs of the child audience during a time of possible war were the particular focus of three television channels that attract the majority of the youth target audience in Israel: (a) the Israeli Educational Television Center (IETC) – a public channel sharing the airwaves with the Israeli Broadcasting Authority (IBA); (b) the Children's Channel (CH 6) – a private cable channel geared towards children of all ages, with a focus on elementary school pupils; and (c) HOP! – a private cable channel, aimed at a young audience of 2- to 7-year-olds, with a declared ideology of providing an educational, "safe television environment". None of the

three channels carries commercials. During the second week of April 2003, shortly after the invasion of Iraq by the American forces, I conducted in-depth interviews with the following directors of programming of these stations:

- (a) AD of the educational station – an experienced television man in his 50s who has been with the station for 30 years and served in a variety of roles, all the way up to his current position.
- (b) KZ of Channel 6 – a woman in her 30s who has been with the channel for a decade, climbing the ladder from script-writer to programme editor and up to her current role of director of programming.
- (c) AA of HOP! – a woman in her 40s who has been one of the co-owners and directors of the station since its establishment in 1998 and who has a professional background in educational media.

All three have close contact with children and their media needs, including variously aged children of their own. According to the interviewees, prep-



The two hosts of the show (on the left) and two experts answer children's call-in questions (Channel 6).

arations for broadcasting before and during the war centred around two main concerns – logistics and contents. While the bulk of the discussion below will focus on the content of children's television facing the war, I will refer first to the former concern.

Logistics

Based on past experience, all three stations were declared by the national authorities to be "vital enterprises". This emergency status allows smooth operation should a war break out. All three stations prepared stocks of videotapes of programmes for children, to be aired non-stop in case of an emergency. The possibility of direct damage to the stations themselves, as well as the potential inability of personnel to travel to work, resulted in the preparation of alternative broadcasting facilities and the storing of duplicates of videotapes in a variety of locations.

For example, IETC which is owned by the government and broadcasts to each home in the country, is the biggest media operation of the three, the veteran (30 years), and has the widest audience of all of the stations. This station's emergency preparation routines include organisation for use of their special anti-nuclear bomb shelter; preparing lists of limited shifts of personnel allowed in that shelter; and reviewing operations in advance of a takeover – or destruction – of the station by enemy forces. In addition, the station has to be prepared for periodic takeovers of their airwaves by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) for the purpose of providing civil defense instructions, sounding alarms, and the like. All of the station's personnel received clear instructions regarding their various roles should a war erupt.

All three interviewees felt confident that they had the logistics of their operation under control, and therefore devoted most of their remarks in the



Israeli family preparing their home for the war (Channel 6).

interview to discussing content-related issues.

Content

Facing the special needs of the child audience during a time of national crisis is not a novel experience, even for the two younger stations. The many emergencies created by the wave of suicide-bombers in the last three years have forced the programme directors to revise their own programming schedules on an almost daily basis. During their interviews they explained several major programming dilemmas that they were facing with the pending war and shared their decision-making processes as well as the action taken.

a) To violate or not to violate the routine?

Finding the appropriate balance between maintaining a broadcast routine and addressing the harsh reality of children's lives seemed to present the greatest challenge to all three broadcasters. "[...] we have been going through this for several years now ... this is something that we are forced to take into account. I think that in the last year and a half we consolidated a kind of a way, that we feel is the right one, where we walk steadily on a very thin line between providing information, clarification, treatment and at the same time maintaining a normal life as a broadcasting institution", explained KZ of CH6. This

dilemma was perceived as an even greater challenge by the director of HOP! AA explained: "We really deliberated hard because of our age group as we felt that the thing that the parents most like about HOP! is that it is a channel that protects children and maintains the routine. Therefore, the question of how and how much to violate the broadcast routine became a very problematic one for us ... it was like shooting ourselves in the foot as a channel that offers a protective routine. But on the other hand, we felt the anxiety in the public, and we felt it wouldn't be appropriate not to give it some kind of voice. We felt that, should we ignore the issue, we would be opening up too much of a gap between the environment created by the broadcasts and the experience that the children have through their family or their preschool."

All three directors felt that the national situation on the eve of the war with Iraq left them no choice but to make changes in their broadcasting routines, as children of all ages were directly exposed to the threat of war (see Lemish in this issue). In search of clear criteria for violating the routine, they stated that this would occur if there was either a major disturbance in children's own real life routines (e.g. closed schools) or a major terrorist attack that took many lives and was broadcast live on all television stations. AD of the IETC explained: "We felt that it was a national emergency situation, similar to the case of the Dolphinarium bombing [one of the most severe suicide attacks in a sea-shore club that took the lives of many partying teenagers]. Then we felt that youth and children were experiencing a very difficult trauma and we had to refer to it somehow ... During the Gulf War we opened an emergency studio because there was no school. This time, too, we opened it because during the first day of the war only 20 % of children went to school, 50 % the following day and 60 % the third day" [although



Fig. 1: The host explaining to the children how to use the gas mask (HOP!).

schools were officially instructed to remain open, many parents were too concerned about their children's safety to send them to school].

At the same time, all three interviewees repeated that they see their role as being that of an island of sanity and normality for the children, a place to escape to from the unbearable tension around them, a place where they can be left "to grow up in peace" (CH6) in a "protected environment" (HOP!).

b) What do children need?

Once a decision was made to adjust to the national situation, the directors were challenged with a host of smaller dilemmas regarding the appropriate balance between routine and war. First was a search to identify the special needs that children might have at a time of potential war and to seek out ways to best satisfy them.

The most obvious need of all was to keep children safe and busy at home, so that they would be close to adults and to shelters, tuned in to emergency information, and away from the unprotected streets. "[...] we felt that we were serving as a 'baby-sitter' and as an emergency medium for transmitting information for the children at home in case of an emergency," explained AD of the IETC. Thinking of creative ways to keep children busy was also part of the CH6 agenda: "We prepared a million possible scripts of what could happen. ... you know, we are sitting in the sealed rooms for hours, so one needs to prepare things

that can be done in the sealed room, otherwise the children will be pestering their parents all day long and driving them mad, so they need all kinds of games, and riddles, and interactive activities ...," related ZK.

Clearly, all three directors realised their significant potential for satisfying other crucial needs besides baby-sitting. Children were at home, but they needed more from TV than the sounding of an alarm in case of a missile attack. They needed help in dealing with the tension, and avenues to relieve anxiety. As a form of managing fear and maintaining their well-being, they also needed responses to their many practical questions. These two functions – relaxation and information – that may seem contradictory at first glance, were viewed as being strongly intertwined by the interviewees.

The various ways for handling the situation developed by the three stations differed according to the age of their target audience, previous experience, personal preferences, and the like.

IETC went on air during the first few days of the war with a "live studio" format that wrapped the regular programmes with a host of live segments with experts, call-ins, news reports, specially produced items about the defense during a war situation, fear management, and the like.

HOP! produced 16 special short items, employing the channel's familiar actors and puppets to deal with young children's anxieties and questions about the war. Children received legitimisation for their questions and concerns (e. g. Where will I pee in the shelter? Why are my parents edgy and impatient? What is the gas mask for?) as well as some empowerment (e. g. suggesting ideas for decorating the shelter, practising the use of their gas mask – see Fig. 1 and 2).

In case the school system were to close CH6 prepared a very elaborate plan, including a full line-up of programmes and items that dealt with

psychological and practical issues, news briefs about the war, as well as many ideas for arts and crafts that could occupy children at home. They devoted some airtime to the use of gas masks at the same time that the population at large received instructions to open their protection kits and to start practising wearing them. In addition, their children's news programme, broadcast daily in the afternoon, devoted more of its time to war-related issues.

c) How much is too much?

While clearly the need to keep children busy, relaxed and informed seemed to be shared by all, finding the delicate balance between these special efforts and the regular broadcasting schedule was a major issue. Yes, children need to be informed – but how much is too much? KZ of CH6 explained how they developed their policy: "We try to give information to the children, to say what happened, but not to show atrocities. To give them in a relatively dry manner what they want to understand [...] we had our hosts visit children in the classrooms and talk to them about the security situation, and they listened to them and asked their advice. [...] and the children said in an unequivocal way – 'we want to know, and we want that after you have told us, briefly, what's happening, that you should go back and broadcast the regular programmes that we like and the sched-



Fig. 2: The two puppets Alik and Balik practising the use of gas masks together with the host (HOP!).

ule that we are used to'." Similarly, in retrospect, AD of IETC concluded that breaking the regular broadcasts for news reports geared to the entire family was a mistake. "It's dangerous to broadcast an emergency news report when there isn't an emergency [...] it can create anxiety."

Concerned about the well-being of her young audience AA of HOP! reached a different conclusion: explanations to a young audience need to be appropriate to their needs and abilities. "[...] explaining is like a hot potato, and you are afraid that you will cause more damage. But today I feel more certain that you can be beneficial if you do it very cautiously [...] in this age group you can provide very naïve comfort. I can look at a young child in the eyes and say: 'I am sure it will be O.K., things happen in war time, but I am sure you will be O.K.' [...] yes, we gave legitimisation to our staff to tell children: 'Yes, we have a strong army and policemen who know what to do, and fire fighters'."

Similarly, children were encouraged to use television as a means of expression for their anxieties – by calling in to speak to experts in the studio; writing to the stations' internet sites, even appearing on air.

Would too much dwelling on fear instigate it rather than reduce it? And what about the children who were handling their anxieties well? KZ from CH6 added a concern of hers:

"We always have this feeling that the more we go over this, the more we give the children the feeling that in order to be on television for their voices to be heard ... maybe we are contributing to escalating things that didn't necessarily happen in that intensity to the children."

Post script

In the end, since Israel was not attacked by Iraq, CH6 ended up not executing their plans; HOP! broadcast some of the special segments for a few days, and then discontinued this practice; and IETC closed their special live studio after three days. The many hours spent in preparation for a war that did not happen were wasted, and the many dilemmas that they struggled with, addressed briefly in these pages, were not resolved. Unfortunately, all interviewees shared the feeling that this was not the last time that they would be faced with such dilemmas.

Clearly this initial study indicated that programme directors believed that television has a crucial role for children in wartime. The directors' planning included consideration of difficult social and psychological issues; external circumstances; the general national atmosphere as well as the particular age groups, and their familial and social needs. We can only hope that they will not need to face these challenges again in the future.

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