

The international Free Press Unlimited WADADA News for Kids

A CONVERSATION WITH JAN-WILLEM BULT*

What is WADADA News for Kids?

Bult: WADADA is a mission and a global cooperation. It supports media outlets around the world in developing tailor-made news for kids. Originally, it was a television project. But today it is a cross-media project that focuses on news, opinions, and stories from the perspective of young people. The core is to develop knowledge, to exchange materials and to establish news for kids in different countries.

What is the age group you want to reach?

Bult: We focus on older children, which generally would be 8 to 12 years old or up to 13/14. It still varies per country, as each country has its own elementary school age range and platforms with different approaches, channels, etc. for different age groups. But the core target group is older children. In some countries, however, there was a need to focus on teens or adolescents.

How has the project developed over the years?

Bult: In 2004, it was originally called *Kids News Network*, and was exclusively spread across developing countries. In 2014, after my arrival, we relaunched it under a new name – *WADADA News for Kids* – with a new vision, a new approach, and with very strict editorial guidelines, basic training, and a certain didactical approach. Since then we have established news for kids on the main platforms and main channels in 21 countries worldwide. Some of them aren't producing anymore because it is

always difficult to continue the funding, especially under changing governments.

How is the project funded?

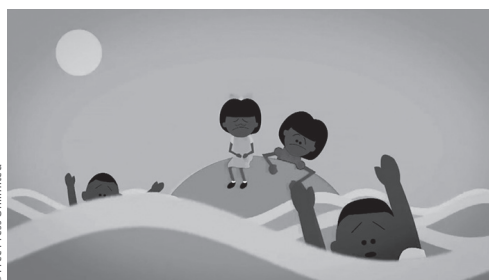
Bult: Originally, Free Press Unlimited used to find central funding for its policy, in which certain countries were named, and then divided it among those countries. But from the very beginning, I always wanted to have local or regional funding in order to create more commitment. For instance, production in Ukraine was funded by its local UNICEF office, production in Argentina by its state channel, and in Montenegro by its local UNICEF office, local media regulator and public channel. The COVID-19 pandemic had a really devastating effect. It is like the flow of a wave, production is going up and down. But the most important thing is that those people who were involved in establishing news for children or youth in their countries – even though the program may have died because of political changes or whatever – have become “ambassadors” and will carry on the ideas and work to bring the program back again.

What is the goal of the project?

Bult: One of the goals of Free Press Unlimited, the NGO that is behind *WADADA News for Kids*, is to give children and youth an equal position in media. Equal position means that they are offered tailor-made news, but also that they can express themselves in the news. In some lucky cases like Montenegro and South Africa we have even been able to integrate young people into the process of creation, production and distribution of news for children.

But it is still adult journalists that develop the news for children or youth?

Bult: Yes and no. Journalists know about journalism and ethics in journalism, which demands a lot of study and life experience. Journalism is a profession. And journalism for children or young people demands specific skills in writing, visualizing, editing, presenting. On the other hand, young people are very good at knowing what topics are important for them or for children, at making media, social media, and at distributing through social media. We work on integrating youth media groups and youth reporter groups into the editorial room of news for youth as well as news for children. In the end, the journalists work together as equals with young people to produce and distribute news for young people or children. UNICEF in Montenegro, for instance, has already trained a group of teenage reporters (see also Djurović in this issue). So when we started to build the newsroom it was a big advantage to integrate them.



Ill. 1: WADADA News for Kids: Explanations instead of iconic photos (here: dangerous migration route across the Mediterranean Sea from Africa to Europe)

That sounds like a win-win situation.

Bult: Yes. The participating countries win on various levels: they promote media literacy, produce good information and foster knowledge and respect for children and childhood. The result could be a traditional television news item, a typical square Instagram video, or a vertical TikTok. Young people think very much in terms of crossing media platforms.

In Argentina, for instance, the news program changed from a weekly traditional half-hour TV news magazine (*Alta Noticia*) to daily 5-minute news flashes (*Paka Data*).

What are the typical topics of WADADA News for Kids?

Bult: The answer is very simple: urgent and relevant. All the things that are essential for children's lives. From the perspective of children, a lot of mainstream news is difficult for them to process. News for children can make these things understandable for them. Besides that, children and their perspective should be represented in news programs, too. To put it bluntly: The mainstream news programs are only interested in kids when they are victims or criminals. But news dedicated to kids comes from their perspective, is about their lives, even though it's not sensational. For example, it might take children's rights as a pillar for a story – not necessarily as a subject itself, but as a starting point for stories that are related, for instance, to their health, education, or safety, so they can be well-informed and make their own choices. Another important pillar is the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals, because this generation will suffer if we don't meet the SDGs. Again, not necessarily as a subject but as a way of looking for stories about children with regard to their relationship to nature, energy, etc.

How do you deal with difficult issues like death, war, murder etc.?

Bult: Basically, for an adult it is difficult to make any topic suitable for children



Ill. 2: Exchanging footage and offering youth glimpses into other children's living environments

(smiles). The first thing I want people who work on a news program to think about is: "Am I thinking about this subject because it was in the main news? Am I following the same hype?"

For instance, when the news tells about a child that is raped and murdered. All the main news programs with their cameras gather in front of the family's house etc. You also want to be there because it's about kids. But the first question you have to ask yourself is: "Is this really news now?" Or is this a problem that was already there, that kids are murdered? How big is the problem, how many kids are murdered? In our editorial guidelines for the program we suggest addressing the safety and security of children regularly. Then you depend less on news hype because you have set the agenda yourself.

Could you please explain this in more detail?

Bult: Take, for instance, the Alan Kurdi case. The little Syrian boy drowned on the beach in Turkey. Everybody published that iconic photo without hesitation. But I decided not to show it in WADADA. Why? Because we were regularly talking about refugees and we explained the situation that people were drowning (Ill. 1). Our audience already knew that these things were happening. So we didn't need a striking image to address the topic. I said at that moment: "Our audience, which is regularly well-informed, can understand this image and can relativize that this is not something that just happened once and now for the first time, it is

happening today and it has happened frequently in recent years. The photo doesn't give any new information."

What is the biggest misunderstanding you are confronted with?

Bult: One thing that I often hear when we establish news for kids is: "So now kids can give their opinions on screen and talk

about everything." No, not at all! This is not what I mean by "Children in the Centre". We will only ask them for their opinion when they are well-informed or when they are the source of information, for instance their experiences. If you ask children about something which they are not well-informed about, you can get stupid answers or they reproduce the opinion of adults around them. But I don't want any kid to be fooled. If the children have their own opinion based on knowledge and experience then yes, please integrate the kids as much as you can, their opinions, their ideas, and their creativity – then adults can also learn from their perspective.

How can you become a member of WADADA News for Kids?

Bult: Being a member has many advantages, e.g., to have the WADADA brand as a label, the editorial and production guidelines and support, the quality training, the network, the knowledge and experience around you, the exchange of materials etc. All that a partner has to do in return is pay a small entry fee (which gives access to hours of materials), share their materials (Ill. 2) and follow the joint principles of journalism. ■

* Jan-Willem Bult is Head of Youth & Media at Free Press Unlimited, Netherlands.

