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Natural Disasters, Media Images and the Role of TV News

Japan has been in the news since the beginning of 2011 for a series of natural disasters, which has affected both the economy of the country and the morale of its people. On the afternoon of March 11, 2011, Japan suffered one of its worst earthquakes in three decades. The devastation caused by earthquake of magnitude 8.9 richter, was made worse by the resulting tsunami. Minutes after the earthquake occurred, the images of devastation flashed across the television screens all over the world. The most common images that were broadcast in the news were the aerial shots of tsunami waves, as high as 23 feet, sweeping cars and houses alike, an erupting volcano, an ablaze oil refinery, and people running for their safety. 6 months later, typhoon Tala and Roke ripped through the west coast of the country, leaving more people, dead and missing. The incident provided TV images similar to those 6 months before, from the damage caused by earthquake and tsunami.

This study was inspired by a concern for the young who watch these images of devastation and despair on the news:

How do children receive these images? What do they make of them? What would make TV news more informative for the young audiences, who will be the architects of our future?

Children, television images and parents:

Despite the proliferation of personalized media into our daily lives, television has remained a mainstay in our living rooms. For the parents of the young children, television viewing is still considered a bonding experience. Oftentimes, television provides the background sounds for leisurely evenings, as children paint or play with their toys. In fact researchers, contrary to the common view that media is a negative influence on children, have advocated using television for enhancing family time (Bryce & Leichter, 1983), and even using events on television to communicate practical knowledge and creating awareness about important issues. *“Media can be used as pro-social resources that promote family interactions that are positive in tone and affect, and that foster bonding and feelings of collaboration and cooperation.”* (Pigeron, 2010). Three trends of media use that emerged from a study based on observing hundred of hours of videotapes on family life are that: media-time can be seen as a platform for physical and emotional connectedness, and as a tool to enter a child’s world, afford quality time, used to promote collaborative activities and the expression of shared interests, and be considered as windows of opportunities for communicating practical knowledge.

However, often news itself, with im-

ages of violence and natural disasters, is distressing for young viewers. A study revealed that more than one third of the 285 parents interviewed reported that their children have been frightened by something in a news story on television (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996). And, there was no significant difference between the number of boys and girls who had had a fright response to news. Among the stories that were the most frequent cause of fear were stories on wars and natural disasters. Although the percentage of children being frightened by news increased from kindergarten to the elemental school years, the tendency to be upset by natural disasters decreased with age. A psychologist in Children’s Hospital Boston’s department of Psychiatry suggests that techniques for helping children process information about natural disasters should vary according to the age group (Underwood, 2011). For children younger than 8 years parents should limit TV viewing to reduce the feeling of helplessness after a disaster, and focus on the family’s security. However, for children between 8-12 years old, parents should talk in more detail about the disaster, paying special attention to the emotions and cognitive development of children that age. Since, preadolescents (8-12) are just beginning to learn and understand empathy, they are likely to have questions about the people affected by the disaster. Therefore



Figure 1: Drawing by Frank, 9



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explaining relief efforts, follow-up programs and options and solutions will reduce that anxiety. Explaining mechanics of natural disasters will make the incidents seem “less frightening and random” (Underwood, 2011). However, for adolescents, parents should turn it around instead and question them what they knew about the specific disaster, and fill-in where the information is missing, and correct it when it is wrong. Overall, assuring security for children and their families remains a significant concern for children of all ages. Television news, when directed towards children, though informative, should always incorporate information on relief and rescue efforts, and follow it with ongoing coverage of the fate of those affected by natural disasters.

Sweden, a country in transition

Sweden, a nation that boasts being disengaged from war for nearly two centuries, has also been a homogeneous society, consisting mostly of people of Scandinavian descent until the recent decades. However, Sweden, a nation known for its high standards of living and generous policies of immigrations, has been welcoming immigrants from various European and non-European countries since the 1970s. Migrants in the early 1970s consisted mainly of refugee migration and family reunification from non-European countries in the

Middle East and Latin America. In the 1990s, Sweden accepted thousands of refugees from former Yugoslavia. Currently, about 12 percent of Sweden’s population is foreign born. The demographic, linguistic, and cultural change that the immigration had initiated is just beginning to surface, as Swedish population seems less homogeneous, and considers Swedish as only “one” of its mother tongues. The voting instructions on ballots for elections of 2010 were written in 11 languages, addressing citizens whose first language is not Swedish. Unlike many other European nations that encourage assimilation, Sweden proudly promotes multiculturalism, thus allowing immigrants to hold on their culture, as they absorb both Swedish language and some values.

The study and the sample

This study is a preliminary attempt to gather children and youth’s perception of TV news coverage about a series of natural disasters that struck Japan in 2011. The participants, between the ages of 7-14 years, were also asked to share their sources of information about news events, and any suggestions they may have for television producers to make the programming more informative and educational.

Thirty questionnaires each were distributed in Karlstad, Sweden, a mid-size town with about 80,000 residents, and Stockholm, the country’s capital. The questionnaires were created both

in English and Swedish and participants were given the choice to select the language of their preference. The response rate was very low. Six children from each location responded. Although the study sample is relatively small to be conclusive about the interaction of young audiences with TV news, the findings did reveal some facts worth noticing. All the children who responded in Karlstad were Swedes, whereas all those from Stockholm were either children from mixed marriage, or first generation Swedish children of Indian and Sri Lankan descent. Although a convenient sample, this difference of ethnicity and race also reflects a fast growing non-European population in Sweden.

Since some interviewees were very young, they were given the choice between filling the questionnaire themselves or dictating to an adult. Participants filled the questionnaire in the presence of their parents, or friends of their parents who were known to them. For all the Swedish participants, at least one Swedish-speaking adult was present to assist. Participants were provided with colors and sheets to draw, and allowed, as much time they needed. Not all the students chose to make a drawing. The questionnaires answered in Swedish were translated into English for analysis.

Results and analysis

Despite the small sample size some meaningful trends emerged from the

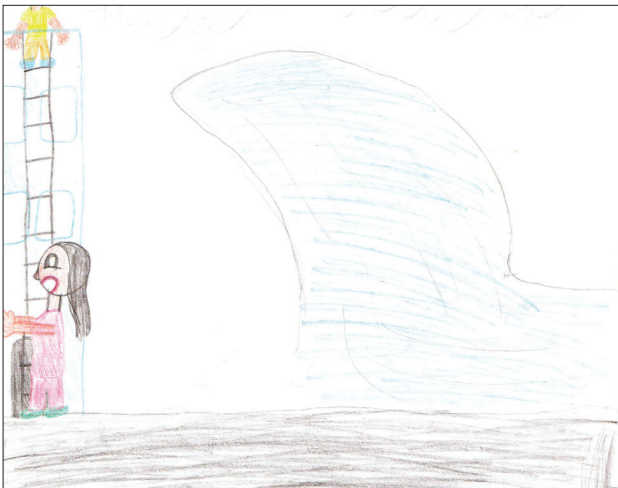


Figure 1: Drawing by Frank, 9

study. First, not only was the vocabulary used by the participants consistent with each other, it was also consistent with commentary that accompanied news stories about the tsunami in Japan on SVT, the Swedish TV, implying that children watched TV news. The most common responses to “What is happening in Japan right now?” were, “An earthquake, a large tsunami, electricity blew up, a volcano erupted, a large wave.”

All except one of the participants, who was too shy to respond, stated that television (primarily SVT) was the primary source of their knowledge about the tsunami in Japan. Children often directly referred to *Lilla Aktuellt*, (Little Current), the only news targeted towards children between 8-12 years of age, as their source of information. The show which is produced jointly by the SVT (Swedish TV) and UR (Swedish Public Broadcasting) is aired once daily, and also makes the shows available on its website for up to a year following the airdate.

It is no surprise then that most of the images drawn by the children were also consistent with those provided on SVT’s news coverage. The most frequent images drawn by children were of water, houses, and people, followed by a block-like tower that could either be a nuclear reactor, oil refine-

ry or a volcano and all of which were drawn in red and yellow, symbolizing fire or a flame (see figures 1-3). The difference between what the children thought was happening in Japan and what they would like to see was mainly that the images in the latter were cleaner without devastation. This indicates children’s need for

a restored order, or at least to understand what happened not just shortly after the disaster struck, but months later, after the rescuing efforts. In their interviews children expressed a desire to see, “all well” in Japan. In one case, a girl of 9 drew people being rescued, as a response to what she would like to see on TV, with regards to the events in Japan (see figure 4). As expected, the two 14-years-old, simply wrote “a movie/documentary about Japan.” Adolescents are at a stage where they have questions and are looking for answers, and a way to understand the world around them. They have longer attention spans and can understand complex concepts through a documentary that gives a detailed account of what happened in Japan, the reasons for disaster and current state of the affected areas and the people.

In addition, the participants, both in Karlstad and Stockholm, emphasized that the events in Japan lasted a few days, which is a response to repeated coverage on television for a few days. Although not a focus of the study, it is important to indicate that both the parents of the most articulate children had post graduate degrees. It was these children who also stated watching the text version of SVT’s program for children. With regards to discussion about the topic with others

or in school, only the children of the most educated parents gave elaborate answers, confirming the crucial role that parental education plays in how children perceive and understand television news. Most children stated that the events in Japan were not explicitly discussed in their class at school, and some stated that their parents talked to them about the news event. There was also a mention of sharing notes on the disaster with friends and siblings. When asked what the program explained well, most children did not have anything specific to say, but two distinct responses from the children with parents with high education were “nuclear accident” and “how big and dangerous the tsunami was.”

Although none of the children expressed direct fear, some children did share some concerns about images they watched on the news. Echoing the findings of earlier studies that have established that young children are frightened by images of natural disasters, children in this study stated that “what happened in Japan was horrible” and that “I have decided not to live there.”

When asked what they would like to see explained better, most of the children stated, “exactly how many people died in the tsunami”, “what happened to the houses that got swept away and where did people sleep when they lost their homes”.

In response to what an earthquake is, the children younger than 12 years used a few words that indicated that they had a rough understanding. Since the information and images about both earthquake and tsunami were covered in the same news story, some children were confused between the two. Words used to describe an earthquake were, “when the ground shakes, when lava and waves come, a large crack in the earth that blows everything up, when a volcano erupts”. This might be due to the absence of discussions about the topic with an adult at home or school or it might be a factor of the age. However,

one 9-year-old, repeating the language used in television news, linked the two and stated that “the earthquake caused the tsunami”.

However, the same 2 children who responded with details to other questions and also indicated following SVT text articulately stated, “one plate goes up and the other plate goes down.” These children also responded very clearly to what a tsunami and nuclear reactor are, a question that both the 14-year-olds failed to respond to. A response of “a nuclear reactor produces electricity” was quite eloquent for a nine-year-old girl, both of whose parents are doctors. Most children were not worried that the tsunami could affect Sweden, but they did think that the nuclear reactors were dangerous; both could be due to images and the accompanying news commentary.

While most children did not have any specific recommendations for what they would like to see on TV in connection to Japan’s disaster, one child, considering the language barrier said, “Those who speak Swedish should explain what those speaking in English are saying.” It is important to mention some of the participants of Indian and Sri Lankan descent, when lost for words in English, wrote in Swedish instead. A 7-year-old whose mother is Swedish and father Indian, stated, “Japan, I think is a place in India” or that she would like to see, “Radha and Krishna”, a reference to Indian Gods on television.”

Summary

The study reiterated and confirmed some concerns shared by previous studies. While television news cannot and should not take a parental role, it can be a very helpful tool in alleviating the anxiety caused in young viewers by images that accompany natural disasters. The children interviewed in the study found the news lacking in providing details and results

Question	Responses in the order of frequency
Most common images drawn in response to “What is happening in Japan?”	Water, trees, houses, stick figures representing people, running, a block that could either be a nuclear reactor or a volcano.
Draw how you imagine the perfect children’s program which explains what has happened in Japan in a good way?	Often children repeated the images drawn for what they saw in Japan, only they were slightly cleaner.
Main source of information on events in Japan	Television news, parents, radio, friends, siblings.
If you talked about Japan in school, do you remember what it specifically was?	The teacher talked about what caused tsunami; the teacher talked about donating money and helping the people.
What did the program explain well?	No answer; the nuclear accident and its dangers; the tsunami was big and dangerous.
What was not explained well? What would you like to learn more about?	Mostly no answer; how many days did the event last; how many people died; where did those evacuated end up living; what happened to the broken houses.
Do you think what has happened there can be or is somehow dangerous for us as well?	No; Yes but no volcano eruption; I asked my teacher and she said it could not happen to us.
Do you know what an earthquake, a tsunami and a nuclear reactor is? (there was a question for each term)	While most children, including the 14-year-old could not explain what a nuclear reactor is, most had something to say about an earthquake and a volcano. However, since images related to both were covered in the same news stories, the younger children were confused between the results of earthquake, tsunami and a volcanic eruption. Many stated that a tsunami was a volcanic eruption or that earthquakes, though they make the earth crack, also cause fire.
When you heard about what has happened in Japan, what did you think?	I was very sorry for those who live there. Yes, feel sorry for them, and would not want to live there. That was horrible. I thought of the poor people. I was shocked and sad for the people there. A day after the happening, my teacher told me about it.

of rescue efforts. Children wanted to know exactly how many days the tsunami lasted, and what happened to those who were directly affected by the events. It is highly recommended for the TV news producers to provide follow up stories periodically to give update on the state of region and people affected by the disaster. Rescue efforts, food drives and other measures taken calm young viewers and help them feel secure about their own situation. Some unintended findings of the study are that children of parents with higher education were more articulate and were less confused about the events. And, the children of non-Scandinavian descent are watching Swedish TV, are multilingual, and consider Swedish their primary language. TV news producers must note, however, that regardless of parents' education, children both in Karlstad, and Stockholm listed TV as their primary source of information. Television news may attempt to bridge the gap in understanding of news events between those with highly educated parents and those with high school or less education. ■

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Furthermore, television can provide an opportunity for parents to discuss moral issues, values, and beliefs (Messaris & Sarrett, 1981).

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