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What Do Children Know? What Do Children Think?

U.S. Children on the News Media Coverage of the 2011 Japan Disasters

Almost two decades ago, famous media studies scholar George Gerbner wrote:

For the first time in human history, children are hearing most of the stories, most of the time, not from their parents or schools or churches or neighbors, but from a handful of global conglomerates... (1994, p. 40)

These are media conglomerates, and their impact on the lives of children around the globe is still on the rise (Calvert, 1999; Lievruow & Livingstone, 2006) for a variety of reasons ranging from an increase in availability and a decrease in price of media devices to a greater burden of parents' work and therefore diminished opportunities for children-parent interactions (Korhonen & Lahikainen, 2008; Nathanson, 2010). Television especially has contributed to exposing children not only to events that can be commonly encountered in their surrounding settings but also to events that are not habitual for their immediate proximity, and not only to issues that can be easily understood by them, but also to issues that are not readily comprehensible for them (Buckingham, 2000; Götz, Lemish, Aidman, & Moon, 2005). The ways in which children view the world, and the ways in which children come to articulate the relationship between self and world (Korhonen & Lahikai-

nen, 2008, p. 148), are often mediated through television news, and these interconnections have led scholars to formulate the concept of "mediated childhood" (Livingstone, 1998).

Although the media provide a means for children to find out about what happens closer to them or farther away from them, as well as a framework for children to interpret what happens, "children tend to be marginalized by the news media" (Joseph, 2007, p. 289). Children are rarely mentioned in the news reports, and when they appear in such news stories it is in postures of victims of crimes, for example in cases of murdered children or missing children. Children's voices are almost never present on television (Goonasekera, Huang, Eashwar, & Guntaro, 2000), as children are very rarely directly interviewed or indirectly quoted by reporters, even in cases of events that pertain directly to them such as launching a film for young audiences (Joseph, 2007). The idea that "children barely figure on the radar of the news media" is supported not only by "the conspicuous absence of children" either as characters or as speakers in news reporting (Joseph, 2007, p. 189), but also by the low percentage in numerous nations on all continents of children's programming that is information-oriented rather than entertainment-oriented (Lemish, 2007; Asamen, Ellis, & Berry, 2008; Bryant, 2009).

Starting from these observations, that

the media affect children's views, yet the media (in particular television news) rarely reference or take into account children's voices, the present article aims at conveying children's views and voices in regards to mediated events and issues. The article examines specifically opinions of children in the United States in reference to the ways in which media accessed by them depicted the events (earthquake, tsunami, and threat of nuclear meltdown) occurring in eastern Japan in March 2011. In prompting children to discuss and to draw what they know about the events that happened in Japan in 2011, how they learned about these events, and what roles the media (especially television) played in their understanding of these events, the two researchers pursuing this study hoped to hear not what various other key players such as producers, parents, or scholars want, but what children want. In uncovering U.S. children's perspectives on the mediatization of the 2011 Japan events, the researchers strived both to document what children think about media coverage of such events and to forge a space where documenting what children think becomes a legitimate scholarly (and mediatic) endeavor.

The data discussed in this article was gathered through a questionnaire administered to 183 preadolescent children in the United States, 100 children from a large city in the central area

of the U.S. and 83 children from a midsize city on the West coast of this country. Study participants included 84 boys and 99 girls, with ages from 5 to 13 in the following configuration: 12 children in the 5-6 age range, 24 children in the 7-8 age range, 44 children in the 9-10 age range, and 103 children in the 11-13 age range. Children in the study attended public schools, private schools, or were home schooled, at levels of education ranging from kindergarten to eight grade. In the central part as well as on the West Coast of the United States, the questionnaire was completed by a majority of Caucasians who were at least second generation in the United States (a few Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans, and a few first generation Americans from Germany, Russia, Romania, Bosnia, China, and Japan also participated in the study). The questionnaire, developed at the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television in Munich, Germany, included close-ended and open-ended items as well as opportunities for children to draw.

In terms of media sources, the U.S. children involved in the study were exposed, while the events ran their course, to local television stations specific to the area as well as to national coverage television stations such as CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, or CBS, to local newspapers specific to the area as well as to national coverage newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, to various local and national coverage radio stations, and to national coverage magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. During the same time frame, study participants also watched children's television such as Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, but these television stations had little co-

verage of the 2011 disasters in Japan with the exception of calls for donating money, and continued to transmit their regular entertainment-oriented shows. It is important to mention that in the United States no television station, including the children ones, features a news show specifically directed towards children, but that there is a news magazine for children, *Time for Kids* (a children's version of *Time* magazine) that is circulated in schools across the country and whose special issue on the Japan disasters (see figure 1) was referenced by many children involved in the research.

ation leak (20 children, of which 16 on the West Coast and only four in the central part of the country). The answer to the question about what specifically had occurred was coded not only for the events but also for the order of the events, and in this respect only 47 of the U.S. children participating in this study placed all the events in the correct order, whereas other children mentioned only the earthquake-tsunami sequence (55 subjects), only one single event (36 subjects), or confused the order (29 subjects).

The data described above has led the researchers to make the observation that there was a discrepancy between U.S. children's knowledge that some events had taken place and these children's knowledge of the events that had taken place. Additional support for inferring this discrepancy came from the part of the questionnaire in which children were prompted to discuss what is an earthquake, a tsunami, and a nuclear power plant. Overall, small numbers of the study participants in the U.S. were able to provide detailed knowledge for these (74 subjects for earthquake, 34 subjects for tsunami, and 14 subjects for nuclear power plant); the other study participants provided phenomenal descriptions (71, 39, and respectively 19 subjects) or misinterpretations (63, 98, and respectively 55 subjects). The following are examples of answers displaying detailed knowledge: an earthquake "is where a strain in boundary faults overcomes the friction causing plates to move suddenly;" a tsunami is "a gigantic wave that sweeps onto land that is caused by an earthquake;" a nuclear power plant "is a reactor that uses fission to create energy." The following are examples that were coded as phenomenal descriptions: an earthquake happens "when the earth rumbles;" a tsunami is "a giant wave;" a



Figure 1: *Time for Kids*, March 25, 2011

What do children know?

This study gave children multiple opportunities to express what they knew about what had occurred in eastern Japan. Children were asked if they were aware of what had happened, and a majority of the U.S. study participants answered this question positively (of 183 study participants in the United States, 175 stated that they were aware and only 8 that they were unaware of the disasters in eastern Japan; all 8 children who were unaware belonged to the 5-6 age group). Children were also asked what specifically had happened, and numerous U.S. study participants identified the earthquake (147 subjects) and the tsunami (159 subjects), yet fewer participants mentioned the nuclear power plant incident (63 subjects, of which 45 on the West Coast and only 18 in the central part of the United States) or the radi-



Figure 2: Drawing by Erin, 13, West Coast

nuclear power plant “gives us electric power.” Answers considered misinterpretations referred to earthquakes as holes in the ground in which one falls, to tsunamis as storms or hurricanes, and to nuclear power plants as places where bombs are made.

Why are many U.S. children knowledgeable about the events, but not fully knowledgeable of the events? A part of that is age: what occurred in Japan was a series of different disasters that have complex causes and consequences and that are not so easy to comprehend (the study also shows that children’s ability to explain these disasters increases from the lower to the higher age groups). Yet another possible explanation of this evident discrepancy is the high exposure of the U.S. children to news coverage of the 2011 Japan events versus the much lower exposure of these children to child-oriented media materials. U.S. study participants followed the events, but they accessed these primarily through news programs for adults due to the lack of news program for children on the networks with national coverage or on cable television in the United States, and due to the en-

tertainment orientation of the children’s television channels which did not cover the Japan disasters other than for some fundraising. Many study participants might not have understood the adult news programs that they were watching, if they did not discuss these with family members or in school settings (the study also shows that watching the events on the news was more frequent and more prominent than talking about events with various people).

What do children think?

In addition to assessing children’s knowledge, this study provided opportunities to get insight into the ways in which children make sense of events they became aware of through the media, especially through television. Children were asked to draw what was going on in Japan, as well as to explain what they drew. Many children put a lot of effort into their drawings, giving intricate details and utilizing color. Numerous children also offered thorough interpretations of their particular vision. Like many children in other parts of the world, U.S. children who participated in this study had the feeling that something terrible and terrifying had happened in Japan. U.S. children drew people who were dead, or who were drown-

ing, or who were attempting to find refuge somewhere, or who were looking for dear ones in the aftermath of the disasters. In a drawing by a 13-years-old from the U.S. West Coast, a mother and a daughter who had escaped on top of a building share their fear (see figure 2).

Although many of the U.S. children’s thoughts about the Japan disasters might have been similar with those of children elsewhere in the world, at a close examination of both the drawings and the accompanying text three aspects have emerged as distinctive for U.S. study participants: a materialist approach, or a focus on the damage of property; an optimist approach, or an effort to find a positive side even for tragic events; and a compassionate approach, or a focus on the help that can be offered to the Japanese people in the aftermath of the disasters. Piles of debris are often encountered in the drawings of U.S. children: for example, one drawing by a 9-year-old girl from the central part of the U.S. depicts a building and even a sun umbrella in a “before” scene, and indistinguishable rubble in an “after” scene.” (See figure 3)

Perhaps in an attempt to cope with the stress provoked by the Japan events, U.S. children drew positive rather

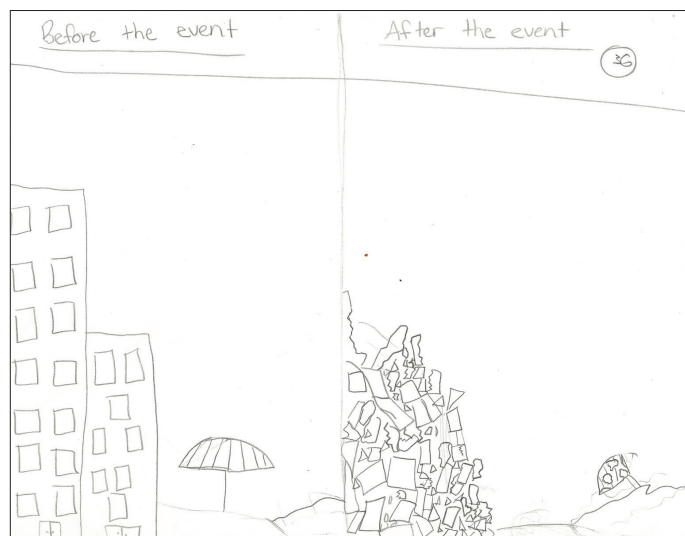


Figure 3: Drawing by Mary, 9

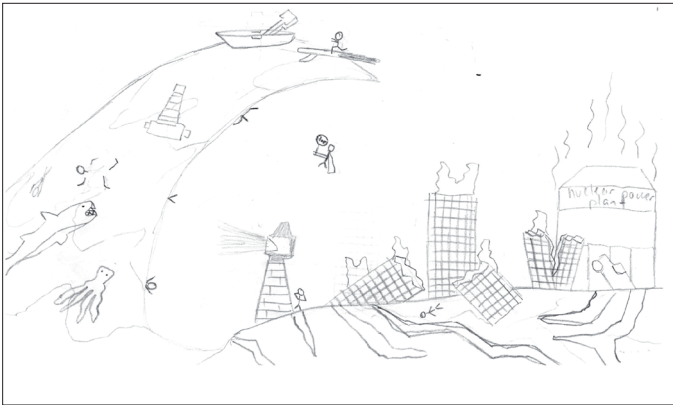


Figure 4: Drawing by Ben, 13

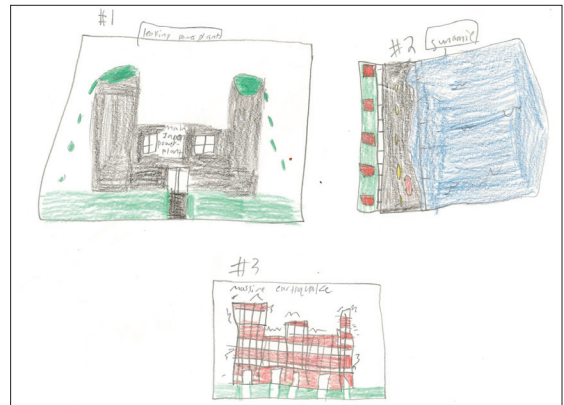


Figure 5: Drawing by Victor, 10

than negative images: for example, several drawings feature surfers having fun in spite of the disasters, and one drawing showcases a rainbow and has the caption: “With all this water, there are lots of rainbows.” Additionally, maybe also as a way of coping with the stress or maybe due to a strong orientation towards charity work in numerous communities across the U.S., many drawings depict Japanese people helping one another or international volunteers (from organizations such as the Red Cross, from other countries such as the U.S.) helping Japanese people; the text underneath such drawing reads: “If everyone works together, we can help.”

It is important to remark that these distinctive aspects for the U.S. children seem to resonate with distinctive aspects of the U.S. media. Much of the U.S. media coverage of the Japan disasters focused on the destruction of material possessions and on U.S. capabilities to help Japan. In these respects, images viewed on television, and then conveyed through newspapers and magazines, seemed to be referenced by children. While the optimist approach cannot be identified in media depictions of the Japan disasters, they arguably have also emerged from U.S. media trends: the logic of many of the U.S. films from Disney to Hollywood is that there is a good part in every bad situation, and that each of us should make the

best of even the worst of times (one of the drawings that includes a surfer also includes a superhero trying to stop the tsunami, see figure 4). It is also notable that, as U.S. news media focused less on the nuclear disaster than on the destruction caused by the earthquake and tsunami (and often depicted the nuclear disaster as distant and inconsequential for the U.S.), children in the U.S. also paid little attention to the nuclear disaster (lacking more specific knowledge, a U.S. child represented a nuclear power plant as a building with two towers and green liquid pouring out of the towers, see figure 5).

Conclusions

This study has documented and examined children’s views on the intricate interconnections between the media, events that happen far from them, and their own lives. As specified by numerous scholars, children of our time more than ever before view the world through media lenses, and strive to negotiate a vision that integrates their own ideas with what they have watched on television. U.S. children participants in this study have gained an understanding of the Japan disasters in connections with images that the U.S. media have transmitted over and over again, and the strengths as well as the weaknesses of their perspectives can be understood by inter-

preting media cues. Whereas this study has approached what the children know and what they think, a further study will discuss what the children want as expressed in their drawings and texts prompted as suggestions of the children for media programming. ■

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