

ISRAELI CHILDREN'S TV GOING TO WAR WITH IRAQ

Dafna Lemish

PREPARING FOR THE UNKNOWN

Israeli TV stations prepared for various war scenarios months in advance of the breakout of the war in Iraq. 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 1991 (Tidhar & Lemish, 1994). Hence, when President Bush's threat of a war became concrete in the fall of 2002, the Israeli broadcasting media were faced with the challenge of planning and preparing for coverage of a war that might or might not take place. Unlike 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 action on the part of the media. Accumulated experience from previous wars focused 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). However, the Gulf War and the pending war in Iraq were different. This time the enemy was

presumed to have threatened to use nonconventional weapons—such as biological, chemical, and even atomic warheads—to attack civilian populations at the center of the country. At the same time, there was also a possibility that Israel's hostile neighbors, as well as terrorist organizations, would take advantage of the situation to attack Israel. Facing such a complicated and uncertain reality, the broadcast media were faced with an awesome burden and responsibility: How should a TV or radio station effectively prepare itself for the unknown?

The Gulf War experience revealed that, on the eve of that war, broadcasters had felt an urgent need to develop multiple plans for a dynamic situation. They expressed frustration created by the necessity to plan a detailed program of action while recognizing the essential need for flexibility that would leave room for alternatives as demanded by the actual circumstances. Preparations were made on two levels: structural (regarding personnel, foundations, and equipment); and programming (providing as much up-to-date information and commentary, as well as the necessary entertainment for release of tension). In addition, the broadcast media were responsible for transmitting civil defense instructions in various languages and for sounding the alarms that would call the population to enter and exit the shelters.

Another role played by the media during the Gulf War was to serve as a form of hotline for callers seeking advice—as well as emergency psychological advice and emotional support. Responses to these needs were integrated into existing family and children's programs as well as within new formats created especially for the war period. The cost of producing these interventions was relatively low, and they proved to be particularly valuable for those who were housebound (Raviv, 1993). Nevertheless, programmers were criticized for compromising both professional media and psychological ethics by offering advice to clients/viewers with whom they were not familiar, to whom they could not provide follow-up supervision, and the like (Witztum & Cohen, 1994).

STUDYING TV FOR CHILDREN

As noted previously, the spring of 2002 found Israel once again reliving the traumatic days of 1990-1991, with heightened tension and preparation for a war that may or may not happen, that may or may not affect the country, that may or may not be catastrophic. As a researcher living in this environment, my attention was directed at the special situation of the audience of children who were living the anxiety through their parents and older siblings' memories of 1991, as well as through the media buzz about the 2003

situation. Confined to their homes during this period, children actively engaged in helping out their parents prepare shelters and special protective rooms. At school they practiced using gas masks and rushing in and out of shelters. Under these circumstances, no child could have missed the threat of a possible catastrophic war (see Lemish, chap. 3, this volume).

The needs of the child audience during the time of this existential crisis were the particular mandate of three TV channels that attract the majority of the young target audience in Israel: (a) the Israeli Educational Television (IET), a public channel that shares the airwaves with the Israeli Broadcasting Authority (IBA); (b) the Children's Channel (CH6), a private cable channel serving children of all ages, but with a focus on elementary school pupils; and (c) HOP!, a private cable channel aimed at the young audience of 2- to 7-year-olds whose self-declared ideology is to provide an educationally safe TV environment. None of the three channels carries commercials.

As the war on Iraq broke out, I set out to study the institutional perspective exemplified by these TV stations: What roles did directors of TV for children in Israel assign their stations at this time of crisis? How were they preparing for the upcoming danger in light of the uncertainty that war would break out? What were the major dilemmas they were facing? What lessons were learned from the experience?

I conducted in-depth interviews with the following Directors of Programming of these three stations during the second week of April 2003, shortly after the invasion of Iraq by the American forces: (a) AD of the IET, an experienced TV man in his 50s who has been with the station for 30 years and who served a variety of roles prior to assuming his current position; (b) KZ of CH6, a woman in her 30s who has been with the channel for a decade, climbing the ladder from script writer to program editor all the way to her current role of Director of Programming; and (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 5 years previously and who has a professional background in educational media. All three have close contact with children and their media needs, including their own children of various ages. I have had a long-term professional relationship with all three, and have cooperated with them on various matters related to children and TV throughout the years. As a result, we have established relationships of mutual respect and trust.

The interviews took place at the three stations and lasted close to 2 hours each. The setting allowed the interviewees to present to me immediately and concretely program illustrations of the arguments they were making as well as to point out some of the administrative logistics. Discussion centered on their perceptions of their duties for children at a time of war, logistical and content-related preparations, the difficulties they encountered, and lessons learned. Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Although the bulk of the following discussion focuses on the programming

of the content of children's TV in this war situation, I refer first to their logistical concerns.

LOGISTICS

Based on past experience, all three stations were declared to be *vital enterprises* by national authorities. This emergency status allows for smooth continuity of broadcasting operations should a war break out. All prepared stocks of videotapes of programs for children to be aired nonstop in case of emergency. The possibility of direct damage to the stations, as well as the inability of personnel to travel to work, resulted in preparing alternative broadcast facilities and storage of duplicate videotapes in a variety of locations.

The IET is an example of such preparations. The IET is owned by the government, is broadcast to nearly every home in the country, is the biggest media operation of the three, is the most experienced (30 years), and has the most diverse audience of the three stations. IET routines for emergency preparation included organizing use of their special antinuclear 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 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.

HOP! prepared a special broadcast room and backup tapes that were stored in four different cable-broadcast centers in the country in the event that their own station would become dysfunctional. They prepared for the possibility of handling the entire broadcast line-up through home computers of chief personnel in case transportation within the country became restricted or impossible. CH6, too, prepared a full lineup of prerecorded programs for emergency broadcast and lodged a backup set in a central cable-company storage area. They prerecorded many items in the event that it was impossible to broadcast live, including items instructing child viewers about how to put on gas masks, tips about how to behave in the sealed rooms and shelters (rooms prepared in each household that included sealing windows and vents with plastic sheets to prevent entry of biochemical substances), psychological advice, and the like. All three interviewees felt confident that they had the logistics of their operation under control and, therefore, devoted most of their remarks in the interview to discussing content-related issues.

CONTENT

Facing the special needs of the child audience during a time of national crisis in Israel is not a novel experience, even for the two younger stations. The many emergencies created by the wave of suicide bombers in the years preceding the war in Iraq forced the program directors to revise their own programming schedules, often on a daily basis. In 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.

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. As KZ of CH6 explained:

[. . .] 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 in the 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. What I mean is that we try to give children the information, to tell them what happened, not to show the horror, but to present it relatively in a dry manner so they can understand and express themselves through mails, chats, and the like. . . . Once again, it depends on the magnitude of the event . . . but you know, when it becomes a routine, and it is sad to say so, but everyday something happens here, so we report and continue with our daily broadcasting business. . . .

This dilemma was perceived as an even greater challenge by AA, the director of HOP!, which serves a younger audience:

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 would not be appropriate to not

give them some kind of voice. We feared opening too much of a gap between the environment created by the broadcasts and the experience that the child has in his family or her 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 threat of war (see also Lemish, chap. 3, this volume). In search of clear criteria for determining when to violate the routine, they stated that this would occur if there was either a major disturbance in children's own real-life routines (e.g., school closings) or if there was a major terrorist attack that is broadcast live on all TV stations and takes many lives, particularly if it involves children as victims. AD of the IET explained:

We felt that it was a situation of national emergency, similar to the case of the Dolphinarium bombing [ed. one of the most severe suicide attacks that took place at a sea-shore disco that took the lives of many partying teenagers]. Then we felt that youth and children would experience a very difficult trauma and we had to refer to it somehow. . . . During the Gulf War we activated an emergency studio because there was no school. And, we activated it now because during the first day of the war only 20% of the children went to school, with 50% the following day, and 60% the third day [ed. although schools were officially instructed to remain open, many parents were too concerned for their children's safety].

At the same time, all three interviewees repeated that they also see that it is their role to be an island of sanity and normality for the children—a place to escape to from the unbearable tension that surrounds them.

In the beginning, when we were challenged by the many terrorist attacks, we used to mess up our own program scheduling. We faced hysterical floundering—should we or should we not broadcast situation comedies? However, now that we have accumulated experience, we try overall to maintain our regular schedule. . . . We see our role as preserving it as a place for children to escape to normality and it is ideologically important for us to keep this as a place for them alone. (KZ of CH6)

A place where they can be left “to grow up in peace” (CH6) in a “protected environment” (HOP!).

This concern of Israeli producers is much in line with the one expressed by producers all over the world, including those from countries much

removed from the conflict—for their responsibility is to provide children with a “safe haven” as well as to keep them informed about major current world events (see Strohmaier, chap. 7, this volume).

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. The first task was a search to identify the special needs that children of different ages and developmental stages might have at a time of potential war and to seek ways to best satisfy them.

Staying Safe and Busy at Home. The most obvious need of all was to keep children safe and busy at home so they would be close to adults and to shelters, tuned in to emergency information, and away from the unprotected streets. AD of the IET explained: “[. . .] we felt that we were serving as a ‘baby-sitter’ and as an emergency medium for transmitting information in case of emergency for the children at home.” Thinking of creative ways to keep children busy was also part of the CH6 agenda, as KZ related: “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.” Special programs were prepared that proposed arts and crafts activities, suggestions for decorating the sealed rooms and the protection masks kits, using readily available household supplies for activities and games, and the like. These activities were also geared to giving children some power over their lives, if only in small and limited spaces, such as the sealed room.

Tension Relief and Information. Clearly, all three directors realized that they had significant potential to satisfy other crucial needs besides babysitting. Children were at home, but they needed more than an operating TV to sound the alarm in case of a missile attack. They needed help in dealing with the tension, avenues to relieve anxiety. They also needed responses to their many practical questions, such as how to manage fear and maintain their well-being. Although they may seem contradictory at first hand, these two functions—tension relief and information—were viewed by the interviewees as strongly intertwined.

The various ways developed by the three stations to handle the situation differed according to the age of their target audience, previous experience, personal preference, and the like. IET went on air during the first few days

of the war with a "live studio" format that was interspersed with the regular programs with a host of live segments with experts, call-ins, news reports, specially produced items about defense operations during a war situation, fear management, and the like. For example, they developed several special items for preschoolers that dealt specifically with the sealed room. As AD related:

We taught them how to relate to their situation. We know that children are afraid of the gas masks and the sealed room . . . they are afraid of the concept of fear itself, so we prepared items about this topic, to show them how to relate to the situation, how to feel good about a place that you have to enter during an emergency, and so forth. We helped familiarize them with the alarm and what it sounds like. We played around with different noises, including alarms, to reduce their fear in a humorous way. We had a psychologist in the studio and a child called in and said—"I'm afraid," and she told him to "paint your fear." He did and sent it by fax to the station. . . . So [we decided] let's talk about fear, let's paint it in different colors, let's amuse the kids by playing, psychologically, with this very difficult reality. . . . We also do this in a didactic manner. We teach them to do practical things—to do gymnastics, to draw, make art projects—so they won't be bored, because boredom stimulates fear too. . . .

HOP! produced 16 special short items dealing with young children's anxieties and questions about the war that employed the channel's familiar actors and puppets. Here the children received legitimization 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 power over their lives (e.g., suggesting ideas for decorating the shelter, practicing use of their gas mask). These items emphasized the sense of confidence provided by family togetherness during the crisis, with the adults interacting with children on the screen providing possible role models for parents at home in dealing with their own children. An uplifting song about togetherness in the shelter that invited preschoolers to sing along accompanied the special items broadcast over the first few days. However, AA felt that their inability to communicate directly with the parents of this young age group (e.g., through TV promos) was an obstacle that did not enable them to make the most out of their special broadcasts; she would have liked to prompt the parents to co-view the items with their children and to use them as helpful resources.

CH6, directed mostly at elementary school children, prepared an elaborate plan in case the school system would have been closed, including a full line-up of programs and items that dealt with psychological and practical

issues, news briefs about the war, as well as many ideas for arts and craft activities that could occupy children at home. They devoted some air time to use of the gas mask, when the general population received instructions to open their protection kits and to start to practice wearing the masks. In addition, CH6's children's news program [ed. which normally broadcasts daily in the afternoon with a modest but stable rating of about 2%–3%] devoted more of its time to the more informative war-related issues. According to KZ, children expect the news to inform them about the burning issues of the day, to a certain degree, but not in a way that is overdone.

All three stations recognized that children needed to be heard and that the media scene of 2003 was different from the one that existed in 1991. Now children expected a lot more interactivity: They called in to ask questions, they faxed letters and drawings, they communicated through e-mails, they participated as guests in the studios, and the like. Parents, too, did not hesitate to call the stations to voice their opinions, make requests, and complement the special efforts. However, it is interesting to note that the directors emphasized the emotional needs of children at times of conflict as well as the use of information for tension relief and personal empowerment. There was hardly any discussion of the role TV might have for children's civic education and socializing to their role as future citizens of the country (as discussed by Buckingham, 2000; see also, Carter, chap. 6, this volume; Messenger Davies, chap. 8, this volume; Nikken & Götz, chap. 5, this volume). Neither was the opportunity seized to examine or challenge the nature of the conflict or its possible resolutions (see Raviv, Oppenheimer, & Bar-Tal, 2005; Lemish, chap. 11, this volume).

How Much is Too Much?

Although 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 do 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 what they want to understand in a relatively dry manner [. . .] we had our presenters 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 a unequivocal way—"we want to know and, after you tell us briefly what's happening, we want you to return to broadcast the regular programs that we like, according to the schedule that we are used to."

Similarly, AD of IET concluded in retrospect that interrupting the regular broadcasts for news reports geared to the entire family was a mistake. "It's dangerous to broadcast an emergency news reports when there isn't an emergency [...] it can create anxiety. . . . Besides, the other television stations have news reports and commentaries all day long. We should stick to our target audience and not breakout for 'a family hour' in the middle." Instead of providing additional commentary, AD suggested that what children need are brief, clear explanations of central terms:

Don't give children analyses of the moves made by the armed divisions in north or south Iraq. They don't understand it and they don't need it. Give them the basic tools to understand concepts used in adult news that they don't understand: for example, where is Iraq; what does a missile look like; what is a military division. We don't think one should prevent children from watching news, but the dosage is extremely important.

KZ complemented this perspective when she recounted some of the decisions they were facing in constructing their own news items:

For example, when the story of the prisoners of war broke out in all the news programs, we deliberated extensively and decided not to show the pictures. We told the kids "you've seen it on the other channels," but we don't think we should present these pictures to children here, so we have made a decision not to show them. Instead, we interviewed an Israeli who was a prisoner of war in the Yom Kippur War 30 years ago and survived.

Concerned with the well-being of her young audience, AA of HOP! was torn between pressure from parents, who wanted to keep protecting their young, and the reality of children who were aware of the anxiety around them:

Mothers called us and said, "what are you doing? I don't need you to heighten the anxiety." But I knew that the Ministry of Education instructed the preschools and daycare centers to practice use of the gas mask that a child cannot be made to be autistic, not to be aware of the threat of war. After all, they were talking about it their classes. Then terrible rumors started to spread among them, not to mention television coverage. . . .

That was the turning point, when the management of HOP! decided they had to tackle the issue head on. Here, however, they reached a similar

conclusion to IET: Explanations provided to a young audience must 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 [. . .] at this age group you can provide very naive comfort. I can look at a young child in the eyes and say to him: "I am sure it will be OK, things happen in war time, but I am sure you will be OK." [. . .] yes, we gave legitimization to our staff to tell children "yes, we have a strong army and policemen who know what to do and fire fighters."

Many moral dilemmas were raised as a result of encouraging children to call and express their anxieties when speaking with experts in the studio, to write to the station via internet sites, or even to appear on the air. Managers were anxious that dwelling on fear might advance rather than reduce fear. What about the children who are handling their anxieties well, and therefore do not appear on TV? KZ from CH6 expressed such concerns:

After major terrorist attacks we used to spend days in live broadcasts letting children talk for hours about their fears, and how they are handling them. But things have changed, we have a lot more experience now. . . . 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 and for your voice to be heard, you need to come talk about your fears. So, maybe we are contributing to escalating things that didn't necessarily happen in that intensity to the children. . . . I think that today, since such events have become part of our routine, we have returned to some sane proportions that are much healthier, in my opinion.

For AA of HOP!, the issue became one of not only legitimizing the fears that children have, but of helping them cope with their parents' anxieties and the tension at home without undermining parents' authority and children's sense of security:

Our psychologist brought up the issue that parents are not aware that they are projecting their own anxieties to their children, who are not sure how to handle this situation. Even if the parents' shielded the child from television news and it was not discussed in pre-school, the child can sense the tension at home. So we developed one item where the father blows up at one of the characters, who then bursts into tears. . . . the adult then catches himself and apologizes to the child, explaining that he is tense. It was a very emotional scene and we were not sure how

children would react to it. Perhaps it would push the tear buttons and they will cry too because they have been in similar situations. But we wanted to tell them that it is normal that parents are tense, that parents are not monsters, but human beings.

This item was not broadcast, as were many of the other episodes produced in advance in the event that the situation deteriorated.

POSTSCRIPT

In the end, Israel was not attacked by Iraq. As a result, CH6 did not implement their plans. HOP! did broadcast some of the special segments for a few days and then discontinued doing so. IET closed their special live studio after 3 days, when children returned to their daily routine. The dilemmas that were raised in the many hours spent in preparation for attacks that did not occur and that were addressed briefly in these pages remained unresolved. Unfortunately, all interviewees shared the feeling that this is not the last time they will be faced with similar dilemmas, and thus this *dry run* was not totally wasted.

Clearly, this initial study indicates that program directors believe that TV has a crucial role to play for children in wartime, but that this role comes with a huge responsibility. They were torn by many moral, educational, and practical dilemmas, including consideration of difficult social and psychological issues related to children's development and needs at a time of a major national crisis that is life threatening. The external political circumstances and the general national atmosphere constrained their decision-making processes in meaningful ways.

However, directors of TV for children are first and foremost citizens of their own societies, concerned with the pressing social and national needs of the moment. Living in a society deeply divided over the Arab-Israeli conflict, and seeing the world mostly through this filter, they feel a responsibility to recruit their TV to advance the national goal of solidarity and collectivism in facing the conflict, as do their colleagues in the other media organizations (Dor, 2005; Liebes, 1997; Wolfsfeld, 2004). They do not perceive that it is their role to encourage the development of critical political thinking or active citizenship in children, nor do they have a conception of the role the media might have in peace-building. Rather, they appear to be satisfied with instilling general compliance with national goals, acceptance of the existing conflict situation as an uncontested reality, and total trust in adult leadership. This, was suggested by AD of IET:

Above all we need to broadcast optimism to children. We broadcast offering a shoulder, love, fraternity, friendship, and happiness. We broadcast togetherness; we broadcast Israeliness. We broadcast a balanced view; we don't take sides, neither left nor right. We are a state-run television station that cannot be political, especially for children and youth. We provide a public service that is educational and social. That's all. We broadcast optimism.

We can only hope that broadcasters of children's TV will indeed be able to continue to broadcast optimism for many years to come. At the same time, however, we may also wish to challenge their perception of children as apolitical and naive beings who need not be concerned with the world around them.

REFERENCES

- Buckingham, D. (2000). *The making of citizens: Young people, news and politics*. London: Routledge.
- Dor, D. (2005). *The suppression of guilt: The Israeli media and the reoccupation of the West Bank*. London: Pluto.
- Liebes, T. (1997). *Reporting the Arab-Israeli conflict: How hegemony works*. London: Routledge.
- Peled, T., & Katz, E. (1974). Media functions in wartime: The Israeli home front in October 1973. In J. G. Blumler & E. Katz (Eds.), *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research* (pp. 49-69). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Raviv, A. (1993). The use of hotline and media interventions in Israel during the Gulf War. In L. A. Leavitt & N. A. Fox (Eds.), *The psychological effects of war and violence on children* (pp. 319-336). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Raviv, A., Oppenheimer, L., & Bar-Tal, D. (Eds.). (2005). *How children understand war and peace: A call for international peace education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Tidhar, C. E., & Lemish, D. (1994). Israeli broadcasting facing the SCUD missile attacks. In T. A. McCain & L. Shyles (Eds.), *The 1,000 hour war: Communication in the Gulf* (pp. 111-126). Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Witztum, E., & Cohen, A. A. (1984). Uses and abuses of mental health professionals on Israeli radio during the Persian Gulf War. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 25, 259-267.
- Wolfsfeld, G. (2004). *Media and the path to peace*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.