

U.S. CHILDREN IN THE IRAQ WAR NEWS COVERAGE

Reflections of the Status Quo?

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Childhood should be a time when things are innocent and sweet and nice. So we want to protect our children.

—Diane Levin, professor of early childhood education,
quoted in the U.S. newspaper, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*
(MacPherson, March 16 2003)

During the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the early part of 2003, there appeared in the U.S. media what seemed a deluge of childhood experts offering advice to non-military parents on how to deal with war anxieties in their children. Ellen Seiter and I decided to examine this interesting media trend, which to our knowledge was not as prevalent during the 1991 U.S. invasion of Iraq, nor in other past U.S. military actions.¹ We were both deeply interested in children's relationships with media, and in this trend it seemed that U.S. civilian children (and their apparent anxieties) were somehow being used in the media as a symbol of the intense global conflict. Just how were these children portrayed in the news stories, and why was this particular theme occurring now?

Seiter was already undertaking an ethnographic study of elementary school children's reactions to war media coverage during this period, so we added alongside her ethnography a qualitative analysis of child-focused

media coverage during the intensive combat phase of the 2003 war (see Seiter, chap. 2, this volume; Seiter & Pincus, 2004). I performed this analysis of the media coverage, which included U.S. newspaper articles, wire stories, and TV and radio segments from January to April 2003.

Our study is broadly grounded in theories that understand childhood as a social construction that differs among times and places, and is primarily based on norms, ideals, and negotiations of the adult world at present (Heywood, 2001; Jenkins, 1992). We are also informed by studies of Western childhood, including Wolfenstein's (1977) examination of a long U.S. child-rearing tradition that emphasizes putting on a happy face, staying busy, and keeping children away from the harsh realities of the adult world, and Buckingham's (2000) work on U.S. and British children's growing alienation from and apathy toward news and politics. In short, our approach to studying children and media is grounded in claims that ideas about children (and children's relationship with mass media) are central to understanding a worldview of a particular time and place. It was through this perspective that we found the current media trend so intriguing.

My qualitative analysis of the child-centered media coverage revealed what we found to be an overwhelming theme of *protectiveness* surrounding U.S. children during the 2003 war in Iraq—specifically, protecting them from TV images and from feeling unsafe during wartime. As evidenced in chapter 2 (this volume), Seiter's discussions with elementary school children complemented this finding, as the children she interviewed revealed to her how relatively little they were talking about the war at school and at home despite their individual curiosities and fears and their exposure to images of war that they found confusing. Presumably, the rise in this kind of child-protective story occurred at least in part as a reaction to what was the most continuous, most live, and most frontline TV coverage of any war in U.S. history. Furthermore, in the wake of 9/11, this protective spirit surrounding children was arguably a reflection of *adult* fears in this new world order and their own reactions to the chilling images and closeness of war and violence to their homes, through terrorism and TV.

When I began to explore the quantitative methodology of content analysis in a graduate seminar, I wondered whether it would enhance our qualitative analysis of the overarching protectiveness we found in child-centered media coverage of the 2003 war in Iraq. Could our conclusions about these themes of protectiveness be quantified? Would content analysis reveal more or different information about parents and children—and the childhood experts media seem to have turned to *en masse* in 2003—during war in Iraq media coverage? Thus, I added to my original study an attempt to quantitatively check our theories about the media's emphasis on protectiveness in relation to parents, children, and childhood experts during the 2003 Iraq War.

As I describe in this chapter, my basic content analysis did in many ways validate the trend we had noticed in media coverage. Then, still curious about whether the trend was continuing (Seiter and I both noticed less of these kinds of stories after the *official* war ended), I followed up my first study (of January–April 2003 media coverage) with one more look at the media coverage of civilian children and the Iraq War. In my second study, I attempted to analyze media coverage on these same themes during the year following the official war, May 2003 to May 2004. As this chapter illustrates, I found that the original trend we found was indeed short-lived, existing as a notable trend only during the official war in early 2003.

THE FIRST STUDY: JANUARY TO APRIL 2003

In my original qualitative analysis, I examined over 60 print and broadcast stories on the topic of civilian children and the Iraq War, collected through LexisNexis searches as well as some of my own finds in magazines and on TV shows not in the database. In my maiden attempt to quantify my qualitative analysis of media coverage in this 4-month period, I chose to use as my sample the 49 U.S. newspaper and wire service articles I had compiled through LexisNexis.² The TV and radio stories I had were a mix of written transcripts and taped clips, which made consistency difficult for coding, although I still use these sources for my broader qualitative analysis. The magazine articles I collected were based only on what I had come across personally and I believe did not fully encompass many magazines not included in searchable databases, so again I excluded these from the quantitative analysis, but kept them for my more general qualitative study. With newspaper and wire sources, I had solely print content to analyze (removing added complications of visual and aural coding), and I knew I had a comprehensive collection of what ran in the searchable U.S. press because I was able to perform thorough searches through the LexisNexis database, which includes national and regional U.S. newspapers and national wire services.

In coding these 49 articles, I focused on four main variables: news source, quoted speakers, general themes, and advice themes. The news source area was straightforward, asking simply whether the articles coded came from national newspapers (in which I included the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*), regional newspapers (which included a wide array of titles, such as the *Milwaukee Sun*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *Rocky Mountain News*), or a wire service (which included services such as the Associated Press, BusinessWire, and PR Newswire).

For quoted speakers, I coded sources directly quoted in the articles. Here I wanted to quantify whether childhood experts were as prevalent in

the news articles as I had found in my qualitative analysis. I was also curious as to the frequency of parents being quoted versus children. In this section, then, I coded for experts, including one category of any expert quoted and also separating into two categories the medical/social worker/academic experts and the spokespeople for nonprofit organizations, which I had found to be surprisingly prevalent in my original analysis. Furthermore, I coded for teachers/school officials separately from experts, although they arguably could go into either category. I chose to reserve the *experts* category for people who would not be in parents' everyday lives, but whom they would presumably need to seek out beyond their family, neighborhood, or local school for professional advice. Last, I added categories for Iraqi children and Iraqi parents to see how their perspectives were represented, although I predicted from what we had already concluded that it would be insignificant. I coded only for the presence of each quoted speaker, not for the amount of times each was quoted or the point in the article where they were quoted.

Next, I wanted to test the general themes of fear and expert advice I had seen running through much of the media coverage. I broke the themes into six categories, the first being the one I predicted to be most prevalent: "U.S. children fear for their own safety." This was presumably the overwhelming impetus for these articles, so I wanted to see whether this came through quantitatively. Related to this theme was the corresponding theme that "Parents need the help of experts to handle their children's war fears," which I predicted would be nearly as prevalent. I also coded for "U.S. children fear for the safety of Iraqi civilians" to see whether children's fears were directed to the people of the invaded country as much as to themselves, which I predicted would not be as prevalent. Next, I coded for the theme that "Parents may be afraid, too" to test whether this tacit conclusion of ours was explicitly stated in the articles. Finally, I coded for the theme of "General-talk to kids about war" to encompass the articles in which fear was not explicitly stated as the reason for talking to children about the war. As I did with quoted speakers, here again I coded only for the presence of these general themes in each article, not the number of times they occurred in each article or at what point in each story.

The final and largest area of my coding was around "Advice themes." Here I extrapolated the various themes of advice to parents I had seen throughout the 49 articles. I coded individually for 22 different advice themes. Again, I coded only for their presence in each article. Furthermore, I grouped the advice themes into three groups: protective, open, and non-specific. My rationale here was to group together the kinds of advice that caused Seiter and I to originally conclude that there was a protective spirit across the media coverage. I wanted to see whether we were correct that the protective advice occurred significantly more than advice that we considered

more open, exposing civilian children to war talk and adult politics. The third category encompassed advice that did not fit explicitly into what we considered open or protective. Table 12.1 illustrates the advice themes and groupings I created.³

Clearly, the advice themes could be categorized differently, but this kind of grouping was important for testing our original conclusion. In choosing protective themes, I included themes that focused on keeping children away from the harsh realities and images of war, away from fear, away from war talk, and advice that encouraged parents to present the war as far away and removed from children's everyday lives. In open themes, I included advice that stressed opening conversation with children, encouraging them to talk, participate, play, draw or write out their fears, and engage in the adult fears and issues of war. Further research could include performing a correlation analysis of these themes to see how often they occurred together, but in this study I coded only for presence of themes in each article—how many of the

TABLE 12.1
Advice Themes

PROTECTIVE	OPEN	NONSPECIFIC
Reassure children of their safety and protection	Listen to your children	Be age appropriate in how you deal with children
Turn off, limit, and/or monitor TV	Encourage participation (in helping troops, Iraqis, in demonstrations)	Consult books or web sites for more advice
Maintain normalcy	Encourage children to create art or writing about war	Make time for family, give children extra attention
Be positive about the war and their safety	Be honest about the war and their safety	Explain that violence is real and serious, not a game
Monitor your own fears and debates in front of children	Use war as an opportunity to teach life lessons	
Look for warning signs that child needs professional help	Talk with children about the war	
Limit information; talk about only what kids ask	Encourage children to play out their fears	
Omit or temper your own opinion	Share your own opinions and fears	

themes in each category were present in each article—using our interpretation of what was protective versus open.

The rest of this chapter illustrates the results of both my broad, qualitative analysis and my more focused, basic content analysis—organized into the themes we uncovered in the U.S. media coverage of children and Iraq.

EXPERT ADVICE

Nationally, a core group of experts from child-centered organizations and institutions such as universities and children's hospitals reappeared often, on different media outlets, from January to April 2003. Of the 49 content-analyzed news articles, 83% included these kinds of experts as main sources. Child psychologists, social workers, and professors were the most quoted sources, encompassing 71% of the experts appearing in the articles, with reporters often calling on the doctors and faculty researchers in their local communities for interviews and some national figures, such as child psychologist and author Dr. Berry Brazelton and fear and media expert Professor Joann Cantor. Also quoted in 27% of the 49 news articles analyzed in the first study were spokespeople for U.S. nonprofit organizations, such as KidsPeace, Educators for Social Responsibility, and the Public Broadcasting Service, as well as for-profit Scholastic Publishing.

Many of these expert spokespeople, professors, and doctors were featured in press releases from their organizations, which were sent out over various national wire services and advertised the experts' willingness to talk to media. Questions to these experts from U.S. reporters and parents were presented as urgent and were often redundant—how to talk to children about war, how to know if they need professional psychological help, how to behave around them during wartime, and how to understand their play or comments. Consequently, parents were the second most-quoted subjects of many news stories—appearing in 29% of the print articles—usually as they described their problems with and behaviors of their own children, but sometimes stating their own theories and tactics. Akin to issues of violence and TV in the United States, the subject of children and war is presented as crossing political party lines in the service of protecting children. The oft-quoted experts provided tip lists for parents that varied only slightly among each other; there was no clear-cut conservative or liberal view on the matter in general—or at least the common *protect the children* mission often masked the conservative-leaning politics behind the protective rhetoric.

Children were quoted in only 25% of the articles, although they were the main focus of all of them. Almost exclusively, U.S. media coverage of children during the original study period focused only on U.S. children,

with few mentions of Iraqi children and the effects of war on them (10% of the news articles mentioned Iraqi children). Finally, although the least quoted, the final notable group of sources were teachers, who were sources in 17% of the news stories. Teachers were portrayed more often as needing the advice of these official experts as well, although the teachers may provide some anecdotes about how they successfully implement the tips in their classrooms. The experts in these stories were clearly people not in the daily lives of children and their families, but more removed in official organizations, universities, or hospitals. Figure 12.1 below illustrates the reliance of reporters on experts as the main source for the print news stories on children and war, a theme echoed in TV and radio stories as well.

THEMES OF PROTECTIVENESS

Because the themes I coded as *protective* were significantly more prevalent than those I coded as *open* (overall, protective themes arose in 42% of the articles versus 17% of articles that included open themes), and because the spirit of protectiveness in the media during this time period is what enticed

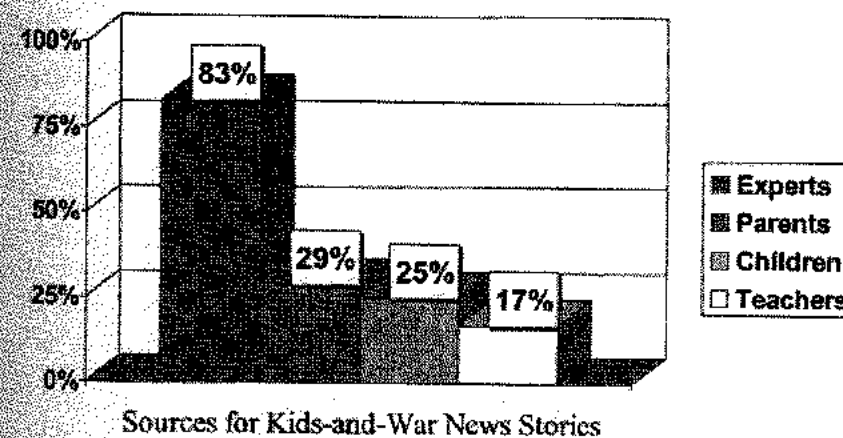


FIG. 12.1. Experts as the most-quoted source in kids-and-war news stories. (Percentages add up to more than 100% because multiple sources are quoted in many of the articles.)

us to do this study, I have chosen to focus on these protective themes in my discussion here. I mention the contrasting open themes, and the other non-specific themes, here and there throughout this section, as they do appear, but I examined more carefully the more prevalent protective themes and explain them in greater detail.

Reassure Children of Their Safety

The great majority of newspaper articles we studied (75%) explicitly stated that U.S. children are afraid for their own safety when hearing about the war. Consequently, the most prevalent advice—offered in 60% of the newspaper articles, plus many of the magazine and broadcast stories—was to reassure children about their safety. “Assure them about all that is being done to protect them and their family,” said the popular KidsPeace tip list, picked up by many regional newspapers such as the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, and the *Vancouver (WA) Columbian* (Sanders, 2003, March 19; Bronston, 2003, March 22; Allen, 2003, February 20). “Make sure they know they are being protected.” Again and again, experts advised parents to tell U.S. children that the war is very far away.

Qualifying this in light of the recent terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, the experts in 48% percent of the news articles also warn parents to “be honest”—not to lie to children or flippantly tell them not to worry or that nothing could ever happen here. “Children will usually know, or eventually find out, if you are ‘making things up,’” one expert said. “It may affect their ability to trust you or your reassurances in the future” (Ascribe Newswire, 2003, March 3). The advice often read, “Tell children [we] will keep them as safe as possible, but don’t make promises” or “Instead of saying nothing could ever happen here, say there are a lot of people across the country doing everything they can to keep people safe” (Yearwood, 2003, March 27; Rother, 2003, March 9). Remain positive, be reassuring but honest, and repeat these messages, parents (of young children especially) were advised. Linda Ellerbee, renowned U.S. journalist and host of *Nick News* for children, the only child-centered news program in U.S. mainstream media, said in an interview in *TV Guide*: “You have to keep reminding kids that there are still more good people in the world than bad, and that all of the good people in the world want to protect kids” (Lasswell, 2003, April 12).

Keeping children in a normal routine—going to soccer practice, going to school or after-school programs—was advised (in 31% of newspaper articles) as a method of protecting children from war anxiety and reassuring them that their lives would not be affected. Few (10%) of the news articles contained recommendations that parents help children participate in the war effort to somehow become more active than helpless in the situation. In those articles, it was more often the parents (rather than the experts) suggest-

ing this kind of involvement. “Teaching children to participate in their world helps to break the fear,” one parent suggested in the *Christian Science Monitor*. “They will feel less defenseless and gain a sense of empowerment” (Wolcott, 2003, February 5). Also notable is that, of the stories that advised encouraging children to participate, all but one recommended supporting the troops—sending letters and care packages, waving flags—as the main activity to involve children in the war effort. Involving children in war protests—of which there were many in the United States—was seemingly not an option if one abided by these mainstream media stories. Here we see the conservative line of U.S. politics more revealed; keeping children safe and protected—away from war activity, war protests especially, and any potentially *harmful* information—was clearly the major theme throughout the general American media coverage.

“Turn Off the TV”

This protectiveness also translated directly to keeping children away from TV images of the war. Slightly more than half (52%) of the newspaper articles advised parents to limit children’s exposure to televised images of the war. When the “Turn off the TV” advice appeared, it was often at the top of experts’ lists. “One of the most important things families and other adults can do is to make sure children aren’t over-exposed to media coverage of the war,” said one wire story, echoing the advice of experts from Georgetown University, Save the Children, Yale Child Study Center, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (PR Newswire, 2003, April 2). “Ask local stations and newspapers to limit the repetition of particularly disturbing and dramatic scenes,” said one child psychologist whose recommendations were “endorsed by the American Psychiatric Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill” (Ascribe Newswire, 2003, March 3).

Philip McGraw, a popular psychologist known as “Dr. Phil” with his own syndicated daily talk show and a tremendous following, proclaimed during one of his wartime broadcasts (*The Dr. Phil Show*, 2003, April 3), “There is too much media on this war!”, to thunderous applause from his studio audience. He concluded, “Technology has outstripped common sense and morality. I think that’s not good for our children and not good for us.” Throughout most of the stories (58% of newspaper articles), experts advised parents to deal with children age appropriately, explaining that the younger the child, the less they can understand about war and the more protection they need from TV and war talk. For older children and teenagers, the experts more often said it is important for parents to watch the coverage with children, open dialogue, and answer questions.

Few voices of dissent spoke to the strong "Turn It Off!" rhetoric. One editorial in *USA Today*, by a writer for the generally liberal National Public Radio (NPR), decried the overwhelming advice circulating to parents to turn off the TV. "I couldn't disagree more," he wrote. "The world is a messy place and our kids know it. But if we watch them closely enough—if we let them air their own thoughts, form their own arguments and paint their own signs—maybe one day they can gently guide us to a time and place where things aren't quite so messy anymore" (Kluger, 2003, April 21). Arguably, this was the more progressive viewpoint coming through in mainstream media. Then again, back at NPR, Yale University professor Dr. Valerie Maholmes advised, "Turn the television set off and sit down and just have a family chat" (*Tavis Smiley Show*, 2003, March 13).

Clearly, some media outlets also had financial interest to combat the "Turn Off the TV" rhetoric—or at least to morph it into "Change the Channel" rhetoric instead. So, with adept marketing, many TV networks began advertising their "war-free TV" for children. At least one broadcast and five cable networks announced kids programming blocks that were a "safe haven" and a "place to escape" for children during the United States-Iraq conflict (Lasswell, 2003, April 12). Using another tactic, Scholastic Publishing, top publisher of age-appropriate classroom magazines and materials for children, sent out a press release reporting that an online poll on the Scholastic Web site showed that 61% of respondents (presumably school-age children) believed that the amount of media coverage of the war was appropriate (PR Newswire, 2003, April 2).

Monitor Behavior—Yours and Theirs

The third most common theme in the articles from January to April 2003 pertained to monitoring behavior during the war—both children's and parents' behavior. Watching and listening to children's talk and play was one element. In terms of children's talk, some experts advised parents to talk to children about the war (40% of news stories) and "listen to your children carefully" (33% of news stories), but often with qualifications.

A press release from Save the Children, for example, suggested that "Before responding, get a clear picture of what they understand. Trauma results in part when a child cannot give meaning to dangerous experiences. Find out what he or she understands about war and terrorism" (*US Newswire*, 2003, February 18). Continually, advice stressed asking children what they know before offering any information and taking care not to give children more information than they ask for. This particular strategy is widely suggested for approaching the topic of sexuality with children, which also stresses the "less is better" approach to sensitive topics. Again, when

parents do explain the war, they should keep answers age appropriate and simple, the experts said. "Look at their level of understanding," said Dr. Phil (*The Dr. Phil Show*, 2003, April 3). "For kindergarten, that is 'good' and 'bad.'" War, Dr. Phil explains, means to children that people "didn't use their words." Soldiers are heroes, Saddam Hussein is a bad man—these simple terms are recommended again and again for parents of young children.

As for children's play, "Be an observer, not a spoiler," reported the *Boston Globe*. "When children have something on their mind, they let us know they need to talk about it through their play," a preschool director told the paper (Meltz, 2003, April 24). Within children's play and everyday behaviors, parents are advised by the experts to look for common signs of stress (in 46% of the news articles). "Any significant changes in sleeping patterns, eating habits, concentration, wide emotional swings or frequent physical complaints without apparent illness" are cited as signs that children need the professional help of a therapist or counselor, a common question of many parents (*US Newswire*, 2003, February 18). According to one psychiatrist quoted in *USA Today*, "the demand for therapy to help anxious children surged after 9/11, followed by a lull last year, and it's been going up again in recent weeks as the war gets more attention" (Eias, 2003, March 24). Experts spent much time advising parents on signs that they should take their kids to a psychotherapist—56% of the newspaper articles advised seeking the help of experts (and 50% to seek out books and Web sites) to help kids through the stress of wartime.

In 42% of the news articles, and in many of the magazine and broadcast stories, parents were also tutored to monitor their *own* behavior to protect their children from further emotional stress or trauma. "If they see Mom or Dad afraid of snakes, they'll be afraid of snakes," one psychiatrist told *TV Guide*. "If they see Mom or Dad shocked and horrified, they will be, too" (Lasswell, 2003, April 12). So, said the experts, parents should remain calm. "Don't pass on your angers and fears," advised Save the Children (*US Newswire*, 2003, February 18). "Handle your own emotions constructively," one local paper instructed (Salter, 2003, March 21). "A child will learn so much by modeling your feelings," said Dr. Brazelton, child expert for the NBC broadcasting network. "You can gently talk to children about your own fears so that they can see that you can face them and carry on" (Brazelton, 2003, March 24). Experts advised parents to limit their own TV watching and avoid engaging in any heated, adult conversations about the war until after children have gone to sleep. Just a couple of the many experts warned parents to monitor their own use of stereotypes or slurs in discussing the war around children.

THE SECOND STUDY: MAY 2003 TO MAY 2004

The most notable feature of U.S. news coverage of civilian kids and the Iraq situation following Bush's "victory" (May 2003–2004) is the utter lack of the kinds of articles we saw in the 3 months of initial combat. In the 90 days of the official war in early 2003, I found more than 60 similarly themed stories on protecting children from Iraq War images. In the entire year following the combat phase—during which many more U.S. soldiers and Iraqis died than in those 3 months—I found less than five stories with this theme of experts helping civilian parents protect their children, using all the same LexisNexis searches I used for the original stories, plus a few more to be sure I wasn't missing anything, and including broadcast as well as print in my sample. There were a handful of national wire stories touting experts ready to give advice, but those seem not to have been picked up by any of the regional news outlets. It seems the story of protecting civilian children, so prevalent the 3 months prior, was over just like the official war.

Notably, coverage of U.S. military children (children whose parents were serving in the military), who were left behind or had lost parents in the combat, was prevalent, even more than the already numerous stories of this ilk during the war. This is certainly relevant to our project as a general theme, but I did not study these articles in depth, because military children were not our chosen focus in this study. Rather, we were interested in the coverage of U.S. civilian children who had presumably no exposure to the military or war other than through media exposure or conversations about it at school or home. Clearly, a second quantitative content analysis was unwarranted, because the May-to-May sample is simply too small. However, I did look at about 20 stories during this period relating to the Iraq War media coverage or children and the war in general (again, only five of these had protecting U.S. civilian children as a main focus), which still revealed some interesting patterns about political shifts and the place of children in U.S. culture as the Iraq conflict dragged on.

A Different Take on "Harmful War Images"

Only two of the stories I found in this May-to-May year period—one on NPR and one in the *San Francisco Chronicle*—centered on experts as the main source for help in dealing with war images and children, as nearly all of the related articles did in January to April 2003. Several stories, notably during particularly gruesome events such as the Abu Ghraib photos and Nick Berg beheading, did discuss the impact of these images on children, but without the expert advice. However, in only one *Boston Globe* article were

children the main concern per se in whether newspapers and TV outlets should show the footage and photos. In this particular article, parents were upset because the Iraq photos ran right below a child-friendly image on the front page. "Perhaps if the photo of the dancing robot had not also been on page 1 of the July 25 *Globe*, fewer readers would have complained about what appeared just below it," wrote the paper's ombudsman (Chinlund, 2003, August 4).

Most of the other articles on the grisly war photos took a different angle, that of the role and business of U.S. news organizations when it comes to printing or running images and information about the war. Children were more of an afterthought in these stories. Several of these stories were written by a newspaper's ombudsman or reader's representative, stating issues brought to their attention by their audience. As wrote the reader's representative at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which printed the Abu Ghraib and Nick Berg photos on page 1:

A majority of readers who called or sent e-mail to me and in letters to the editor supported the decision. But others argued variously that giving the photos Page One prominence was: 1) visually offensive, 2) improper for the eyes of children, 3) a thin ploy to sell papers, 4) a partisan attack on the Bush administration or 5) comforting to the enemy, even seditious. (Knight, 2004, May 16)

Protecting the eyes of children was an issue, but in all of the articles much less of an issue than the political consequences of the images and the role and responsibility of news organizations in wartime. Other articles were editorials or analyses by reporters. In May 2004, the *Baltimore Sun* printed a full news analysis of media coverage of the war violence, leading with:

Confronted with horrifying images of dead Americans, news executives this week scrambled to balance concerns about upsetting readers and viewers with the obligation to report the news in its full enormity. (Folkenflik, 2004, April 2)

The reporter notes, as media scholars have quantified, that U.S. news used to show only dead bodies of people from other countries, but now it is American bodies on the screen, and this is a new issue for the U.S. news audience. Readers and viewers here are not specified as children and are more likely adults.

Another article, which ran in May 2004 in *USA Today*, describes how advertisers are on edge, afraid to run light-hearted commercials during news broadcasts for fear of offending audiences who may have just witnessed

gruesome and sombering images from the war (McCarthy, 2004, May 18). In short, the issue of violent images has shifted from an apolitical protectionism of children to a more political and bottom-line discussion of the roles, responsibilities, and business of news organizations (to the adult world) during wartime.

Shift in Which and How Civilian Children Are Covered

As opposed to the expert and protectionist themes found in my first study, in the May-to-May stories, I found two different themes more prevalent. First, U.S. civilian children were most often story subjects in relation to school projects for which they corresponded with G.I.s in Iraq or took on community projects to help the troops or, sometimes, Iraqi civilians. No longer were the children characterized as afraid; they were now characterized as curious, helpful, and supportive of the U.S. Armed Services and the effort to "restore democracy to Iraq." The *Tampa Tribune* story headlined "Students Meet Soldier They Adopted" describes an elementary school class' close pen-pal relationship with a U.S. G.I. in Iraq and echoes similar stories throughout the year in several of the nation's regional and national papers (Blair, 2004, April 24). These kinds of stories did appear (especially in military town papers, such as the *San Diego Union-Tribune*) during the time of the original study, but then were overshadowed by the more prevalent articles on dealing with civilian children's fears. In the following year, there were many more stories about the civilian children as supporters of the war effort than of them feeling afraid.

Second, I found that Iraqi civilian children, who were mentioned in only 10% of the kids-and-war articles in the original combat phase, were covered more often than U.S. civilian children in the following year. The articles discussed either the awful plight of Iraqi children—the homeless street orphans or middle-class Iraqi children barred by their families from leaving the house for fear of kidnapping—or, more often, the valiant efforts of U.S. military/civilians and their allies to help the children. A taste of the headlines of these stories includes:

- G.I. Aided By The News Works To Help Iraqi Kids (*New York Daily News*) (Becker, 2004, April 26)
- Troops' Mission: Charity—America's Gifts Thrill Iraq's Poor Schoolchildren (*Columbus Dispatch*) (Hallet, 2004, April 4)
- Soccer's A Start—Soldier's Goal: Help Iraqi Youth (*New York Newsday*) (Kelleher, 2004, April 2)
- Dozens of Iraqi Children Treated Abroad Since End of War (*Associated Press*) (Mroue, 2003, November 12)

Again, children (this time, Iraqi) are used to show the good work of the U.S. Armed Forces in Iraq, rather than the fears or casualties associated with war. It became quite clear in the second study that children were being covered in the mainstream media from a vastly different angle as the unofficial conflict continued than they were when the United States was officially "at war." Arguably, according to mainstream U.S. media, they went from innocent, fearful victims to active supporters of U.S. actions in Iraq.

SYNTHESIS: EXAMINING THE INFLUENCES OF CHILDREN AND NEWS

So, how do we attempt to explain the "why" behind the media trend we found in 2003? What are some reasons that the U.S. press might have seized this particular moment to write and broadcast these particular kinds of stories, offering experts to help parents cope with the short-lived combat phase of the Iraq War? I posit several explanations for these trends, assuming each plays some role in this trend.

The first factor, as alluded to in this chapter's introduction, is how modern U.S. culture envisions and characterizes children, particularly in light of the historical moment of high tension soon after the nation's largest ever terrorist attack. The second factor is the routines of U.S. journalism, which focus on event-centered, expert-supported news coverage. The third is the type of parent and teacher involvement and communication most prevalent in mainstream American culture, which this book illustrates is different than in other parts of the world.

Envisioning Childhood

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the U.S. news media broadcasting children's fears and desire to be protected during the initial combat phase in Iraq clearly reflects the concerns of the post-9/11 American adult world at the time. In early 2003, weapons of mass destruction were a real possibility, and terrorist warnings came over the TV screen daily. In the year following, when the weapons were not found, Hussein was captured, and the terror alerts gradually subsided, children were not needed to reflect adults' pressing fears in the same way, because the adults had calmed down and in many ways returned to their own normal routines. The news returned to sensational court trials and celebrity marriages, with even the *USA Today* columnist who wrote passionately against the grain about including children in war conversations a year later writing about how he

refuses to talk to his daughter about the Michael Jackson case and its uncomfortable sexual issues (Kluger, 2003, December 2). The pressing panic of combat was presumably behind us, and the Iraq conflict became a backdrop of regular U.S. news coverage during the year following the war, carrying a tacit assumption of public support.

Virtually no children's news programs are produced in the United States and many U.S. parents keep their children away from the news and the war, as experts instruct them, and as Department of Defense booklets and school regulations direct teachers to do as well (*Educator's Guide to the Military Child During Deployment*, 2003). This approach validates the theories mentioned in the introduction that say U.S. parenting traditions breed a distancing of children from adults and from politics and adult issues, which is particular to modern times in Western culture (Heywood 2001; Wolfenstein, 1977). As Buckingham (2000) writes of the United States and Britain, "By and large, young people are not defined in our society as political subjects, let alone political agents. Even in areas of social life that affect and concern them to a much greater extent than adults . . . political debate is conducted almost entirely 'over their heads'" (Buckingham, 2003, p. 219).

The Power of News, The Power of People

The fact that we saw a surge of "protect the children" stories during the initial combat phase, and that experts were called in to help parents across the nation, actually reflects the standard routines of U.S. journalism. First, the news was event-centered—children became an issue during the initial war and threat, and then the other blips we saw of them were during the Abu Ghraib and Nick Berg stories/events. "The [US] media are adept at covering events. They are, in fact, organized to carry out this task," Thomas E. Patterson explains. "Conversely, they are poorly designed to inform their audiences about the issues underlying these developments" (Patterson, 2003, p. 142). Even when terror threats exist, if they are not in "event form," the news media will not cover them, Patterson asserts. When the world was seeing combat up close on TV as never before, a deluge of U.S. news stories about how to handle watching the images with children surfaced around this event. But once the frontline coverage ended, the U.S. media moved on to the next event and issue, without analyzing the broader issues about the place of children in politics or follow-up on the expert articles. The U.S. media did, however, move on to the issue of the responsibilities of news organizations to their adult, national audience when images have become a political hot button in the continuing problems of rebuilding Iraq.

Second, the reliance of many American news outlets on official (often government) sources, and on public relations, is illustrated in the picking up of all the expert press releases that flooded the news wires in early 2003. In

terms of public relations, news scholars have studied the press' reluctant but prevalent reliance since World War I on "spin doctors" to deliver story ideas to them, as they are rushed to fill news holes and meet pressing deadlines (Schudson, 2003). Public relations professionals at universities, hospitals, and child-centered organizations seized the event as an opportunity to get their message out to the press, sending out wire stories about their in-house experts, which gave harried journalists an easy feature during an intense news time.

U.S. media scholars Schudson (2003) and Hallin (1989) also write about the news as repeatedly representing the "authorized knowers" of society as their sources—which, in the case of our study, were the childhood experts at outside organizations—to help shape reality and how stories are told. The expert stories, in our case, also reflected a common frame in U.S. media—that children are innocent victims to be protected and kept away from adult affairs. Buckingham (2000) notes that in U.S. and British media, children and young people "are most frequently framed as a problem, whether implicitly or explicitly" (p. 205). In the first stories we examined in early 2003, anxious children were portrayed as a problem that parents could solve by consulting experts, a comfortable image that also offered them some perception of control when they may have felt helpless and frightened. Through media framing of U.S. children, we also saw characterizations of the United States' self-described role in the Iraq conflict. U.S. children (representing the nation) fit the frame of an embattled victim fighting evil villains during the combat phase of the war and of peacekeeping, do-gooding helpers in the rebuilding phase. In short, in examining the media coverage in our study, we can attribute it in some ways to the routines of U.S. journalism—its focus on events, its common frames, its official sources, and its reliance on PR.

U.S. Parenting and Teaching Norms

Yet if we think about the actual children's shift in attitude in Ellen Seiter's postwar follow-up with them (explained in Seiter, chap. 2, this volume), we can also see that the influence of adults in their lives, and their experiences at school, could arguably be counted as even more powerful than media in shaping their opinions. As Seiter's study shows, it was the children's new *teacher* who got them engaged in finally discussing the politics of war the year after the original invasion. Buckingham (2000) echoes this idea, writing, "children develop broadly 'political' concepts at an early stage, through their everyday experiences of institutions such as the school and the family" (p. 204). As Dafna Lemish (chap. 3, this volume) illustrates, Israeli children were more often included in their parents' and school discussions of war and politics from the beginning and were thus more deeply engaged in the conflict. This evidence points to influences outside of media as having a strong

effect on children's attitudes and behavior about political and news events. As Schudson (2003) too argues, "People tend to overestimate the power of the media for the simple reason that media are the visible tip of the iceberg of social influences on human behavior" (p. 19). However, he concludes, "A television set can never punish a child, but a teacher can, a parent can, a police officer can, a peer group can. Media power is power of a special sort, and this is what makes figuring out the effects of news so difficult" (Schudson, 2003, p. 25).

The fact that, as Maya Götz (chap. 1, this volume) discusses, German television offers several children's news networks is surely one factor that leads to German children speaking much more fluently about the issues of war than the American children, who live in a country where one *Nick News* special and school publishers' handouts are the only mainstream news media that speak directly to them. But the fact that German parents were taking their children to rallies and many German teachers were discussing the war in class is also a critical contrast to American parents accepting expert advice and maintaining normal routines during wartime—not to mention American teachers following rules to not discuss the war or its images at risk of unemployment (Sanchez, 2004, May 15).

In summary, several aspects of American culture—media, family, school—working together account for both the U.S. media trend we saw and the attitudes of the American children Ellen Seiter and I encountered in San Diego (chap. 2, this volume). Cultural norms that characterize American children in this day and age as needing extreme protection, shielding from adult issues, and delicate caretaking are reflected in the protectionist themes we saw in 2003 media stories. The routines of the U.S. press—event coverage, common frames, expert sources, public relations—also explain, in part, the surge of expert-centered articles during the combat phase of the war and the move to other topics when the adult panic died down. Rules at school districts and professional advice that led teachers and parents to avoid discussing or showing war images to children led to the children's apathy during the wartime school year, but then an involved teacher led to their engagement the following school year.

Together, the media, parents, and schools produce powerful cultural visions of childhood and reflections of the adult world in which they live. When it comes to war, this study suggests that American children are less engaged and more protected than some of their counterparts around the world. The U.S. media and our children reflect this, and time will tell what larger effects this has on the world political stage.

NOTES

1. A preliminary analysis of news coverage during the 1991 Iraq invasion, the Vietnam War, WWII, and WWI confirms this hypothesis. cursory news article searches revealed more than twice as many articles on "parents, children, and Iraq" during the 2003 war than the 1991 war, and only a miniscule percentage of this kind of article during Vietnam. Further analysis of this historical comparison would reveal more detail, but it seems evident that the trend of these articles hit its peak during the 2003 war.
2. Search terms used were *children, parents, Iraq and children, parents, war*.
3. Only 20 themes appear in this table, not 22, because I omitted two subthemes of "Encourage Participation," which I had also separated into "supporting the troops," "helping Iraqi civilian victims," and "going to demonstrations." The "Encourage participation" category encompassed all of these themes and was the advice we found more open than protective (whatever the type of participation), so I used only that category in the groupings. This way, also, the number of protective versus open themes was even and more straightforward to analyze.

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