

CHILDREN'S WRITINGS ON THE INTERNET ABOUT THE WAR IN IRAQ

*A Comparison of Dutch and German
Submissions to Guestbooks on Children's
TV News Programs*

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Children grow up today with all kinds of media: Television, video games, radio, newspapers, magazines, and Internet. Indeed, many children have their own TV and VCR set as well as an Internet-linked computer in their room and carry their own cell phone with them all day (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001; Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). With the abundance of messages transmitted by all these media, it is hard for children to avoid information about harsh and sensitive events that happen every day. Although some media producers have decided to try to provide children with a safe harbor and to refrain from devoting attention to international conflicts and disasters (see Strohmer, chap. 7, in this volume), other producers do not refrain from informing them about daily events. In support of the latter position, we know that many children do want to be informed about the news because they want to know what is going on in the world (Hoffner & Haefner, 1994). Indeed, according to Walma van der Molen, Valkenburg, and Pecters (2002), many children are active news seekers: In the higher elementary school grades, most children watch the news regularly during the week, and younger children (up to age 8) watch it a few times per week.

As further proof that children do make use of news programs on TV and react to the content of these programs, this chapter describes how German and Dutch children perceived the war in Iraq early in 2003 by means of a content analysis of their postings on Internet guestbooks related to web sites of children's news programs. Specifically, it focused on the children's opposition to or justification for the war and their reasons for their position; the extent to which they expressed positive or negative emotions in their writings; and the solutions they proposed as a way to end the war.

What News Programs Bring to Children

Watching the news may influence children in two ways: The news may have a positive effect on children's well-being, and it may have a negative impact. The positive impact of the news on children may be, first, that their general knowledge about the world increases as a result of following the world events, and second it may give them the opportunity to form their own opinion on society. For these reasons, children in many European countries not only follow the news aimed at the adult audience, but also frequently watch news bulletins that are specifically tailored to their interests. In England, for example, they watch *Newsround*, in the Netherlands *Jeugdjournaal*, and in Germany *Logo!* Children's news programs usually attract large shares of the young audience and are well understood and remembered by children (Gunter, Furnham, & Griffiths, 2000; Walma van der Molen & Van der Voort, 2000a, 2000b). Thus, it may be claimed that children's news programs may help children to cope with the world they live in (see Messenger-Davies, chap. 8, this volume).

If children do not choose to watch or listen to the news, they still may be confronted with it when looking for other TV or radio programs or when their parents view the news (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996). In such and other cases, the confrontation with heavy issues in news and current affair programs on TV may have negative effects on children, including the prevalence of strong emotional reactions such as becoming frightened or disturbed (Greenberg & Gantz, 1993; Wright, Kunkel, Pinon, & Huston, 1989) or even cause them to experience posttraumatic stress disorders (Duggal, Berezkin, & John, 2002; Redlener & Grant, 2002). The harmful effects of TV have been related to the viewing of *regular* bad news, such as reports of crime and traffic accidents, but also of *intense* bad news, such as the 1986 Shuttle explosion, the 1998 and 2001 floods in Europe, international conflicts (e.g., the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian war or the Chechen conflict in southern Russia), and terrorist attacks as in the case of September 11 (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996; Pfefferbaum, 2001; Pfefferbaum et al., 2001; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). Viewing and hearing about such harsh news events

are likely to have a severe impact on the emotional well-being of children; because they may consider themselves potential victims of such events.

What Children Do With News About War: Reactions on the Internet

When it became clear early in 2003 that the war in Iraq was unavoidable, a decision was made to investigate how children would cope cognitively and emotionally with this terrifying event. The researchers assumed that, although for most children "Operation Iraqi Freedom" would take place in a country thousands of miles away, it was expected to be an issue relevant to all children. Further, it was assumed that no matter where children lived, they would have to deal with the sufferings of other people, the political and/or economic reasons of the governments of the countries involved or not involved in the war, as well as the unforeseeable outcomes of the attacks. As part of a joint research project carried out by IZI in Munich, Germany, and the Youth and Media Expert Center in Utrecht, the Netherlands, the study reported here focused on the reactions of German and Dutch children to the war in Iraq as expressed in written submissions to Internet sites related to children's news programs.

These two countries are comparable because Germany and the Netherlands are socially and economically quite similar (e.g., the way children are raised in families and at school, as well as children's media consumption; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001). Furthermore, the spoken and written languages are highly comparable, suggesting that perhaps misinterpretations will be less of a concern when comparing Dutch and German children's reactions.

Despite the similarities between the countries, the comparison between German and Dutch children was deemed important because there was one major difference—the general view on the war. Dutch society was undecided, whereas clear opposition to the American initiative to advance, "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was expressed throughout German society and politics. In the Netherlands, some politicians and opinion leaders overtly supported the U.S. point of view, but other Dutch political parties and human organizations protested, arguing that the United States should wait until granted permission by the UN to advance the use of military force. Still others stressed their doubts and did not take a stand. Although these debates and points of view among adults in both countries were well known, it was unknown whether children in both countries shared these same doubts or had clear points of view.

Specifically, we looked at children's reactions to the war as presented in children's postings in guestbooks and forums that are part of the Web sites that accompany children's TV news programs. We had three reasons to

investigate children's views by means of the Internet. First, the vast majority of children growing up in Western Europe today have access to the Internet at home or outside the home (e.g., at school or at the public library; Huysmans & De Haan, 2002; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001). Thus, the chances of obtaining a representative sample of children were thought to be rather high.

Second, as with children's news broadcasts, it is known that children are also avid users of the Internet among other reasons, to be informed on political, cultural or environmental news topics and to exchange views on these issues with other children. According to Valkenburg and Soeters (2001), next to entertainment seeking, retrieving information is the second most important activity for children on the Internet. Four out of five children reported that information seeking is important to them when describing their favorite Web site, followed by half who claimed that expressing one's opinion (as they do by MSN or in chat rooms and in guestbooks and web logs) is the next important Internet activity. Children are primarily interested in expressing themselves in order to remain active with their existing network of friends (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). However, children also often use the Internet to exchange views on matters of importance to them with unknown persons on the Internet (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003).

Finally, we chose to investigate children's reactions to the war by means of the Internet because it is known that, generally, users of the Internet more easily express emotions and tend to present personal views because of the relative anonymity of the medium (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). Thus, analyzing children's spontaneous contributions on Websites offers a unique possibility to find out more about their true feelings and opinions.

Children's Web Sites Related to News Programs

Many of the larger Web portals of children's TV channels in the Netherlands and in Germany dealt with the topic of the war and more or less actively invited children to express their views in the weeks before and during the war on Iraq. For example, in Germany, the Web portals of the public children's channel KI.KA at www.kika.de and of the public broadcaster ZDF at [www.tivi.de](http://www tivi.de) offered a wide range of varying services: presenting facts and information on the war, giving advice for children who were worried, as well as offering a guestbook in which children could enter their own opinions. Children were invited on and off air to join the Web site and post their opinions and questions. At www.kindernetz.de, a Web site of another German public broadcaster SWR, children were able to post their opinions about the war in a forum.

In the Netherlands, two children's news programs that are regularly shown at the public children's channel Z@ppelin specifically invited children at the end of its broadcasts to express their opinions about the war and to submit questions on their Web sites. The first was www.jeugdjournaal.nl, a Web site related to the daily children's news program, *het NOS Jeugdjournaal*, which provides background information about the news presented on TV. It also has a guestbook in which children can write freely about anything they want related to the news. At the second Dutch children's news-related Web site, www.teleacnot.nl/weekjournaal, children received background information about the news presented in their weekly school TV program, *Weekjournaal*, and were asked to react to polls and statements on news topics. They were also invited to express their opinion on the war in a forum.

Goals of the Present Study

The study described here had four major goals. First, we wanted to document what children in the Netherlands and Germany thought about the war in Iraq during the first week of "Operation Iraqi Freedom." As noted earlier, in general, Germany and the Netherlands had different political views on the war, but it was not known at the time what children thought about the reasons given for the war. Second, we wanted to identify the arguments used by children when stating their arguments for or against the war. Further, we sought to determine whether in these arguments, children perceived the conflict as a war between countries or as a personified battle between two state leaders. Expanding on this point, it can be noted that, along with emotional reasons, several economic and political arguments were used by politicians and opinion leaders in the general debate about the war. However, we questioned whether these arguments were also important for children. As Atwood and Donnelly (2002) stated, the way children perceive and experience devastating events depends very much on their developmental level. For example, younger children up to 11 years possess a crystallized system of thinking, but often concrete experiences serve as an anchor for their thoughts. These children may have less understanding of global distance, and therefore may be frightened that the war will take place in their own country. Older children—roughly between 11 and 14 years of age—are more capable of formal operational thought and logical and abstract reasoning. Such children generally have their own well-developed sense of prescriptive morality, about how the world should be. They may question things from a moral standpoint, come up with their own solutions, be confused between good and bad, and vary in their opinions on a daily basis, an outcome of the attempt to determine their own identity. Accordingly, the study sought to portray the way the audience of children's news programs,

which is roughly between the ages of 8 and 14 years, related to the conflict in their debates.

Third, the study aimed to establish the extent to which children in both countries expressed their emotions when writing about the war. During the first Gulf War, neither parents nor children showed strong emotional reactions in the Netherlands probably because of the policy of the American military authorities to keep scenes of the wounded, dying, and dead off the TV screen (Van der Voort, Van Lil, & Vooijs, 1993). However, because prior to "Operation Iraqi Freedom" it was announced that so-called embedded journalists were to report live from the battlefield, it was expected that this time more horrifying images of the war would be shown in the media, and that even racism among children at schools would increase (Arslan & Huinder, 2003).

Finally, the present study sought to portray what the children in the Netherlands and Germany saw as remedies for ending the conflict. In the general public debate, opinion leaders often predicted how long the war would last and how it might end. Similarly, the study wanted to determine how children perceived the duration of "Operation Iraqi Freedom" and what their ideas were on ending the conflict.

METHOD

The Sample of Children's Postings on News Programs' Web Sites

The Web portals of children's news and current affairs programs were monitored during the first week of the war in Iraq (i.e., from March 20–26, 2003), in Germany and in the Netherlands. The thousands of postings children submitted to the guestbooks during this 7-day period were retrieved. Postings that were not understandable or readable, that did not relate to the war in Iraq, or that were posted more than once were eliminated from the collection. This resulted in a final sample of 3,417 unique messages. This sample contained more German (2,149) than Dutch messages (1,268), and many more postings from girls (61.4%) than from boys (26.8%); 11.8% of the messages were not gender identifiable. Few children (3.3%) included their age in their postings. We assume that most children who submitted messages to the guestbooks were 8 to 14 years old (i.e., the target audience of the children's news programs). However, because the children were not asked to state their age, this assumption could not be verified.

A coding scheme was developed to measure specific features of the writings of children in both countries before trained coders in Germany and the Netherlands analyzed the children's messages. Specific attention was given

to the German and Dutch definitions of all categories included in the coding scheme. The Dutch coding form's reliability was tested by comparing the work of two independent coders on a sample of 130 messages (10.3%) taken at random from the Dutch subsample. As can be seen in the next section, the intercoder reliability, for each feature expressed in Scott's (1955) π , was found to be satisfactory.

Coding Scheme

Each posting was analyzed in terms of four content features and five formal features. The content features included *favorableness*, *reasons*, *solutions*, and *emotions* each of which was measured as follows:

Favorableness to the War. Each submission was coded in regard to whether the child favored the war, opposed the war, mentioned both positive and negative sides of the war resulting in a middle position, or did not mention a position to the war (Scott's $\pi = 0.91$).

Reasons for the Child's Point of View. Each message was analyzed for the prevalence of specific arguments used by children to explain their position in regard to the war. In most cases such reasons usually were introduced by means of phrases such as, "... , because. . ." In other cases, the reasons were intrinsically present in argumentative text phrases. The following 18 arguments used by children were identified and coded: (a) people die, get hurt, or are victimized; (b) children die, get hurt, or are victimized; (c) war is just stupid, dumb; (d) Bush is dumb, stupid; (e) Bush wants all the power to himself; (f) Bush acts single-handedly; (g) Bush only wants oil; (h) Hussein is dumb, stupid; (i) Hussein is a dictator; (j) the UN (and other countries) did not agree; (k) Iraq possesses dangerous weapons; (l) Iraq is a dictatorial regime; (m) the United States of America delivered weapons to Iraq; (n) the United States of America wants power in the Middle East; (o) it provides Iraq with a better future; (p) buildings are destroyed; (q) the environment is destroyed; and (r) it [war] doesn't provide any future perspective (Scott's π for these reasons on average = 0.91, varying from 0.77 to 1.00).

Remedies to End the War. To establish the kinds of solutions children advanced as a way to end the conflict, the analysis sought to identify whether the child proposed one or more of the following remedies: (a) Saddam Hussein disappears, surrenders, or is captured; (b) there is reconciliation between both countries, or Bush and Hussein talk with each other and shake hands; (c) find another solution instead of war; (d) organize a demonstration; (e) just ask for peace; (f) Iraq discloses its weapons; (g) continue the arms

inspections; and (h) stop the war right away (Scott's π for these eight solutions on average = 0.77, varying from 0.44 [finding another solution] to 1.00).

Emotions. Analyses for each posting determined whether the child explicitly referred to experiencing the following emotions: (a) fear or extreme worries for themselves, friends or relatives, their own country, or outbreak of a third world war; (b) compassion or sympathy for the Iraqi people, Iraqi children, Iraqi soldiers, or the Coalition soldiers; (c) anger or indignation on the war; (d) sadness about the war; and (e) happiness about a positive perspective for the Iraqi people or about the humanitarian aid (Scott's π for these five emotions averaged = 0.91; varying from 0.66 to 1.00).

In addition to the four content features, the children's writings were also analyzed in regard to their form. In particular, an attempt was undertaken to determine whether the child used emphases to draw attention to a special comment or contribution by using (a) capitals; (b) special characters or punctuation marks (e.g., !!!!!); (c) superlatives such as *really, really . . .* or *very, very . . .*; or (d) poetic phrases. Finally, the total number of words the child used in the submission was counted.

FINDINGS

Children's Writings: Most Children Opposed the War

The most common point of view about the war in both countries was explicit opposition to the war: Almost four out of every five children wrote that they did not agree with the war activities going on in Iraq (see the bottom row in Table 5.1). However, a small number of all children did support the war, and an equal number were indecisive. Finally, in 13.8% of the postings, children wrote about the Iraq war, but gave no information about their position in regard to it.

When Dutch and German children are compared, a significant difference appears vis-à-vis their position in regard to the war, $\chi^2(3) = 206.10$; $p < .001$. The difference in the pro stance is substantial as shown by the effect-size measure *phi*, which is 0.25. German children stated more often their disagreement with the war (83.9%) in comparison with Dutch children (67.4%), whereas the latter took an indecisive position significantly more often (8.8%) or expressed a positive view on the war (8.3%). Few German children favored the war (1.9%) or hardly ever expressed their doubts about the good and bad sides of the war (1.4%). In regard to gender, boys were somewhat more often in favor, and girls were more often against the war, $\chi^2(3) = 73.55$; $p < .001$; *phi* = .16.

TABLE 5.1.
Distribution in Percentages of Children's Internet Postings
with a Positive, a Mixed Positive/Negative, a Negative,
or With No View on the War in Iraq by Country

COUNTRY	FAVORABLENESS TOWARD THE WAR			
	POSITIVE	MIXED	NEGATIVE	NO VIEW
Netherlands ($n = 1,268$)	8.3	8.8	64.7	15.5
Germany ($n = 2,149$)	1.9	1.4	83.9	12.8
Total	4.4	4.3	77.4	13.8

Note: n stands for the number of Internet postings analyzed.

Reasons for the Child's Points of View

Most children explained explicitly their opinion about the war in their messages. Altogether, the children used 18 different arguments. No significant differences appear between when German and Dutch children are compared in regard to the total number of arguments used in their writings. On average, German children mentioned .99 arguments per submission, and Dutch children used .97 arguments per posting. The children in both countries did differ, however, on the variety of arguments applied, as discussed next.

For reasons of brevity, the 18 arguments were regrouped into nine argument groups (see Fig. 5.1). This clustering was done after a principal components analysis was performed on the data of the 18 arguments, leading to identification of 9 distinct factors. The most common line of argument applied by the children was that *people and/or children are being injured or are dying*; 31.8% of all submissions contained this argument. As Figure 5.1 shows, however, German children referred somewhat more often to this argument than did Dutch children, $\chi^2(1) = 34.49$; $p < .001$; *phi* = .10. Girls mentioned this argument somewhat more often (35.2%) than boys (27.1%), $\chi^2(1) = 19.30$; $p < .001$; *phi* = 0.08. The argument that people should not become victims of war was used more often by children with a negative opinion about the war, as well as by children who were indecisive; this is in comparison with children lacking a view on the war and children who favored the war, $\chi^2(1) = 154.71$; $p < .001$; *phi* = .21). When discussing the appropriateness of the war, German children mentioned the emotional argu-

ment *war is just dumb or stupid* significantly more often than did Dutch children. Almost one out of every three of the German children's submission's contained this statement, whereas only 5% of the Dutch writings referred to the stupidity of war, $\chi^2(1) = 347.0$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .24$.

As compared with German children, Dutch children used the other arguments more often to underline their position in regard to the war. As can be seen in Figure 5.1, Dutch children referred in an emotional way to the main leaders in the war more often than did German children, stating that either *Bush or Hussein is a dumb person*, $\chi^2(1) = 33.31$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .10$. This argument was used somewhat more often by children who wrote simultaneously about the negative and positive sides of the war, as compared

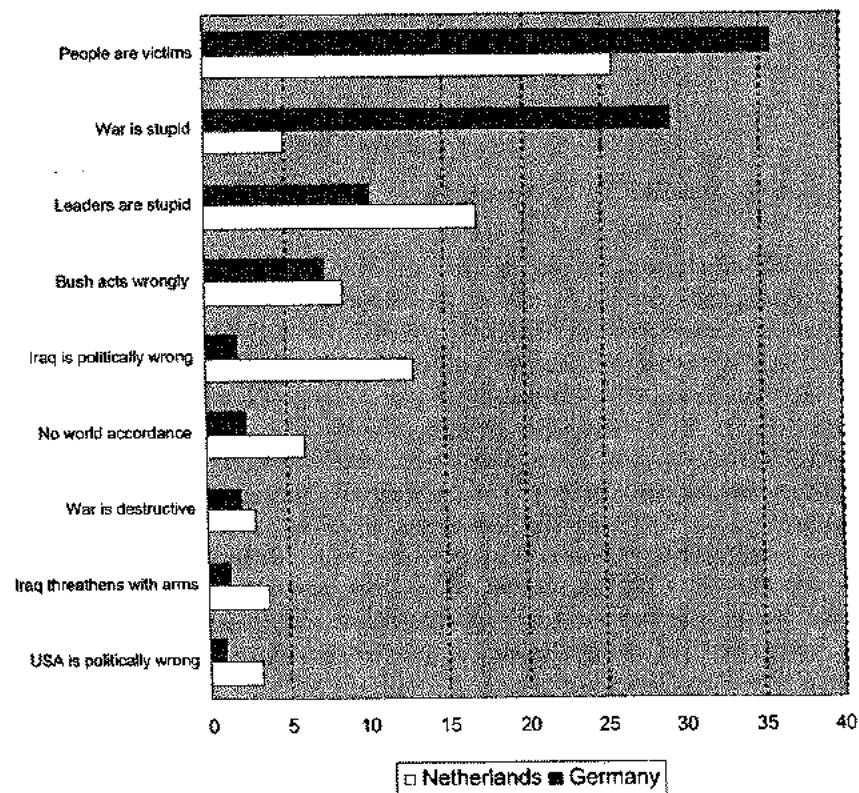


FIG. 5.1. Percentages of children's Internet postings containing a specific argument to motivate their position on the war in the Netherlands ($n = 1,268$) and in Germany ($n = 2,149$). Multiple arguments per writing possible.

with children who either favored the war, children who opposed to it, or children who had no view, $\chi^2(3) = 17.55$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .07$.

Dutch children also applied four political and/or economical reasons when arguing their view on the war. As such, Dutch children stated more often than German children that (a) *Iraq or Hussein is politically wrong* because they are dictatorial and the Iraqi people deserve a fairer situation, $\chi^2(1) = 170.27$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .22$; (b) *Bush/USA acts alone without the UN's accordance*, $\chi^2(1) = 28.33$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .09$; (c) *the USA has political interests*, such as wanting power in the region and it delivered arms to Iraq in the past, $\chi^2(1) = 26.67$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .09$; and finally (d), *Iraq possesses dangerous weapons*, $\chi^2(1) = 18.20$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .07$). The statements about *Iraq or Hussein obstructing a fair future for Iraq* and *dangerous weapons in Iraq* were mostly used by children with a positive opinion about the war and by children who had both a positive and a negative view simultaneously, $\chi^2(3) = 515.83$ and 133.80 , respectively; $p < .001$; $\phi = 0.39$ and 0.20 , respectively. Finally, German and Dutch children did not differ significantly in respect to the number of statements in their writings about *Bush wants power or oil* and *the destructive effects on buildings, the environment, and the future*. However, children with a negative attitude toward the war criticized Bush's wrongful desires more often than did all other children, $\chi^2(3) = 20.40$; $p < .001$; $\phi = 0.08$.

As can be concluded from the ranking of the arguments, children did perceive "Operation Iraqi Freedom" as a personified conflict to a great extent. Both the third and fourth arguments related to Bush's and Hussein's qualities or personal intentions. Arguments that related to the intentions of Iraq and the United States involved in the conflict as states only ranked fifth, eighth, and last. Interestingly, the Dutch children stated their opinion about the war on Iraq with arguments about the state leaders more often than did German children, particularly in regard to Hussein.

What Should Be Done, According to the Children?

In their messages, children and preteens also wrote about what they wished would happen to end the conflict. Figure 5.2 shows the prevalence of the hopes, demands, and solutions they presented. The most common suggestion was for the armies of both countries to cease military action immediately. On average, about 15% of the Dutch and German children's writings included a statement such as "Stop the war!" Children with a negative disposition toward the war, as well as children who simultaneously mentioned a positive and a negative view on the war, were most inclined to suggest that the war should end immediately, $\chi^2(3) = 79.59$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .15$. Demands that warring parties "Make peace" or "Find another solution but war" were

somewhat less prevalent, but could also be found in equal numbers in the messages in both countries.

Dutch and German children differed, however, in their writings in three respects. First, as compared with German children, Dutch children wrote significantly more often that George Bush and Saddam Hussein should shake hands or start reconciliation talks, $\chi^2(1) = 62.44; p < .001; phi = .14$. Second, Dutch children wrote somewhat more often that Iraq should disclose its weapons, $\chi^2(1) = 14.25; p < .001; phi = .07$. Finally, significantly many more children in the Netherlands also suggested that Hussein should make himself scarce, be captured, or be killed, $\chi^2(1) = 207.55; p < .001; phi = .25$. This demand was presented mostly by children who had a favorable

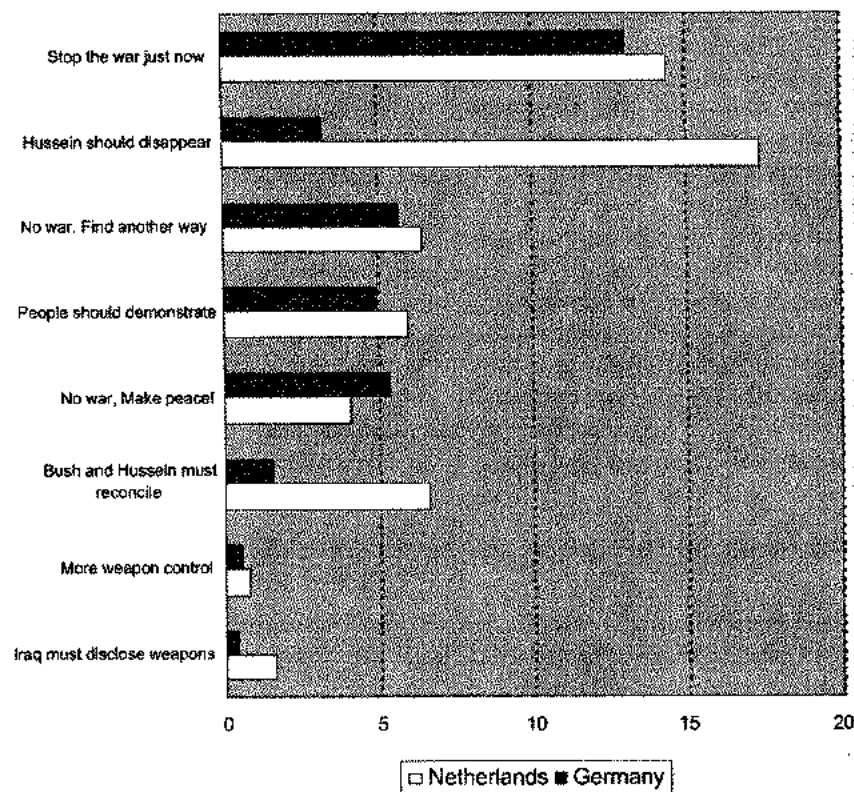


FIG. 5.2. Percentages of children's writings in the Netherlands ($n = 1,268$) and in Germany ($n = 2,149$) containing a specific solution to end the war in Iraq. Multiple solutions per writing possible.

view on the war and by children who had mixed feelings on the war, $\chi^2(3) = 254.44; p < .001; phi = .27$.

Children Feel, But Are Not Particularly Afraid

Table 5.2 shows the prevalence of five different types of emotions children wrote about in their postings on the Web sites of children's news programs. With .34 emotions per submission, Dutch children on average referred more often to their feelings about the war than German children, who had .19 emotions per writing, $t(3,415) = 8.28; p < .001$. The emotion mentioned most often was explicit sympathy the children had for the people involved in the war. As Table 5.2 shows, sympathy for the people involved was expressed about four times more often by Dutch children in their writings than by German children. On average, girls sympathized more often with the war victims (15.1%) than did boys (7.5%), $\chi^2(1) = 32.49; p < .001; phi = .10$; whereas children who had mixed feelings about the justification for the war were most apt to express their sympathy, as compared with the other children, $\chi^2(3) = 73.05; p < .001; phi = .15$. Children felt most regret for Iraqi civilians in general (10.3%), whereas relatively few children specifically mentioned their feelings for the Iraqi children (2.9%).

The second most mentioned emotion in the children's writings was fear. However, contrary to what might have been expected, this emotion was not a principal emotion expressed by the children. Only 4.5% of all postings contained phrases in which children expressed fears for themselves, their rel-

TABLE 5.2.
Percentage of Children's Internet Postings Containing an Explicitly
Mentioned Emotion With Regard to the War in Iraq by Country

EMOTION	NETHERLANDS		GERMANY		TOTAL	$\chi^2(1)$	PHI
	(N = 1,268)	(N = 2,149)	(N = 1,268)	(N = 2,149)			
Sympathy	23.0	6.3	12.5	204.21***	0.25		
Fear	5.2	4.1	4.5	2.27	—		
Anger	1.5	5.1	3.8	28.78***	0.09		
Sadness	1.1	1.1	1.1	0.01	—		
Happiness	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.01	—		

*** $p < .001$.

atives, their country, or outbreak of a third World War. Neither Dutch nor German children with different opinions on the war differed in the number of fears mentioned. On average, children in both countries referred equally to fears in their writings, although German children wrote more often about their country being affected, whereas Dutch children feared more often for themselves or for acquaintances. The prevalence of fear-related statements did differ for writings by boys and girls, although minimally; the latter referred somewhat more often to fears (5.6%) than did boys (2.7%) $\chi^2(1) = 4.24$; $p < .050$; $\phi = .04$).

Anger was a third emotion expressed particularly often by German children. Whereas only 1.5% of the Dutch writings contained phrases in which children mentioned their anger or indignation about the war, in Germany 5.1% of the children's postings referred to this emotion. In addition, children who opposed the war especially expressed their indignation $\chi^2(3) = 16.49$; $p < .001$; $\phi = .07$). Finally, neither explicit sadness nor happiness was mentioned by either the German or Dutch children in the mails they posted on the guestbooks of the Web sites of the children's news programs.

The Formal Features: Another Way of Expressing Your Feelings

In general, boys produced a bit shorter submissions than did girls (mean length 29 vs. 36 words; $t(3,011) = 5.66$; $p < .001$). On average, Dutch and German children used the same number of words (35) to express their ideas about the war. However, postings by both countries differed greatly in terms of length and amount of detail ($SD = 24.8$ and 38.9 , and the range is 109 and 577, respectively, for Dutch and German submissions). Thus, the sample included both many short, concise messages as well as many long ones whose complex lines of argumentation reflected the depth of children's and preteens' preoccupation with the topic.

The prevalence of words written in capitals and the special use of unusual punctuation marks was rather similar in the texts produced by Dutch and German children. In both countries 13.9% of the postings contained extraordinary emphasizing capitals (e.g.; "NO WAR"), whereas in 21.9% and 18.6% of the Dutch and German writings, respectively, specific punctuation marks (e.g., !!!!!) were used to underline the child's view on the war in Iraq. Dutch and German children did not significantly differ in their ways of expressing their emotions through use of formal features, $\chi^2(1) = .01$ for capitals and 5.40 for punctuation marks, respectively. Children in both countries did differ from each other, however, in the use of superlatives (e.g. very, very . . .) and the use of poetic phrases. German children did not use these emotionally valued stylistic features in their writings on the guestbooks. Among the Dutch postings, 16.7% contained the unusual use of

superlatives, $\chi^2(1) = 379.26$; $p < .001$), and 4.5% of the Dutch postings contained rhymes or short poems, $\chi^2(1) = 98.24$; $p < 0.001$. The difference with regard to the use of superlatives is significant as shown from the effect-size measure ϕ , which is 0.33; the prevalence of rhymes ϕ is 0.17.

DISCUSSION

Children's Use of the Multi-Mass-Media Environment

When American and coalition troops started "Operation Iraqi Freedom" in March 2003, the media reported on it extensively and children, too, became involved. Many children used the opportunity offered by the TV-related Web sites to propagate their perspectives and viewpoints on the war. Children wrote whether they opposed the war, supported their position with arguments, expressed their feelings, and wrote about what they thought should be done. Thus, this study makes clear that, due to the widespread availability of modern media, children too had a chance to participate in the public debate about the war on Iraq. Second, it is evident that serious topics like war and terrorism are part of children's discourse, and many children are willing to participate in the debate on these issues. For example, on a normal day the Dutch children's news program receives about 90 messages from children. However, during the first week of the Iraq war, they received on average twice as many submissions.

No War! But Not for All Children

In general, children who sent in submissions clearly rejected the war, as shown by the vast majority (77%) of the writings children posted on the Web sites of children's news programs in the Netherlands and Germany. Political or economical reasons are not sufficient in and of themselves for these children to support a war operation, especially when civilians become victims of such action. This basic idea of human justice was reason enough for most children to disapprove of "Operation Iraqi Freedom."

The study also demonstrates that there are significant differences between children in regard to the reasons or arguments used to support their position. Within a country, children may vary in their ideas about what should be done and why "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was or was not justified. For example, boys and girls clearly differed in their position in regard to approval/disapproval of the war and their feelings for the war victims. Boys were significantly more in favor of it, whereas more girls opposed the war, expressing as well more sympathy for the victims of war. These find-

ings are in accordance with most communication research that indicates that, in general, males are more interested and less critical about entertainment violence in the media than are females, who in turn usually react more emotionally to images of violence (Goldstein, 1998). As this study indicates, such stances apply not only to fictional violence, but also to news reports on actual violence.

Different Social-Political Environments

This study demonstrates that, despite geographical proximity, children from seemingly similar, adjacent countries can also vary in their position in regard to the presence or absence of justification for a war, arguments in support of their position, as well as what should be done about a conflict. In the German messages, an overwhelming majority of the children positioned themselves against the war and supported their point of view by means of a general emotion-laden statement that war is stupid and the argument that people suffer. Therefore, for the most part, German children demanded that the war should stop immediately, period. In contrast, although a majority of the Dutch children was against the war too, their submissions included many statements that expressed arguments both for and against an attack on Iraq, and many children wrote that they supported the war. As a result of these diverse points of view, Dutch children presented a broader range of arguments in support of their views. Dutch children not only argued that they do not support the war because people are victimized, but also gave more often politically oriented arguments, especially Iraq's possession of weapons and the unfair dictatorial regime, and to a lesser extent relating to the interest of the United States in the Middle East and the unilateral action taken by the U.S.-led Allies without the UN's accord. In comparison with the Germans, the Dutch children more frequently proposed that Hussein should leave, be captured, or be killed, or that Hussein and Bush should reconcile.

German and Dutch children also had different ways of expressing their emotions. In particular, Dutch children expressed more often their sympathy for the victims of the war and used superlatives and rhymes more often in their writings; to a lesser extent, they reacted emotionally to Bush and Hussein, calling them stupid more often than their counterparts in the study. German children, too, expressed their emotions, but significantly more often referred to the war as stupid and shared their general indignation about the war more frequently.

The different types of discourse that children in the Netherlands and Germany applied can be explained, initially, by acknowledging that a different general political debate took place in both countries. In general, public opinion was mainly negative in Germany about the war, whereas in the

Netherlands politicians and opinion leaders were divided in regard to the U.S.-led war on Iraq. Because the political debates in Germany and the Netherlands were prominent in the broadcast media received in the homes, they may well have had some influence on the opinions of parents and children alike. Therefore it is understandable that Dutch and German children also differed significantly in their general justification for or disapproval of "Operation Iraqi Freedom." In addition, because opinion on the war in Dutch society was divided, it may have been more necessary for children involved in the debate to use a broader range of arguments, feelings, and solutions to make their position clear. That is, Dutch children had to address both sides to emphasize their own mixed statement or to convince others who had a different opinion in the debate. Therefore, based on this study we cannot conclude that German children, as compared to Dutch children, lack political or economical awareness or sympathy for the people involved in the war. Instead, this explanation claims that there simply was less reason for the German children to write about Hussein, the alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the role of the UN, people being victimized, or Bush and Hussein shaking hands. This is due to the fact that it is likely to be the case that most implicitly agreed on these issues (see also Götz, chap. 2, this volume).

A Personified War

As was clear from the ranking of the arguments used by children to justify their approval of the war, children more often wrote about the international conflict as a war between George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein than as a war between opposing countries. This stance was also often present in the solutions offered by the children—namely, that both leaders should shake hands or that Hussein should be captured or killed. Dutch children more often wrote about the state leaders than German children did.

The personification of the war most probable is also related to the way the news media reported about "Operation Iraqi Freedom" in the two countries. It is customary in media reports of the news to pay a lot of attention to the speeches and actions of state leaders. This may be due to the assumption that their behavior and statements can easily be used as a symbol of a country's decisions and actions. The audience, and perhaps children more easily than adults, may adopt these symbolic representations and apply them in turn in their debates. Actually, the Dutch children's news broadcasts in the first week of the war on Iraq did indeed pay a lot more attention to both state leaders than the German news did, and especially quite often reported on Saddam Hussein (see Nikken & Walma van der Molen, chap. 9, this volume).

Are Children's Fears Related to the News Images, Too?

Children in this study did not often write that they were frightened or worried. This observation supports findings of a survey conducted by Walma van der Molen among children ages 10 to 12 years at schools in Amsterdam in the Netherlands (see chap. 4, this volume). One explanation may be that the news about "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was not so frightening, at least not for children in countries who were far away from the actual battlefield and not actively involved in the war operations. Different results might have emerged, for example, for children in a country like Israel that expected to be directly affected or by children growing up in coalition countries (e.g. the U.S., Spain, Australia, or the United Kingdom). An additional explanation may be that the reports from inside the war by embedded journalists were not available during the first weeks of the war, and that the reporting was mediated, less visual in terms of footage, and more sterile, giving children less reason to be horrified. The previously mentioned study by Nikken and Walma van der Molen does indicate, indeed, that in the first week of "Operation Iraqi Freedom" the children's news in both countries did show intense emotional footage, especially in the Netherlands. On average, however, the possible distressing material was only a little violent and not very detailed. In addition, the Dutch and German news producers used other consolation strategies, such as interviews with experts and children, and reassuring comments by the news presenters.

The "Unmighty" Journalist

The finding that children hardly wrote about the destructive effects of the war on the cities and the environment in Iraq, too, is interesting. In general, images of buildings destroyed after bombing has taken place or pictures of people as victims of war are often shown on the news. In the Dutch and German children's news, during the first week of "Operation Iraqi Freedom," almost one third of the air time devoted to the war conveyed information about the suffering of the people in Iraq, including the devastation of houses, schools, hospitals, and so on (Nikken & Walma van der Molen, chap. 9, this volume). Such images are important for news programs in order to show the audience the impact of war, because one image of a destroyed school or hospital or of a corpse lying in the street tells more than a thousand words. However, although the Dutch and German children did refer to people as victims, they did not write particularly often about the physical and destructive aspects of the war. Apparently, identification with the people in Iraq was the most important aspect of the war in these children's opinion. In addition, it indicates that what the news brings to the

audience is not automatically copied, but rather it is perceived and then used in a way that relates to the child's interests, abilities, values, and feelings.

CONCLUDING REMARK

As Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout (2005) concluded, the present generation of children truly is a media generation, devoting more than a quarter of each day to media content, be it via TV, games, VCRs and DVDs, or Internet-linked computers. In addition, today an enormous number of children use these media in their own bedrooms and without much parental guidance. Therefore, we must emphasize the growing importance of children's exposure to TV and related Web sites on the Internet. Whether desired by broadcasters and Web site masters, these professionals do need to recognize that they, too, have a role in and share responsibility for raising children. Therefore, they have to take the young audience seriously, especially when it comes to providing information on difficult and complex political topics such as war.

For broadcasters and Web site managers, this emerging situation creates interesting challenges that require an investment of efforts in developing their outlets, as well as finding a balance in their responsibilities for entertaining and informing. Not only should children be offered amusement and diversion as a safe haven, they should also be given the opportunity to participate in contemporary debates. By writing to a children's channel or program, children can become politically active and very much involved in their own society. In Western countries, in particular, the Internet opens up many opportunities, because making contact and proclaiming an opinion on the Internet is easy for children. In other countries, where children do not yet have the opportunity to use the Internet, other older forms of communication should be offered by the editors and producers of children's TV (e.g., having children write letters or make a phone call to the children's channel or programs).

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