

TALKING ABOUT MY GENERATION

*A Critical Examination of Children's BBC
Newsround Web Site Discussions About
War, Conflict, and Terrorism*

Cynthia Carter

re: The Holy Quran

- [sweet_cherry_pie](#) - 212th post - 13 Jun 2005 16:34
- well yeah, i mean our generation is misunderstood, we know lots about the political world, and we have valid views about things!
- [Reply](#)

re: The Holy Quran

- [*©-HARMONY-©*](#) - 3629th post - 13 Jun 2005 19:33
- i know. tony blair should really come on to this website and talk to us, so that he can listen to what we say. maybe in that way he can understand!
- [Reply](#)

re: The Holy Quran

- [sweet_cherry_pie](#) - 257th post - 14 Jun 2005 15:49
- yeah. it would be cool to do that, then at least he can see how much we know and it could just make a difference!
- [Reply](#)¹

This online interaction by "sweet_cheery_pie" and "HARMONY" on UK Children's BBC (CBBC) *Newsround's* message board "What's in the News" offers an exciting insight into the ways in which children's Web news is already engaging young people with what is happening in the world. On this board as well as in other areas of the *Newsround* Web site, one can find daily evidence of young people's knowledge about political events and their willingness to engage in critical, public debate, tempered by an awareness that adults rarely show an interest in or take seriously what most young people have to say about current affairs. Web chat data that I have collected for the purposes of this chapter also show that young people are sometimes quite frustrated by adults (parents, teachers, politicians, and journalists) who expect that young people will be interested in political events while largely ignoring what they have to say. Is it any wonder, then, that once many young people reach voting age, many do not feel like full citizens and therefore have little enthusiasm to participate in elections?

Exactly what is meant by the term *citizenship* is a fiercely contested terrain in western, democratic societies today (Crick, 2000; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Jones 2003; Roche, 1999; Stevenson, 2004).² Public participation in elections (both local and national) has been regarded as a growing cause for concern, particularly among young people. In the 2005 General Election in the United Kingdom, for instance, overall voter participation rose slightly from 59% in the 2001 General Election to 61%, but the situation worsened among 18- to 24 year-old voters, with a mere 37% turning up to vote in 2005, down from 39% in 2001.

Such election data clearly demonstrate that many young adults are failing to exercise one of their most important democratic rights as citizens. Teachers' ongoing attempts to encourage the active participation of young people in public life are now encountering serious difficulties. Many researchers have begun to express a sense of apprehension for the future of citizenship. Young people, many of them fear, are becoming ever more disengaged from a political process that they believe largely ignores them and their interests as young people (Electoral Commission, 2005; Jones, 2005). Political detachment, as Buckingham (2000) argues, can be interpreted as a response to young people's "positive exclusion from that domain—in effect, as a response to disenfranchisement" (Buckingham, 2000 p. 218). In an increasingly information saturated world, part of what it means to be a citizen demands that all of us become more critical of how the various news media are defining the issues of the day, and more specifically, the extent to which they invite young audiences to relate to these issues in distinct ways (see also Allan, 2002; Carter, 2004; Carter & Allan, 2005a, 2005b; Carter & Davies, 2005; Lemish, 1998; Matthews, 2003; Tidhar & Lemish, 2003).

This is precisely the point where I would like to make an intervention—in the interface between young people and mediated forms of citizenship. In

my view, the ways in which adults (parents, educators, and journalists working in news organizations) have typically responded to young people's natural curiosity about the world and their desire to become informed about what is going on is where much more effort needs to be made to support them as young citizens. To date, adults have generally reacted to young people's interest in news in two general ways. First, adults try to protect children from traumatic events (e.g., war and terrorism, child abduction and murder, etc.). In terms of child development, the argument is made that certain facts and images may be inappropriate for specific age groups (see Walma van der Molen & Konijn, this volume; Moyer-Gusé & Smith, this volume). Research utilizing this approach generally tends to study how, why, and under what circumstances children's exposure to some types of news content might lead them to experience negative emotional effects (see Walma van der Molen, 2004). Such studies have generated a number of important insights in relation to children's responses to the news and raised awareness about the possible short- and long-term emotional harm children may experience after exposure to traumatic news (Buckingham, 1996; Cantor, 2001). Although such arguments are compelling, I would like to suggest that it is important to ensure that such concerns do not lead to a situation in which children are discouraged (or not encouraged) from following adult news, that children's news providers oversimplify difficult stories in the hope that this will protect young audiences from emotional harm, or that it leads to a failure to produce news specifically tailored for them. Democratic political structures are best supported, in the long run, by providing young people with nonpatronizing, age-appropriate news and information so necessary to ensuring that they mature politically.

A second way that adults have tended to respond to young people's desire for news is really by a lack of response. My concern is that, because there are so few news outlets in any part of the world that cater to children and young people, this situation is contributing to discouraging some from seeking out information and thus developing their own views on events. Although the political socialization of young people does not occur entirely through the news media (also important are the family, peers, school, and sometimes religion), news organizations are entrusted with a particular social responsibility to present all citizens with an array of facts and opinions in order for them to make informed decisions. If growing numbers of young people are feeling disenfranchised from both party politics and the news, what might be done to address this problem? Perhaps it is partly a sense of being excluded or shielded from knowledge about certain distressing events and public discussions about them that is leading some young people to see the news, a crucial point where we are meant to connect as citizens in a democratic society, as rather boring or made solely for adult audiences. If this is true, then it seems logical that many of today's children and

young people might not feel ready or willing to emerge at the age of 18 as fully formed and informed citizens eager to vote.

Given the new realities of global war, conflict, and terrorism, the time has come to develop fresh conceptual models and methodological tools needed to better understand children and young people's complex relationships to the news. One of the most pressing challenges for news researchers today is to build on the insights drawn from past research on children and news while taking into account the new realities of young people's interactions with mediated conflict in different cultural contexts. It is indeed important to attend to the ways in which the news affects young audiences in emotional terms, and to find ways of constructing news for them that is age appropriate, informative, and empowering. But it is equally important, in my view, to understand how and why certain journalistic assumptions about the needs and capacities of this audience have become aligned with specific cultural constructions of childhood. How do such assumptions shape how children are portrayed in the news? What are the prevailing cultural views about child audiences and their capacities to understand the news? Are children's responses to traumatic news always emotional (and negative/harmful)? If further efforts were made to provide news in various formats for young audiences, might this not only result in their improved comprehension of what is happening in the world, but also make them feel more empowered and less frightened? Would it make them feel that they are an important audience whose opinions are valued? Might it then encourage young people to develop a greater interest in what is going on in the world and to routinely contribute to public debates?

Some researchers have suggested that particular children and young people tend to find the news to be boring when they feel their opinions and ideas do not count for anything and when they feel that there is insufficient age-appropriate news is being produced especially for them (Buckingham, 2000; Styles, 2005). When news organizations such as the BBC's *Newsround* (and the now-defunct Channel 4 television program *First Edition*) are able to reach and address them in ways that legitimate their position as citizens in the making, children and young people say that they tend to feel much more empowered and interested in the world around them (Carter & Davies, 2005; Styles, 2005). Nowhere is this more apparent and striking than on *Newsround* in its online provision, and particularly in terms of its engagement with complex and often terrifying events such as the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States of America, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and bombings in Madrid, Bali, London, and Sharm el-Sheik, for instance—events that are proving to be decisive markers in the lives of many young people around the world.

To begin the task of making connections between young people's growing sense of citizenship and their engagement with the news, I start by offer-

ing a brief discussion about the history and organizational structure of *Newsround* so as to provide the reader with a context within which to make sense of discussion board postings to *Newsround*'s Web Site. From there I explore a particular example of a recent online discussion on *Newsround*'s "What's in the News" message board, where children and young people reflect on their relationship to the news and the Web site. This is followed by a brief consideration of an array of different kinds of postings to the *Newsround* Web site (e-mail feedback and message board chat) around war, conflict, and terrorism.³ Such interventions provide clear examples of the potential that lies in offering a wider array of dedicated children's news resources (print, broadcast, and online) that are already engaging some young people with public debates about important political issues and, in so doing, supporting their development as citizens. I would like to suggest that such a provision might enable young people not only to better understand the news more generally, but also to voice their opinions about how the news is put together, the events it covers, and to have a critical awareness of the political assumptions underpinning current children's and adult's news provision in the United Kingdom.

CHILDREN'S BBC (CBBC) NEWSROUND

As part of its public service remit, the BBC is committed to providing all citizens with the information they need to make knowledgeable choices about issues of public interest and policy. To that end, Children's BBC *Newsround*'s producers have come up with the following mission statement that guides the journalistic activities of the organization. "*Newsround* aims to be the first and premier source of news for children. We aim to find and deliver news that matters to children in a way that is interesting, engaging and easy to understand." Along with this mission statement, *Newsround* is also bound by a specific vision statement: "To equip children to handle their lives better by giving them the information they need to understand the world around them, in the ways they want" (cited in Ham, 2004, p. 108).

Newsround first went to air on April 4, 1972, anchored by former BBC journalist John Craven. The program had a similar set and reportorial to adult news programs of the time (news anchor sitting at a desk reading short news stories). Shortly after Craven left in 1989, substantial changes were made in the program's format to make it more entertaining for the younger viewer. Over the course of the 1990s and to the present day, the program went through young adult news presenters, most of whom have been at the beginning of their journalistic career. It is the most watched news bulletin

among young people (over 1 million viewers in 2001; see Atwal, Millwood-Hargrave, & Sancho, 2003). Its core audience is 8- to 12 year-olds, although many younger and older viewers also tune in. Each edition of the 10-minute weekday newscast—it airs daily at 5:25 p.m.—is typically composed of news stories related to what the news team regards as its main audience's primary interests. Reporters usually cover five main news items, most typically emphasizing news about celebrities, sports, animals, and nature—topics that the TV news team believes to be the one of most interest to their child audience. *Newsround's* ongoing presence on British TV for over 30 years is an important symbol of a continuing commitment to a public service ethos, which legally obliges the BBC to deliver news for all citizens. Commercial TV organizations do not have this legal obligation and have shown themselves to be unwilling to make the same sort of commitment to children's news given their overriding concern for the economic bottom line. At present, the only children's news program in the United Kingdom is *Newsround*. There are currently no commercial broadcasters producing children's news for either television or online.⁴

Newsround on the Web

Newsround launched its Web Site in 2001 (see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbc-news/default.stm>). It offers considerable capacity for young people to engage with a wide array of issues, and it is one of the few truly interactive sites for news currently available anywhere in the world. With a more dialogical structure than most news organizations, the Web Site goes some way to addressing Buckingham's challenge to develop news formats that would critically engage young people with the world around them (Buckingham, 2000). The BBC's *CBBC Statements of Program Policy 2004–2005* confirms that the corporation remains committed to offering young people dedicated 24-hour-news and the opportunity for "in-depth comment and explanation." Given that the total amount of factual output by the CBBC TV has been steadily falling since 1999 (Ofcom Review of Public Service Broadcasting, 2003), this makes the Web site an especially important resource for those young people who are trying to stay informed about current events.⁵

On *Newsround's* interactive "What's in the News" message board, young people comment on stories that they feature in the news and how *Newsround* (both on TV and the Web site) has handled them. Insights generated by young people in their online chat provide a crucial resource upon which to engage young people in politics as well as in media criticism (see Hassan, 2004; Jones, 2003; Livingstone, 2002; Osgerby, 2004). An example of a criticism about *Newsround's* coverage of the 2005 United Kingdom General Election can be found on the now-defunct Election 2005 message

board, where one young person complained about *Newsround's* failure to give publicity to all political parties. In this contributor's view, young people should have the opportunity to learn about the political platform of all parties taking part in the election (Election 2005, chat, May 3).

A visit to the home page of the *Newsround* Web site reveals how its distinctive structure and content encourage an interactive relationship among the news organization, young people, and educators. Top stories are reported (you can read or listen to them online) and oftentimes background links added to give the reader more information or to elicit contributions to message boards on issues that the story raises. Other features on the home page include the options to watch or listen to that day's TV bulletin and to chat about the top debate of the day. Also provided is a clickable link enabling the reader to directly contact the news team via e-mail, to ask for help in navigating the site, and to access citizenship lesson resources designed for use in the classroom. Although many aspects of the news program strategies and production structures of the TV and Web site provision of *Newsround* may appear to be remarkably similar, in fact there are several significant differences between them. These differences are, in part, driven by varying conceptions of the audience and the organization's relationship with them. With the TV program, this relationship is largely top-down, whereas the Web site is more dialogical. That is to say, TV team members assume they are the best judges of what the audience wants and needs to know, that the average age of the typical viewer is 10, and what this age group would find to be fun and interesting. The Web team, in contrast, asks young people every day for their views about stories that were reported, how they were covered, what should be on the news agenda, and so on. As Couldry (2000) suggests, the model of communication operationalized by the TV team is one in which the media have great power over their audiences (see also Cottle, 2003). Here the media are typified as one-to-many rather than many-to-many organizations. A distinctive characteristic of this organizational structure is that "both the spaces where media inputs are made and the social interactions occurring there are strictly controlled" (Cottle, 2003, p. 277). Control is important because it provides members of the news organization with ways of preserving their authority and legitimacy as the ones who can best judge what audiences want and need to know. Where children and young people are concerned, what is already an asymmetrical power relationship based on generation is thus compounded by one in which the audience can be made to feel "in awe and see media practitioners as big [important] people" who therefore must be right about everything (Couldry, 2000, p. 280).

Web journalists operate with a different set of assumptions about the news audience and what it wants and needs to know about the world. Through an examination of young people's feedback to the Web team and

the team's responses it is possible to discern how this relationship has influenced the development of the institutional ethos of *Newsround* and its distinctive web news strategy. Needless to say, of course, I make no claim as to the quantitative representativeness of their comments. Rather, I cite extracts from discussions that illustrate a sense of participants' knowledge about world events, that offer a reflexive stance on the importance of children and young people's opinions, or that exemplify a critical awareness of the social construction of the news and something about their connection to *Newsround's* Web team.

Although the Web team's relationship with its audience is by no means nonhierarchical, there is clearly a daily rapport established between moderators or *mods* which is most apparent on the "*Newsround* Feedback" message board. The following exchange demonstrates something of that connection between *Newsround* and its audience. Made in response to chat moderator Mim's monitoring of young people's discussions about the bombing of London on July 7, 2005, the ensuing discussion confirms that *Newsround* journalists regard such conversations as valuable not only as a source of support for each other during a personally and politically challenging time, but also to members of the news team who have found support while monitoring young people's chat on the subject. As such, it perhaps shows that, particularly in times of trouble and uncertainty, the relationship between the news organization and its audience is an important one to help both to make sense of such events.

Thanks Moddies

- Mim - 1212th post - 9 Jul 2005 17:53
- Hey guys, believe me when I say that your messages have a great affect on us too. Although you may not realise it, it really helps to be reading your messages and wise advice at a time like this. It really makes all the difference when people come together and are able to console one another during this time. We are very grateful for all of you guys coming on too. Mim x

• Reply

re: Thanks Moddies

- -veggichick-horseluva4eva- - 3097th post - 9 Jul 2005 17:58
- awwwww, you're welcome! we are very grateful of you too for giving up your free time to make our lives happy by posting our posts!
- Reply

Young people on the Feedback board also point out when the news team has "got it wrong" in their reporting of an event. As such, there is a sense in which some young people are not only critically engaging with what they are reading on *Newsround* online, but also feel that the relationship between themselves and the news organization is such that they can point out when *Newsround* journalists have misreported an event and have the expectation that their intervention will indeed lead to a correction in the official record. As "sapphi" indicated on July 9, 2005, with regard to *Newsround's* report that Australians were among those killed in the July 7 bombings in London:

error

- sapphi - 406th post - 9 Jul 2005 13:06
- I'd like to point out something you got wrong in one of your news items on the London attacks, titled "Experts combing London bomb sites".

The eighth paragraph down says that Australians were among those killed. I'd like to point out that (thankfully) there have been no Australians confirmed dead, as yet.

I have seen this on several news sources here in Australia, and it has been confirmed by the Australian Government and Embassy in London.

Hope you fix this information.

• Reply

re: error

- Mim - 1208th post - 9 Jul 2005 15:42
- Hi there, I've forwarded your feedback onto *Newsround* for you. Cheers, Mim
- Reply

The structure of the *Newsround* Web site means that the news agenda set by the Web team can be directly and almost immediately challenged, subverted, reoriented, or corrected by the audience. Additionally, chat contributors have the opportunity to construct their own discussion strings, which may or may not be in agreement with the stance on a particular event or the facts as they are presented by the Web news team. In this sense, then, young people are given the opportunity to express their opinions and in so doing, are encouraged to feel that their opinions and knowledge are being taken seriously.

RESEARCHING YOUNG PEOPLE'S ONLINE E-MAILS AND MESSAGE BOARD CHAT

In this section of the Chapter, I offer selected examples of young people's e-mail feedback to the *Newsround* Web team and message board chat on the subject of war, conflict, and terrorism. What I have endeavored to do in this examination is to find some of the best examples of young people's Web site contributions that clearly demonstrate the extent of particular sets of knowledge about war, conflict, and terrorism. Such examples provide preliminary evidence of well-developed political reasoning around such issues, a fact that may go some way to challenging what is now a rather widespread view that young people know little and couldn't care less what is happening in the world—a view that might perhaps unwittingly contribute to some young people's feeling of disenfranchisement from an early age (a self-fulfilling prophecy). The sample evidence I have gathered for this purpose is not meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive of what young people in the United Kingdom, or even on the *Newsround* Web site, are discussing about these issues, but is instead suggestive, inviting longer term study organized to systematically gather and thematically analyze young people's responses to a wide range of political issues.

Before proceeding to present various examples of such responses, a word about the different types of contributions included here is helpful to gain a clearer sense of what each entails. E-mail responses are elicited by the *Newsround* Web team in response to a question they pose in a news story. The first examples come from two girls who e-mailed *Newsround* in response to its Web story posted on March 25, 2003, asking whether the war in Iraq was the biggest worry in young people's lives. These contributions are followed by e-mails from two teenage girls who responded to the question Did you march against the war? (March 3, 2003) and a more recent e-mail from a girl responding to *Newsround's* Web story asking young people if the march that was due to take place in July during the G8 Summit in Edinburgh would have any effect on the decisions G8 leaders were being asked to make to help alleviate poverty in Africa. All of the examples I have chosen here are fairly typical of this particular genre of e-mail feedback on the Web site and of other e-mails on these issues.

The next examples I have chosen to highlight center on young people's reactions to the bombings in London on July 7, 2005. They come from the "What's in the News" message board, which is 1 of 23 message boards currently on the Web site (October 21, 2005). Others specialize in chat about, for instance, sports, food, celebrities, the environment, and so on. There are certain boards that are a steady feature of the Web site, of which, "What's in

the News?" is one. Others come and go, such as one devoted to discussion of Harry Potter, and the 2005 General Election in the United Kingdom, to name only two examples. The title of each chat contribution is one that is chosen by the originator of the discussion string, which usually follows (although not always, as some contributions might have no responses, or very few). Chat contributors log on to participate in chat, choose their message board, see what is there, decide whether to read others' contributions and then log off, or select one or more to which they might respond. Having logged into the site, when responding, the title of the original post, plus the new contributor's chat name, the number of the post, and the date and time of their contribution all feature at the beginning of the message. Such information provides a trail of the responses, which, if traced, will eventually lead back to the originator of the post. However, some contributors may decide to start a new string when responding to a posting, rather than simply hitting reply, and this sometimes makes it more difficult to follow a thread of discussion.

When young people originally sign up to *Newsround* as a potential message board contributor, they have to fill out a form online in which they choose a Web name and a login ID. This is done to ensure that they are anonymous and unidentifiable. They are warned not to give many details about who they are, such as name, address, name of their school, and so forth, as a further measure to protect them while online. They are also asked to seek permission from their parents to become a chat contributor and must tick a box on the online application form indicating that they have parental approval. Once on the message boards, all contributions are monitored by *Newsround* chat moderators, or mods, to whom all chat contributions go before they are approved for posting. Young people are aware of this moderating function before they originally sign on, so they know they are not allowed to use swearing, to express racist, sexist or other forms of discriminatory views, nor refer to subjects that are generally not open to young people below 15 (e. g., such as movies with an 18 rating). If a mod decides that a message, in whole or in part, should not be posted, the contributor is sent a message telling them why such a decision was taken. At times this prompts a response by the contributor asking why, which mods will sometimes allow onto the boards in order to make everyone aware of the parameters of what is and is not acceptable.

With information about how I selected my sample of young people's discussion and the different types of sample data included here, I turn in the next section to an array of online messages posted to *Newsround* by young people.⁶ These selected comments, as I already suggested, provide invaluable insights into their knowledge of world events and willingness to engage with differing points of view.

YOUNG PEOPLE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Although various young people admit in their online discussions that they are sometimes frightened about the war, conflict, and terrorism, what upsets many of them is the fact that adults appear to think that young people's views are ill informed and of little worth. On *Newsround's* Web site, young people repeatedly state that they want to be accepted as citizens who possess legitimate points of view and rights. After all, today's youth will have to live with the consequences of the actions of decisions taken today by adults, yet they rarely have the chance to influence these decisions.

In the early days of the war in Iraq, the following e-mail was sent to *Newsround* by 15-year-old Becca in response to its story, "Is War Your Biggest Worry?", which clearly illustrates this point:

If people would listen to children properly as if what we had to say was important (which it is) they would see the easiest way to sort things out. We, as children, see things simpler, without thinking about pride, shame or politics. War is something adults do for pride and politics, they can't admit they are wrong. (posted March 25, 2003)

A similar intervention was made by 10-year-old Cara-Leigh in response to the same *Newsround* story:

I am very scared about the war with Iraq, because President Bush and Tony Blair are not giving our selves, "children" a chance to speak about it, because it may change our lives. (posted March 25, 2003)

In early March 2003, before the official beginning of the war in Iraq, thousands of schoolchildren (mainly teenagers) across the United Kingdom walked out of school to join antiwar marches. Five hundred or so made their way to the prime minister's residence at 10 Downing Street and held a sit-in at the gates to the street, blocking it. *Newsround* posted the story "Did You March Against the War?", which asked young people whether they participated in an antiwar protest. Ally, 16, was pleased that the march she went on included many young people who were there with family or friends. As she remarked:

I went down to London for the march against the war on Iraq. I think the amount of CHILDREN who did really shows what the adults of tomorrow will be like. Better. (posted March 3, 2003; emphasis original)

In Ally's view, young people's willingness to become informed about the war in Iraq and to join peace marches where their presence and voices would count for something echoes what many others said on *Newsround* online.

Noreen, 16, who lives in Pakistan, responded enthusiastically to the same news story, but had to explain why, even though she wanted to demonstrate, it was not possible to do so where she lived. Said Noreen:

I didn't march because it can get very violent here, but if I could I would have. They should listen to what we have to say. Bush has no excuse to kill millions of innocent people to get Saddam out of the way and even if there was a war what good will come out of it? Bush should see what the rest of the world has to say. Not the leader, PM or presidents, but what the public has to say. Let us all say NO to war. (posted March 3, 2003)

What is discernible in Noreen's response to *Newsround's* story on antiwar demonstrations, in our reading at least, is her apparent anger, but also her recourse to an online environment to express a viewpoint that could not be safely articulated (in her judgment) otherwise. Evident, too, is her belief that world opinion matters and that it should be taken into account by political leaders. It would be interesting to know whether, in formulating her position, a sense of global citizenship underpins her thinking. In any case, however, *Newsround* is clearly being used as a public forum for young people like Noreen to actively participate in public dialogue and debate in relative safety.

Although some young people supported the war, many did not, and they were not afraid to say that war did not solve anything regardless of the situation (even though all agreed that Saddam Hussein was an evil dictator). A prevailing view, it seems, is that young people already know and appreciate the fact that war almost always does far more to damage people than to help them in most circumstances. The antiwar protests held around the United Kingdom were well organized and included a strong representation of young people, in part, because they used the Internet and mobile phone texting to make other young people aware of the issues and to tell them where to go to participate. Young people's contributions to demonstrations were the topic of many conversations on "What's in the News" for months after these events. The majority of those who contributed to these discussions, in our reading, believed that the demonstrations offered fellow young people a potentially valuable opportunity to have their views widely heard. There was a high interest among participants in this discussion in finding out who attended demonstrations and their views about young people's contributions—real and potential—to their overall political effectiveness.

Just over 2 years later, young people were again participating in large numbers in public protest, this time in relation to the G8 summit held in Edinburgh in July 2005. A similar point to the one just outlined in relation to the antiwar demonstrations in 2003 was made most clearly by 11-year-old Anna, who e-mailed *Newsround* (2005) responding to its question "Will the G8 march make a difference?", which asked young people to assess the importance of their own involvement with the issues around poverty in Africa. Says Anna:

I think that children should be allowed to take time off school to join the march because it shows that they want to help with the poverty situation and if they care about it now, they will care a lot more about it when they are older and able to help more. (posted June 4, 2005)

In addition to suggesting that it is important to be involved in the protest if you possibly can, Anna and other young people responding to *Newsround's* question challenge the view of teachers' groups across the United Kingdom that simply saw their involvement in this event as a feeble excuse to "bunk off" school rather than any real commitment to ending poverty in Africa.⁷ So too does Anna make the link between children's involvement in the protest as a precursor to a more active citizenship when they become adults.

This is also the case in terms of young people's discussions around the attacks on London in 2005. On July 7, several bombs went off on various parts of the city's underground and bus systems. Immediately, young people on the *Newsround's* "What's in the News" message board started discussing what had happened, expressing sadness and sympathy for friends and family of the victims, disbelief at what had happened, and wondering who might be to blame. Many immediately began to make links between the bombings, the war in Iraq, and Britain's support for that war. The following exchange was typical of those featured on the day of the attacks and in the week that followed.

Terrorism

- Way-Out-Lugburz - 1158th post - 10 Jul 2005 21:54
- Do you know what is REALLY annoying? It is when idiots go around saying that terrorism is so bad and that there is completely no reason for it. Yet, they go on about how the war on Iraq was for the best and it was, somehow, meant to get rid of terrorism. The weird thing is, is that THE WAR IN IRAQ WAS TERRORISM! Then they go on about how Saddam Hussein was removed from power and how the Iraqis were freed . . . well they are not! SO MANY normal civilians, trying to carry out their lives are dying each day because of the stupid war. I have read so many stories of the people suffering AFTER the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

There is hardly any electricity, water supply, etc. But we never hear about that, do we? It's only big news if it's from a first world country. Even the ignorant manage to hear.

Though lots of people would say the Iraq war was necessary. The real reason: the US has a lot of oil reserves now! [...]

• Reply

re: Terrorism

• Merquery - 132nd post - 11 Jul 2005 13:54

- oh i completely agree that the war in Iraq was blatantly unnecessary however the difference was that in the Iraq war the plan was not to kill thousands of innocents it just kinda worked out that way...the terrorists that hit London, Madrid, America...they were just trying to kill.

• Reply

Such interventions offer compelling insights into some young people's thinking about the ways in which certain events are framed in the news as either legitimate violent interventions, in the case of the invasion and occupation of Iraq by Allied forces, or as terrorism, as in the case of the bombing of London. As "Way-Out-Lugburz" notes, the western news media tend to focus on the latter events, which are *big news* because they are events happening in First World countries, whereas the everydayness of death and struggle in Iraq and elsewhere does not get the same sort of coverage. So too does this contributor make a link between the nature of the coverage of Iraq and the political reasons for the war, in his or her view, in the first place—the fact that Iraq is an oil-rich country made it a target for the U.S. government. While agreeing with some of this assessment, the other contributor to this debate, "Merquery," talks about the differences between the situation in Iraq and those in the United States, Spain, and Britain, where he or she suggests that there was no deliberate plan to kill innocent civilians in Iraq, but that it "just kinda worked out that way . . ." Behind this claim is an understanding that the invasion and occupation of Iraq had some good intentions (to get rid of Saddam) and that the killing of innocent people had not been intentional, whereas this was the main reason, in his or her view, for the attacks in the United States, Spain, and Britain. Both interventions exhibit a reasoned and evocative engagement with the issues and a willingness to consider differing points of view around what are often complex and difficult issues.

On July 14, only 1 week after the London suicide bombings and on the day when another, this time failed, attempt was made to explode several bombs in the capital, this exchange took place between a small group of young people who took different positions with regard to these events (not

necessarily in response to each other, sometimes also as an original contribution that might have been sparked by an earlier exchange). The first one suggests that Britain is partly responsible, through their participation in the invasion of Iraq with the Americans, for what happened, while the second directly talks about the motives behind the suicide bombings, arguing that if the motive were to disappear, so would the desire to do such terrible things.

My point of view IS THAT

try to get your head round this

mackem(sunderland)lass – 1st post – 14 Jul 2005 19:31

I am sorry if it offendeds anyone but this is my message and im sure a lot of people hopefully will agree they say the Madrid and London bombings was because England America and some soldiers from Spain were in Iraq but the thing is if 9/11 never happened woudnt that mean we wouldn't be in Iraq no we wouldn't have these suicidal maniacs blwoing things up including them and innocent people so at the end of the day it's a waste of effort and a waste of innocent lives.

• [Reply](#)

[...]

motives?

Blurredbeauty – 5th post – 14 Jul 2005 15:41

Here's a crazy thought. The bombers had a motive. They must of thought there motive was pretty extreme to do a mass massacre. But if we made sure that there motive would no longer be a problem, this would mean that the bombers would no longer have an excuse to bomb London or kill themselves, and London will be safe!

just a thought ...

• [Reply](#)

A slightly different take on the London bombings comes from "Headless," who rejects blaming Islam and condemns both the suicide bombers and their leaders if the aim was simply to kill people without a good reason. This contributor is clearly able to articulate a number of fairly sophisticated and interconnected points—that is, that no one should regard the bombings as acts undertaken by those who are true followers of Islam, a religion that emphasizes the importance of peace and condemns killing others or oneself. So, "Headless" concludes, the bombings must be understood as acts perpetrated by those claiming to be acting on behalf of Islam, but who are in fact

simply using religion as an illegitimate excuse to kill innocent people. As "Headless" says:

What was da point?

Headless – 3rd post – 14 Jul 2005 15:03

What was the point in bombing London? If somebody's trying 2 frame another religion, den dat's disgusting! [...] As far as I'm concerned who ever told those men to bomb London is a right won wrecker. {I didn't wanna be rude.}

• [Reply](#)

The point "Headless" makes about religion is a salient one—it elicited lengthy comment from a number of young people who came out to identify themselves as Muslim, as well as non-Muslims who condemn how some British people were treating Muslims in their community after the July 7 bombings. This direct exchange of opinions started by "Zena" is typical of several occurring in the 2 weeks immediately afterward. I quote it at length in order to maintain as much of the integrity of the original conversation as possible.

isolated coz of terror bombs

Zena – 1st post – 13 Jul 2005 18:26

Hi, I'm 15 and I live in West Yorkshire in a little town close to Leeds—this is the worst place 2 b. [...] People don't understand that everyone is an individual and are responsible for their own actions. Just because a couple of people from the same religion did something unforgivable does not give anyone the right to stereotype all of them to be in the same group. The men who did this thought they were doing the right thing and had been brainwashed into thinking they were going to achieve eternal bliss and happiness—they were wrong and everyone knows this. [...]

• [Reply](#)

[...]

re: isolated coz of terror bombs

blurredbeauty – 4th post – 14 Jul 2005 15:26

[...] I am muslim as well. The men who bombed London were wrong in thinking that they were dying for God. What they died for was politics, and because they thought that there motive was worthy of mass mas-

sacre. The Qur'an prohibits suicide and murder, therefore what they have done is a huge sin, as well as being physically sickening [. . .]

• Reply

The attacks on London elicited more divided opinion among young people when it came to the question of how to respond to those who planned them, whereas views about the culpability of the Muslim community were almost completely unanimous in their condemnation for those who blamed all Muslims. Still, there were a sizable number of contributors who confirmed that, although they thought the attacks to be vicious and barbarous, they could see that the suicide bombers perhaps felt that they had motivation because of the British involvement in the coalition invasion and occupation of Iraq. Only a few felt so strongly that they wished to find and sentence to death those who planned the attacks. Most contributors to the discussion in fact suggested that such an act would be no better than the one perpetrated by the suicide bombers.

PUBLIC SERVICE FOR TOMORROW'S CITIZENS

War, conflict, and terrorism, as well poverty, AIDS, and illiteracy, are among some of the most pressing issues confronting the world in the early 21st century. The *Newsround* Web site shows how at least some young people are exceptionally eager to make a contribution to public debates, often demonstrating a highly developed, critical awareness of the ways in which such issues are politically linked. To my mind, this undoubtedly shows a well-developed political sensibility that has found a place to flourish on an online children's news Web site dedicated to the development of young citizens, a place where many must feel they are being listened to and their views are valued.

Children's news media, educators, and parents all need to work much harder to provide young people with the tools that they urgently need in order to engage critically with the challenges posed by current world events. News organizations have never been more obliged to substantially increase investments in programming and news Web sites for children and young people so as to provide this audience with the informational resources they deserve as future citizens. In societies that claim to be democratic, young people must be made to feel actively connected to the world around them. For this to happen, adults need to genuinely listen to and take seriously what they have to say. The central challenge, it seems to me, is to find ways to make this happen so as to ensure young people's active participation as citizens throughout their political lives.

In this regard, *Newsround* makes an especially important contribution to this aim. Its place and importance in British culture is unquestionable. For over 30 years, its journalists have consistently worked to fulfill its public service remit of providing news for all citizens, including children and young people (Cowling & Lee, 2002). Because there is no such legislative requirement for commercial broadcast organizations, and because they are not legally obliged to do so, it is unsurprising that few have been willing over the years to make the same sort of commitment to children's news due to it is being expensive to produce, a perishable daily commodity, and not terribly profitable (Ofcom Review of Public Service Broadcasting, 2003). At the moment, *Newsround* is the sole producer of children's news in the United Kingdom—that fact alone makes it an important institution in contemporary British news culture. *Newsround's* Web site provides news and public spaces within which young people are able to engage in political discussion with each other and the news team while also encouraging them to develop a relationship with a public service news organization that is dedicated to an open, democratic debate. Such debate is, of course, central, as I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, to tackling the particularly difficult political challenges citizens now face as they grapple for ways to resolve the complex array of often interconnected issues that are fuelling acts of war, conflict, and terrorism around the world.

NOTES

1. All spellings in quotations taken from *Newsround's* Web Site represent the original ones as written by children and young people.
2. I would like to acknowledge that some of the discussion around citizenship issues has been developed elsewhere with Stuart Allan (2005a). My thanks go to the Arts and Humanities Research Council and to the British Academy for funding various aspects of research for this chapter.
3. Press Pack reports are another interesting feature of the *Newsround* website, one that I have not been able to include in this chapter. These short pieces, of no more than 200 words, typically feature personal reflection and opinion on current events. As such, they give young people a chance to engage with the ways in which the news is being reported to them, often offering an angle on the story that is not found elsewhere in the news. For example, one Muslim teenage girl wrote a report after the July 7, 2005 bombings in London, maintaining that even though the suicide bombers were young Muslim men, that non-Muslim people should not think that the Muslim community supports what they did. She expresses the hope that British people understand this situation and that everyone can continue to live together in peace. July 8, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_4660000/newsid_4664000/4664021.stm).