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TOWARD BETTER USE OF MEDIA FOR CHILDREN AT TIMES OF WAR AND CONFLICT

Concluding Notes

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The 15 different contributions to this book unveil a wide diversity of concerns, theoretical groundings, methodological approaches, and delivery styles. Some provide us with peeks into the role media play in children's understandings of war and conflict. Others explore the perspective offered by producers of media for children, and yet a third group examines the roles played by parental interventions as well as those offered by TV programs designed for peacebuilding efforts.

We can also analyze these studies along a theoretical continuum of prevalent approaches to childhood in the social sciences, education literature, and parenting guides concerned with the well-being of children. On one end, we find protectionist approaches grounded in a particular view of childhood that emphasizes children's vulnerability in comparison to adults, and thus the need for active mediation and protection by their caregivers from the potential harmful effects of the harsh reality and the disturbing sights of war and conflict on their media. This is much in line with the many Web sites, newspaper commentaries, and experts' advice offered to parents and educators in the U.S. media, for example.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we find contributions that emphasize the role of children as citizens with full self-agency. Such researchers

assume that children are fully active in the construction of their understanding of the world who do know what is good for them. Therefore, proponents of this view argue that children's voices should be heard and their opinions incorporated in media productions about war and conflict aimed at them. They believe that children both have the need as well as the right to be informed about the events happening in the world, including those that adults deem to be disturbing and negative, and that they do not require patronizing overprotection of adults.

Along this continuum, we find other, more middle-of-the-ground contributions in the book that, although advocating giving a voice to children and respecting their needs and opinions, also maintain that at the same time children remain in need of adults' mediation and protection.

The collection is also characterized by bringing together scholars grounded in a variety of epistemological traditions. A brief glance at the reference lists of the various chapters highlights the diversity represented by these studies. These can be grouped into three major disciplinary roots: a communication perspective to reception and meaning-making processes of media texts, psychological studies of emotional and cognitive responses of children to such texts, and conflict-resolution and peace studies analyses of media texts designed for children. It takes recruiting of all of these efforts and more to approach the complex and challenging area of investigation that we have attempted to understand in this book.

However one chooses to slice the varied collection of chapters offered in this book, we find that they all call our attention to the role of cultural context in any discussion of media and children at times of conflict and war. Children understand the conflict against the background of their everyday life experiences and from a child's perspective. They think of it as concrete, anecdotal, and personalized. They may be familiar with lots of details, but may be missing the basic historical and background information. Children's previous war-related experiences, knowledge, and images, most of it originating in the media environment of the culture in which they are raised, serve as the backdrop on which they absorb, integrate, and make sense of new media-related encounters with conflict and war. The meanings created are, in and of themselves, already a combination of previous images from media fiction and news reports. Clearly then, what children are exposed to and the opportunities they have to challenge, elaborate, develop, and make sense of these images play a significant role in the way they grow to understand situations of conflict and war.

Indeed, the various projects presented in this book highlighted the role the main media discourse of each society has in cultivating its children's views of the social world and the potential danger involved in children's reliance on their culture's hegemonic discourse. This seems to lead them to develop a limited, culturally bound and culturally laden perspective.

Certainly one result of this can be that the media contribute to children continuing to be socialized into perpetuating the paradigm of violence and war as resolution options, as opposed to the use of nonviolent forms of conflict resolution. Although there are few pioneering research efforts associated with media interventions around the world, the results in hand do indicate that there is a need and desire to involve media directed at children in a much more pro-active way in facilitating peace building, mutual understanding, prejudice reduction, and conflict-resolution efforts as means for developing and sustaining a culture of peace (Lemish, 2007).

At the same time, it is clear from the studies in this book, as well as others, that news programs do evoke a host of emotions in children, most noticeably fearful reactions. The particular issue at hand—conflict and war—is itself frightening and makes children and grown-ups alike uncomfortable. But fear that cannot be handled is not a solid basis for the development of understanding, learning, and developing coping strategies. However, the opposing alternative—shielding and protecting children from the emotional hardships of war and conflict-related images in the media—seems to be a double-edge sword as well. Evidence was presented that it may do little to defuse children's emotions of fear, anger, distress, and anxiety. In doing so, it leaves children's desire and need for knowledge and emotional support in the hands of nonprofessional, often interested parties, or parents who may find themselves in the dark. It seems particularly important to enable children to articulate their emotions of fear and anger and provide them with suggestions about what to do with them.

It seems that either way, most authors of this book agree that children are much more aware of current social conflicts and events than we may think, and that they want the media to value and address their questions, concerns, and needs. Children, we argue, should be considered as serious potential participants in the public sphere, who require—and deserve—a lot more from their media. Addressing programs designed for children—particularly news, informative, and edutainment genres—is crucial because it can prepare and empower children as future citizens at all times, and especially during times of conflict, in many ways: understand the events as they unfold; express their feelings, anxieties, fears and hopes; know how others in their own and other societies feel about the conflict; understand options for the resolution of the conflict; and learn about what they can do. Such contributions are important not only for the children, but also for the development of a democratic society (Götz & Lemish, 2004). Although it is perhaps not the desire of each and every child, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that many children would have seized the possibility to become more politically involved given the opportunity.

Educators and parents have a crucial role in relating to programming about conflict and war in developing children's civic education. Following

Freire's (1968) summary of the empowering role of education, caregivers have the duty to help young citizens through praxis (i.e., to conduct their daily actions through understanding and moral judgment). Based on the Freirian theory, the five principles of the Praxis Approach (as developed by P. Lemish and summarized in D. Lemish, 2003) could also be applied to the issue at hand. First is the principle of *active participation*: Each child should become an active participant in the creation of sociocultural life in his or her community. Second, the principle of the *centrality of processes* of social change requires that participants be active in social change, including an ability to cope with social problems, controversial issues, and conflicts of interest. The principle of *reciprocity of human relationships*, the third one, is central for the development of a just and honorable society that avoids violations of human rights. Fourth, the principle of the *constant problematization of social life* recognizes that critical understanding and constant struggling for a better society is a long-term process. Finally, the fifth principle prioritizes the *concrete and immediate conditions of human life* in an attempt to expose problems and proceed to social change. In summary, praxis pedagogy calls on participants to act through a critical understanding of social life and moral judgment to develop and improve sociocultural life.

A praxis-oriented and media-related civic education includes, among other things, explaining the conflict and enabling children to ask questions and raise dilemmas; encouraging critical reflection about the conflict and media coverage of it; informing children about possible actions they could take; providing them with other sources to turn to for information, links, emotional assistance, and so on; and fostering a positive approach of hope and optimism. It seems that, rather than protect children from news about war, we need to present it to them so they can understand it, express their feelings about it, and consider how they can act in relation to it. Peace—or perhaps a more realistic, immediately achievable task on the road to creating a culture of peace, conflict resolution—need not be an illusive, imagined world. Indeed, it is an actual achievement when people or societies negotiate and reach a compromise in which basic needs of all parties in conflict are met. Understanding the cycle of conflict resolution (P. Lemish, chap. 11, this volume) and relating it to common disputes that occur in children's own lives may help them to understand more general conflicts as well. Media producers for children can assist them by planning programs that cover not only war and violence, but also the work of people laboring to make peace after the fighting stops and presenting examples of conflicts that have been resolved. Applying these principles and practices in reporting on wars and social conflicts can also be an opportunity to show that we know how to resolve conflicts—not just between countries, but in our everyday lives at home, in the classroom, in the playground, and with friends (Gotz & Lemish, 2004).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRODUCERS

This conclusion poses a great challenge to producers of media for children in their handling of conflict-related issues, be they news reports, documentaries, or dramatic stories. They are required to balance between the informative and emotional needs of children, while developing outlets for children's expression of their own concerns, such as through Web sites, talkback programs, active participation in children's news programs, and the like. More specifically, they can provide information to key journalistic questions and contextualize the information in the geography, as well as cultures of the peoples involved in the conflict. They can enable viewers to understand the conflict from diverse points of view, including all sides to the conflict, and relate it to the everyday lives of children affected by conflict, including their emotions and concerns. They can tell the full story of the conflict and not just the war period when there is fighting: They can present the prewar rise of tensions and efforts to avoid war; the war as the most violent stage in a conflict and the impact it has on all parties; efforts to negotiate a cease fire and resolution; as well as postwar implementation of agreements and rebuilding of societies and lives.

For such involvement to become possible and more common, producers of children's media are required to take a critical view of their content choices, production strategies, and programming decisions for children, allowing for the development of a much deeper understanding of the nature of human conflict, its consequences, the various stages it goes through, and the possible nonviolent alternatives to its solution. Such work should be guided not only by theory and research on children's cognitive processing capabilities and emotional reactions, but also informed by a deep understanding of the role media might have in socializing children into the public sphere. Indeed, peacebuilding interventions, including those presented in this book, suggest that media can have a significant role when they are developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant. Offering children a vision of a possible better world, providing them with diverse and positive images of themselves and their foes, developing their critical skills, and improving on their knowledge—all these have proved to be realistic goals for professionals who have this broader vision and understanding of their role. It is clear that understanding the interaction between the child, the particular content, and the context within which it takes place is crucial if we are to use media for the well-being of children—be it through designing for them special news programs, peacebuilding interventions, or interactive Web sites. One such initiative is the *Prix Jeunesse International "Suitcase"* entitled *War and Political Conflict in Children's Television*, which provides material for workshops with producers around the world, sensitizing them to the problems,

developing with them constructive suggestions for reporting, and explaining conflict and war for children.¹

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEDIA LITERACY

On the part of educators, crisis situations provide an outstanding opportunity for an informed educational intervention regarding the role of the news media in the construction of social reality and in provision of basic civil skills for a critical analysis of our central information sources. The complexity involved in an appropriate treatment of this issue is highlighted by the need to respect the multiplicity of political and ideological positions held by the public and the difficulty that students as well as teachers have in separating their personal worldview and the professional analysis of the role media have in a democratic society. Media education employed by teachers who have been trained especially for this purpose, and have the theoretical knowledge and educational tools, can mark a middle road between the critic of the functioning of mass media and the recognition of their vital role for the existence of a civil, free, and democratic society. Specific goals for the study of media literacy at times of existential crisis could include a need to (a) deal with children's emotional world, including anxiety and fear; (b) provide children with cognitive skills to evaluate the worldview presented in the media; and (c) to assist educators and parents in directing selective exposure to media contents.

Media education designed in the spirit of these and other principles facilitates the participation of pupils through a comprehensive educational process that enables them to cope with their fears and anxieties while developing cognitive skills based on knowledge and acquisition of tools for a broad social comprehension whose ultimate goal is to develop a citizen capable of critical and independent thinking. Such an education process requires treating teachers, respectfully, as mediators between the media coverage, the reality, and the students. They are expected to operate out of social responsibility, avoiding emotional outbursts and inflammation of anxiety and violence, in the hope of attempting to prevent a widening of the existing social divisions in society, and through encouraging dialogue and a rational, constructive, multicultural debate of the issues.

But media literacy also means studying media production, media language, representation, and audiences (Buckingham & Domaille, 2003). With regard to media production, a first goal, for example, could be an examination of the production of war and crisis journalism: Who is actually reporting? Which groups are behind the reporting? Are there regulations about what can be broadcast? Particular events call our attention to specific aspects

that deserve a critical examination (e.g., the lack of live pictures and the aesthetic similarity to the computer game during the first Gulf War, the practice of embedded journalists, and questions regarding independent journalism during the Iraq War).

Regarding media languages, specific analyses can be offered with respect to the use of visuals, whether original sound is used or faded out, if music is included and, of course, how the speakers use these various symbol systems in their commentary to create meanings. This requires understanding the nature and value of different sources of information and the characteristics of various media genres, as well as familiarity with media texts produced especially for them.

In reference to representation, it is crucial for students to understand that all media production involves a process of selection and editing, and thus, by definition, texts can only offer one version to the world. Questions need to be posed, such as the following: Does the program prioritize positive or negative aspects? Who gets to speak here and who does not? Who speaks as representative for which group? In addition, special attention is necessary regarding ethical questions, such as finding the balance between realistic reporting that includes incidents as well as emotional moments, and the cheap showmanship that encourages voyeurism. How much suffering should be permitted to be shown and must be shown? Finally, media literacy also requires understanding the audience, its characteristics and needs, and the way members interpret messages.

However, *media literacy* also means the ability to articulate oneself through the media. Such activities can range from painting and displaying posters about current events in art lessons to creating their own texts by means of the electronic mass media. In the case of the Iraq War, for example, children and teenagers independently used the Internet as a discussion forum and as a means to express their own positions (see e.g., Nikken & Götz, chap. 5, this volume; Carter, chap. 6, this volume). Similarly, for several months, German, Iraqi, and American teenagers documented their life and thoughts during and after the war with a video camera and shared it with each other, in a video project entitled *Hallo Deutschland* (Hello Germany). Other video productions include examples like the *One-Minute Project* by UNICEF, in which children and young people all over the world produce their own 1-minute videos and express themselves through this innovative and challenging new media genre.

This book has been but a first collaborative attempt to put the issue of the role of media in the lives of children at times of conflict and war high on the agenda of researchers, producers, and caregivers of children. We challenge all of those professionals to use their resources and privileged positions as owners of knowledge and skills, as well as their creative energies and commitment to advance the well-being of children; make responsible and

better use of media for children's informative, social, and emotional needs; and provide more access to children's voices and concerns as they become of age in our complicated sociopolitical world.

NOTE

1. The *Prix Jeunesse* Suitcase is provided by the nonprofit foundation Prix Jeunesse International in Munich. Workshops are organized in cooperation with the regional Goethe Institutes.

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