

Children's news on television. Topics, information quality and audience reception of *Newsround* (BBC), *Logo* (ZDF) and *Info K* (TVC)

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Abstract

This article analyses children's news on television by comparing three benchmark programmes by European public broadcasters: Newsround, from the British Broadcasting Corporation; Logo, from the German Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen and Info K from the Catalan Televisió de Catalunya. An empirical content analysis identifies the topics covered by these programmes and the way in which these are explained to the audience, young children, considering information quality criteria. The research is completed with a reception study by using focus groups of children discussing their media consumption and relationship with television as a source of information and news.

Keywords

Children's news, journalism and children, children's television, television quality, media, audience studies.

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Resum

L'article presenta una anàlisi comparativa sobre informatius infantils de televisió realitzada a partir de l'estudi de les notícies de tres programes de referència de cadenes públiques europees: Newsround, de la British Broadcasting Corporation; Logo, de l'alemanya Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, i Info K, de la Televisió de Catalunya. S'identifiquen els temes i com s'expliquen als seus espectadors, nens i nenes, tenint en compte criteris de qualitat informativa. La investigació es completa amb un estudi de recepció a partir de focus groups amb infants sobre el seu consum mediàtic i la seva relació amb la televisió i amb la informació i els telenotícies.

Paraules clau

Periodisme i nens i nenes; televisió infantil; qualitat televisiva; mitjans de comunicació; estudis d'audiència.

Introduction

The Right to Information is a fundamental right established for everyone; a right exercised by citizens fundamentally through journalism. But what about children? When David Buckingham calls them "citizens in the making" (Buckingham 2000), he abandons the concept of childhood as a strictly preparative stage for adult life by giving it its own autonomy. Socialisation starts at the beginning of childhood and whereas adults principally receive their information from the media, it seems logical that children should also have the chance to duly enter into, and be informed about, this world. This means creating sources of information specifically aimed at children since, if they are well-informed, they are capable of making decisions and taking part in a democracy. This idea is not new. Article 13.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice". Paradoxically, however, few sources of information are specifically for children. The media form part of the everyday lives of children and young

people and, even today, although the internet and new media are gaining ground in the search for information (Metzger *et al.* 2015: 325), television is still the medium to which most children in the world have access (Moore-Russo *et al.* 2013: 255). Children are exposed to adult content, including news, and this has a number of consequences and effects that have been studied (Carter and Davies 2005; Jiménez 2006). The dominant commercial model of television means that a lot of content produced specifically for children is exportable and can be used on more than one occasion. But news cannot. When such programmes exist, they are related to a clear vocation to provide good quality public service television. On the one hand, such programmes have been promoted as of interest to society in order to help children develop their thought processes (García 2003). Historically, and even today, child-specific media experiences have never been a priority, not even on public television, with only a few examples managing to keep hold of their place within the programming. On the other hand, the demand for media literacy (Ferrés 2006; Sánchez 2008; Livingstone and Haddon 2009; Buckingham 1993, 2007) highlights the need for such news programmes specifically for children. Experts warn that certain illnesses which have been related to an excess of information (stress, depression,

indifference to other people's suffering, etc.) are also present at an increasingly younger age (Jiménez 2006) while they also note the importance of children being able to participate in society as citizens (Buckingham 1997, 2000; Carter and Allan 2005; Carter *et al.* 2009). This is impossible if they do not have access to news tailored to them. It therefore makes sense for children to be able to take on the new challenges posed by the information society progressively and not suddenly find themselves confronted by adult news content which they find difficult to understand and grasp. Consequently, children's news today has a public service vocation and such programmes are produced by state-owned TV channels.

Cynthia Carter (2009) notes that, precisely because there are few programmes of this type in the world, children's news has been insufficiently studied by academia. The research carried out for the author's doctoral thesis and which this article aims to summarise underlines the need to examine the role of media education for children by making a contribution to social sciences which have traditionally been concerned with the study of childhood (especially sociology and psychology), from the perspective of media studies and, more specifically, journalism on the one hand and reception or audience studies on the other. There are numerous studies on the effects of television on children tackled from the perspective of child sociology and psychology but few focus on content aimed at children, especially in terms of the news. Research into young people's attitudes towards information, especially looking at the internet and new technologies, has been a prime focus of researchers from many different disciplines (Gillmor 2004; Masip *et al.* 2015; Fernandez-Planells 2015) but addressing this issue at an even earlier age provides a new perspective for research focusing on information quality on children's TV news programmes. Numerous studies have also focused on media education, including the notable EU Kids Online, which investigates internationally the uses and risks of the internet by and for children. As noted by Sonia Livingstone (2002), children today have been born in a multimedia environment characterised by the convergence of media and a multi-screen environment. The report on Young People and ITCs makes this clear: "Television and the internet play a central role in young people's everyday lives." (Fernandez-Planells and Figueras-Maz 2012). "While television allows them to switch off from "hypercommunication" and over-stimulation, the internet provides a constant connection with the world they're interested in. It allows them to have fun and socialise at the same time. However, television still has an important presence in their lives" (Fernandez-Planells *et al.* 2016:3). But the fact the internet exists doesn't mean a news programme specifically for children is less necessary; they need a place where they can find answers to questions about the world they're growing up in and of which they are citizens.

We consider children's news programmes as the media's contribution to accompanying children on the path towards the adult information society. Analysing how this is done can also

represent a first step towards a more democratic society that addresses the concerns of all its citizens, including children.

Methodology

The three cases of children's news programmes chosen for the comparative study are of renowned importance within the context of children's TV. *Newsround* by the British Broadcasting Corporation is the benchmark children's news programme in Europe and the world and was the first to appear, in 1972, providing a model for subsequent news programmes aimed at this audience. It has different daily broadcasts and an average duration of five minutes per programme. *Logo* (1989, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) is the benchmark for its area in Germany, a country which has been included in the comparison given its long tradition of children's TV. It's broadcast daily at 7.30 pm and has an average duration of 9:47 minutes per programme. *Info K* (2001, Televisió de Catalunya) has also been modelled on the British news programme and is currently the only news programme of its kind in Spain. This Catalan programme is broadcast Monday to Friday at 6.50 pm and its average duration is 11:40 minutes. All three news programmes can also be seen *a la carte* on the programmes' respective websites.

What are these news programmes like and what do they report on? Which topics are given priority? Using comparative content analysis, the content of the different programmes and also their features in terms of information quality have been identified. The news items analysed form part of the *Newsround*, *Logo* and *Info K* programmes broadcast in May 2013. The choice of this timeframe has taken into account the fact that, during this period, there was no particular event (related to sport, politics or society) that might drastically alter the media agenda. In total, 63 news programmes were analysed (22 *Newsround*, 20 *Logo* and 23 *Info K*), equivalent to 372 news items. A template was designed to provide a semi-structured observation of the news programmes so that the data analysed could be subsequently entered into a database. Coding was carried out by the author of the study and reviewed by a supervising researcher from each country in the sample. Regarding the topics, these were classified into main (Politics, International, Economics, Society, Sport, Media and Weather) and subtopics [Society: Animals, Science, Education, Style (Fashion, Gastronomy, People), Environment, Meteorology, Religion, Health, Events, Technology, Work; Culture: Cinema, Circus, Sculpture, Photography, History, Literature, Music, Painting, Folk Culture (Giants, Human Towers), Drama; Sport: Mountain sports, Basketball, Cycling, Horse-riding, Extreme sports, Football, Handball, Multi-sports; Media: Radio, Television].

Regarding quality indicators, a proposal was drawn up based on the criteria of different authors, official sources and institutions (Alsius 1998; Casas 2005; Crescenzi 2010a, 2010b; González 2011; Gutiérrez 2000; Pereira 2005; Pujadas 2002; among others). There were 15 indicators: information quality; inclusion

of experiences; promoting diversity; promoting values; excluding discriminatory scenes and conduct; stimulation; interactivity; narrative roles; originality; image/graphics; image/narrative coherence; sound/music; sound/effects; decoding the media; and ethics.

A study was also carried out of what the audience for these news programmes thinks about them, and what role these programmes play in forming their view of current affairs and citizenship. Using group discussions with children, it was analysed whether their TV consumption habits affect their notion of current affairs and what strengths and weaknesses they see in this kind of programme. The groups were made up of between five and seven participants aged between ten and eleven and were held within the school environment, since this was familiar to them (Pfaff-Rüdiger 2011). Based on the project sent to different schools, year five tutors were responsible for selecting the participants, taking into account the required criteria (balance between boys and girls, age, reflective and communicative skills, one group made up of children who normally watch children’s news programmes and another with those who don’t normally watch them, and no children whose parents are journalists or related to the media). In total, two pilot discussion groups were held in Barcelona. These were used to test the semi-structured script produced for the sessions and to improve the specifications in the project’s instructions given to the schools. Initially, the plan was to hold discussion groups with between 6 and 8 participants. After the pilot groups, it was realised that, with children at this age, smaller groups of between 5 and 6 participants improved the discussion and gave everyone the chance to speak. Once these conditions had been readjusted, two discussion groups were held in Cerdanyola del Vallès (Catalonia) and two in Berlin (Germany). For the United Kingdom there was already a prior study on the reception of news programmes by children (Carter *et al.* 2009). For this reason, in addition to the limited resources available and the

difficulties of carrying out research with minors in this country, it was decided to exclude UK discussion groups from the project.

A script was drawn up for the sessions, which were expected to last 45 minutes. Nevertheless, the guidelines were not strict and the order and manner in which the topics were introduced were adapted depending on how the conversation developed in each case. This script was divided into 6 blocks: 1. Free time; 2. TV consumption habits; 3. Current affairs; 4. Importance of being informed; 5. News programmes; and 6. Consumption habits for information and media in general, the individual and family. The first block was meant to help break the ice; based on a prior written questionnaire, the children started to explain what they liked to do in their free time, which then enabled the introduction of block 2 related to their TV consumption habits. Within block 3 (current affairs), three news items were watched: one from a conventional news and current affairs programme, one item on the same current affairs topic but from a children’s news programme, and a news item on a topic suitable for a children’s news programme. The news items selected needed to be current, occurring a few days before the date of the discussion group, lasting approximately one minute and covered by both conventional and children’s news programmes. Lastly, blocks 4, 5 and 6 helped to investigate the importance of being informed and information habits in general.

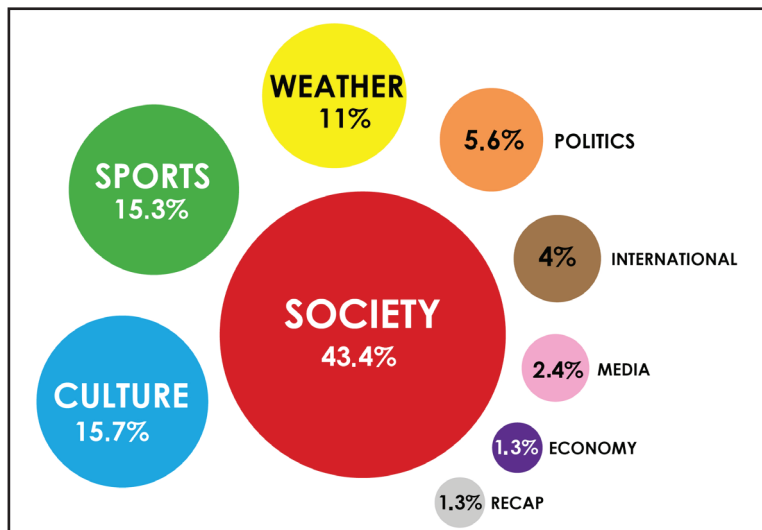
The sessions were recorded on video and audio so they could be transcribed and coded afterwards.

Results

Topics

An overall analysis of the topics covered by the three children’s news programmes as a whole shows a clear predominance of Society topics (Diagram 1). Culture and Sport have a similar relative weight when mapped according to volume of topics.

Diagram 1. Map of the spread of topics in the three news programmes



Source: Author.

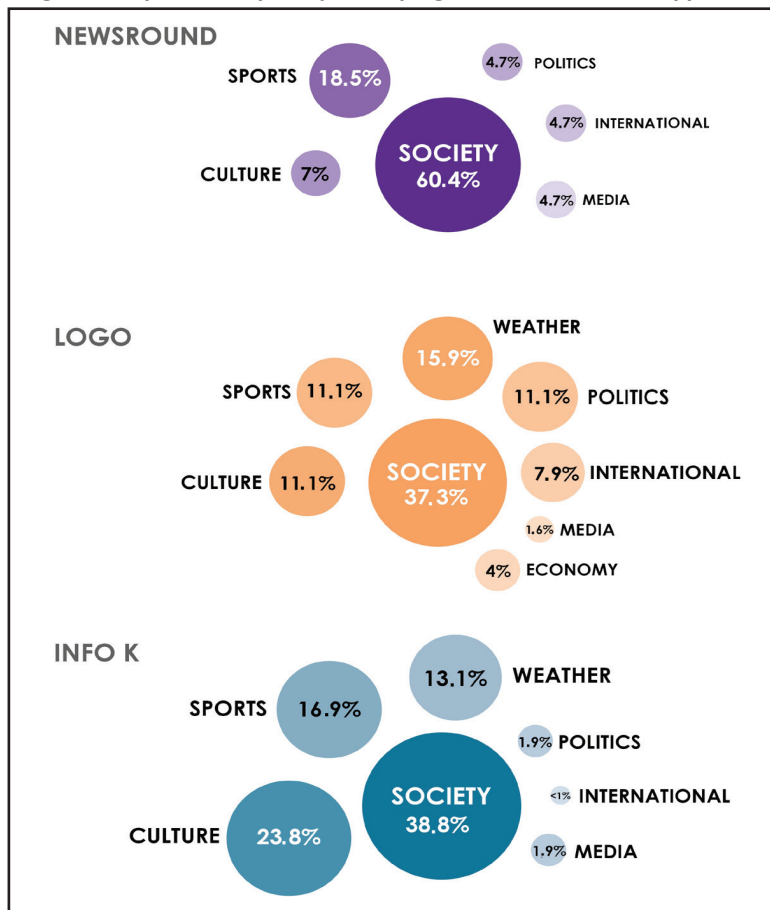
Although Politics, International and Economics are present, their share is not very significant.

Overall, the topics and subtopics of the news items from the three news programmes are distributed in such a way that, within the Society topics (N=161), those most covered are Style (N=30), Animals (N=29), Meteorology (N=24), Education (N=21), Science (N=14), Health (N=12), Technology (N=9), Social Rights (N=8), Environment (N=6), Events (N=5) and Religion (N=3). Of note in Culture (N=58) is the greater coverage of topics related to Music (N=26) than the other subtopics, which appear between one and five times at most. Regarding Sport (N=57), Football is clearly dominant with 27 news items, while the other Sport subtopics appear between one and five times at most. The next section with most coverage on the three news programmes as a whole is Politics (N=21), followed by International news (N=15). International news has a balanced coverage by country as only on three occasions (Russia, Syria and the European Union) was there more than one news item on this topic. In all other cases (Afghanistan, Belize, United States, France, Mali, Romania, Syria/Turkey, European Union/Syria and the World) only one news item was broadcast on the topic during the period of time the sample was analysed. In Media (N=9), the subtopic most covered is Television (N=6, if we add the two on TV3), followed by Photojournalism (N=1),

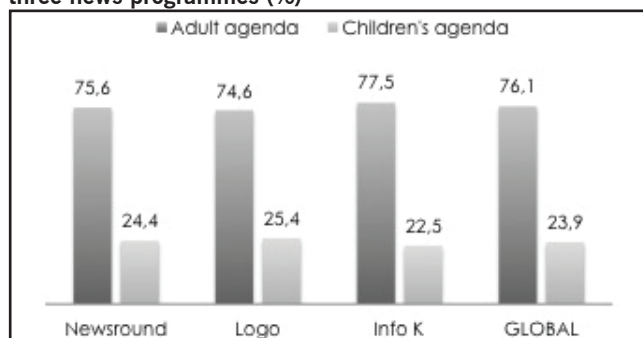
Internet (N=1) and Radio (N=1). Economics appeared on five occasions, all corresponding to the German news programme. The Weather had 41 news items, each one corresponding to the weather news on *Logo* and *Info K* in May 2013. The subtopics categorised as Summary (N=5) correspond to the summary of the week's news broadcast by *Info K* on Fridays.

A comparison of the topics covered on *Newsround*, *Logo* and *Info K* (Diagram 2) reveals that all three news programmes have a predominance of Society topics. The British news programme covers more Society news items than all the other sections added together, while Sport comes a clear second, far ahead of the other sections such as Culture, Politics, International and Media. The German news programme has the most varied and balanced spread of topics in terms of the volume of each section. Sports, Politics and International are of an equivalent weight. On the other hand, *Logo* is the only programme to cover Economics topics. There is also a predominance of Society topics on *Info K* but with a notable presence of topics related to Culture and Sport. Regarding the nature of the topics on the programme's news agendas, as these have been analysed individually, comparatively this can be seen to be equivalent in all three cases (Diagram 3). A quarter of the news items appearing on *Newsround*, *Logo* and *Info K* are specifically related to children.

Diagram 2. Spread of topics by news programme and share of appearances



Source: Author.

Diagram 3. Comparison of the nature of the topics on the three news programmes (%)

Source: Author.

Information quality on the three children's news programmes

Regarding the analysis of the different indicators established to measure the quality of children's news, a difference can be observed between the three programmes. Some programmes emphasise certain criteria more than others. This is surely related to the cultural and journalist traditions of the different countries, as well as their educational and social traditions.

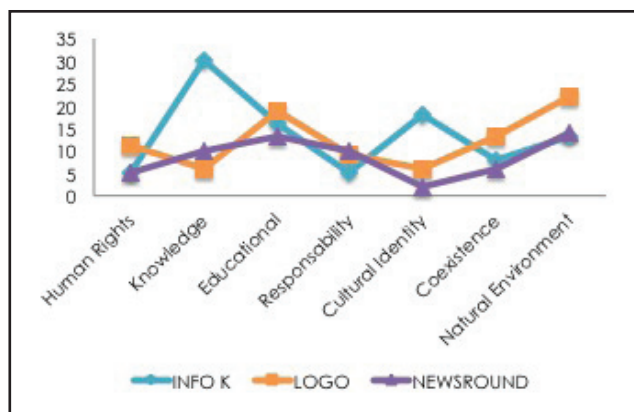
In promoting diversity, *Logo* stands out for including more cases of ethnic diversity and for being the only programme of the three to cover religious diversity. It should be noted that we are not saying that *Newsround* and *Info K* don't promote a diversity of beliefs but rather that they didn't cover Religious topics in the news programmes analysed.

Regarding the values promoted based on the news items, the results show different tendencies on the three news programmes (Diagram 4). *Newsround* has the most balanced coverage of values appearing overall and in more cases (promoting and respect for Human Rights, desire for knowledge (exploration, discovery, creativity), educational values, responsibility, cultural identity, coexistence or social harmony and respect for nature or the environment). *Logo* shows a preference for educational values and particularly for values that promote respect for nature or the environment. *Info K* encourages other values more, such as a desire for knowledge (exploration, discovery, creativity) and cultural identity.

Regarding the inclusion of children's experiences in the coverage of news items, these accounted for 37% of the total (N=372), representing 134 news items with the presence of children.

What does the audience say?

From the discussion groups we can conclude that, when children say they watch television with their parents, most of the time it's to watch the news or films. Where and when they watch television is also affected by the family's daily routine and some differences are evident between the different countries.

Diagram 4. Promoting values on the three news programmes

Source: Author.

All participants state they have a TV in the dining room at home and only in two cases (both in Catalonia) do they say they have a TV in their bedroom. The children of Catalan families also often associate watching TV with mealtimes, especially the evening snack or dinner. On the other hand, in German families the children say that, at most, they snack (*knabbern*) on something while they watch television. Regarding the appeal of television, children identify four categories: entertainment and fun; learning or interest; varied content; and spending time with the family. The opinions discussed during the sessions by the participants concerning the topics of the news items and the different formats used to present them, resulted in a very interesting discussion about news programmes. Regarding conventional news programmes, in general the children interviewed find them boring even though they believe they could be useful as a source of information or to learn something.

Based on the children's conversations, proposals were made to improve news programmes and demands for news programmes to be more agreeable, such as:

- Use of less sophisticated language.
- Superimposing on the screen concepts which aren't very clear or are difficult to understand.
- More gestures by the presenters, who often seem like they're as stiff as a board.
- The features of children's news programmes they like the most are:
- The presenters' informal clothes.
- The colourful set (they think the set for adult news programmes is too serious).
- Children as reporters (*Inforeporters* and *Kinderreporter*).
- That examples are given to explain topics, because then they're much easier to understand.

In general, there was agreement among the participants of the different discussion groups that it's important to be informed. Some children have a clear opinion about the reasons why it's important, others firmly believe this even though they can't explain why while a few children believe that being informed

is only important for adults. Among the reasons given are highly practical objectives closely related to the usefulness of information in their everyday lives. Four categories can be established concerning the reasons why the children in the study believe it's important to be informed:

1. Avoid being stupid
2. Be able to converse
3. Knowing what's happening
 - a. Illnesses
 - b. Strikes
 - c. Wars
 - d. Sport
 - e. New laws
4. Services
 - a. Traffic
 - b. Weather

Conclusions

1. The three children's news programmes analysed prioritise Society topics and a quarter of the topics covered belong to the child agenda.

Almost half the topics covered by the children's news analysed are Society topics (43.4%) and the other major focus is related to Culture and Sport which, together, account for over 30% of the news items covered. The structure of children's news programming shows a clear predominance for these topics, which are seen as child-friendly, while topics related to politics (9.6%) and economics (1.3%) are covered infrequently.

The three programmes coincide in this balance and also in their concentration of adult agenda topics, which is very high considering these news programmes are designed specifically with children in mind. The adult focus that predominates news media content (Feixa 1993; Figueras and Mauri 2010) is also evident in this case, added to the fact that, when news is provided on children, they are mostly represented as having problems (Davies 2010: 157).

On the one hand, this 25% share of child agenda topics are covered by such programmes when they aren't covered anywhere else, which the children consider to be interesting and necessary (Carter *et al.* 2009; Narberhaus 2013, 2016). But on the other hand, we might ask why they only account for 25% of the content on children's news programmes, the rest being made up of adult agenda news items. Perhaps this is because the maxim of editors for news items aimed at children is that you can talk about everything but not show everything, which encourages coverage of the same topics as on conventional news programmes. Regarding the concentration of topics, *Logo* (ZDF) had the most balanced distribution during the month analysed. The German news programme is the only one to cover Economics topics and the one presenting the most news items on Politics and International. In this respect, it's the programme

that is most similar to adult news programmes, as it explains all the topics thoroughly and intelligibly, albeit adapted to its intended audience.

Newsround (BBC) tended to prefer more sensationalist topics during the month the sample was studied. The fact that the broadcast is shorter (five minutes on average) means that topics need to be presented briefly and also fewer topics can be covered by the same programme, with the result that the news items broadcast are mostly related to Society, principally Animals and Meteorology (the programme doesn't have a specific Weather section, unlike the other two), and also Football. Such topics are always narrated directly with less explanation than, for instance, *Logo's* news items.

Info K (TVC) is the programme with the most news items on current affairs, with topics mainly concentrating on Society and Culture and particularly Style and Music. It also covers the most news items from the adult agenda (77.4%) and the most current affairs items (81.3%). The Catalan programme concentrates mainly on explaining topics it believes are of particular interest to children, so that it rarely includes news items from Politics or International in its content and, during the study period, no Economics topics were covered.

2. *Newsround*, *Logo* and *Info K* meet most of the quality criteria and particularly the one related to promoting values.

Children's news programmes on the BBC, ZDF and TVC are of considerable quality. This can also be seen in the numerous awards and distinctions they have received for their work. Our research shows that the form and content of all three news programmes comply with what we have defined as elements related to information quality for children's news. These three children's news programmes vary slightly in terms of the values they promote through their news items. The British programme emphasises the promotion and respect for Human Rights, a desire to learn, educational values, responsibility, cultural identity, social harmony and respect for nature or the environment. *Logo* shows a clear preference for educational values and especially values promoting respect for nature or the environment, while *Info K* particularly encourages values such as a desire for knowledge (exploration, discovery, creativity) and cultural identity.

The analysis has also shown that the different programmes make an effort to contribute positively to decoding the media for children, including spaces in which children themselves can become reporters for news items, an explanation of the bluescreen technique used in TV studios (*Info K*) and references to further sources of information if the children find the news item disturbing (*Newsround*). In this respect, the children's news programmes can be considered as elements within a non-formal environment that contribute towards children's media literacy.

3. Children who often watch children's news programmes show more interest in current affairs than those who don't tend to watch such programmes.

The discussion group participants who watch news at home, and also those who have carried out a radio, blog or newspaper workshop at school, are more interested in the news during the discussions, provide more ideas regarding what they would like and defend more strongly the importance of being informed. Although it's true that the study has not produced clearly differentiated data between the discussion group participants who normally watch children's news programmes and those who don't, it has been observed that various factors affect their interest in news, most particularly their family and school environment. In other words, children's relationship with the media and news has a notable impact on their interest in this area. This reinforces the proposal put forward by David Buckingham and Cynthia Carter who state that, the closer children's relationship with the media, and also with the news and its production processes, the more interest they have in such matters (Buckingham 1997; Carter *et al.* 2009). Although there were no significant differences between regular and non-regular viewers of the programmes, it can be stated that those children who remember having seen the topics viewed during the sessions on *Info K* or *Logo* are perfectly aware of what the item is about and can also explain it, and have the initiative to do so. Consequently, although regular watching of children's news programmes is not the only or most decisive conditioning factor for children's view of current affairs, it is nevertheless a factor which influences this conception. Media literacy is crucial to ensure this influence is conscious and that media messages are not consumed without a critical, reflective attitude (Masanet 2015; Masanet, Contreras and Ferrés 2013). However, as previous studies have pointed out, media education must go a step further, taking into account education related to emotions, attitudes and values, a media education based not only on knowledge but also on experience and attitude (Masanet 2015).

4. Older children perceive these programmes as too infantile and express a desire for a news programme for older children.

Most regular viewers of the programmes analysed consider themselves to be loyal viewers, they've been watching the programme for some time and, in general, like how the news items are explained. Some of them, however, believe the tone used by presenters and reporters is sometimes too much "for young children", too infantile. At a time when adolescence begins at an increasingly early age (Piracón and Palma 2010), it's logical for an audiovisual product aimed at an audience aged 6 to 12 not to be able to satisfy all the preferences of its range of viewers.

5. Television is still the preferred medium for news and the family's media consumption habits affect those of the children.

Children's media consumption habits are strongly influenced by their family and everyday lives, in line with what Pfaff-Rüdiger (2011) has claimed. If, at home, a parent reads the newspapers, it's easier for children to leaf through them because they have access. Some of the children interviewed say that they are interested not only in the specific pages for children which might be included in a newspaper some time during the week, but are also interested in the headlines and photographs. Some also use the press for the information they provide (for example, TV and cinema schedules) but this is an introduction to the media which is not available to those children living in family settings where no newspapers are present. Regarding radio, most children associate it with music and only with information when they are in the car. A few say that they get information from the internet and those who do explain that they consult search engines and websites such as Wikipedia to do schoolwork. Some families subscribe to digital providers and the children are aware that newspapers can be consulted via apps, mobile phone or tablet. In spite of evidence of children's growing interest in the internet, television still plays a key role in their media consumption habits (Fernandez-Planells *et al.* 2016: 3). The discussion group participants confirm this for the German and Catalan cases and Carter *et al.* had already noted this in their study published in 2009 for the British case: "Television is children's 'favourite place for news'. 52% mentioned TV by itself as their 'favourite.' When TV plus another medium, e.g. 'TV and newspapers', was included, it was mentioned by 67%" (Carter *et al.* 2009: 11).

6. The children taking part in the study see themselves as citizens and believe it's important to be informed, showing an interest in news.

The children in the study also showed great interest in news, stating that they believe it's important to be informed both of what's happening close to home and also around the world, and equally for adults as for themselves. Although some were not able to explain very well why it's important to be informed, most did find specific examples to illustrate this, principally their everyday lives, ranging from service information to the weather but also, in some cases, they expressed the desire to take part in society and it was therefore necessary to be informed, and they even saw it as a responsibility, citing the case of elections. Another important reason for being informed was not to feel stupid, the knowledge provided by knowing what's happening and being up-to-date, which at the same time means they can converse in the social circles typical at their age: family, friends and school.

This is a common point in all three countries, demonstrating the need for children's news, as stated by Carter *et al.* regarding children in the United Kingdom: "The research provides strong evidence that most children see themselves as citizens even though they are not yet of the age where they have full citizenship rights, and consider themselves to be keenly interested in issues relevant to the world around them." (Carter *et al.*, 2009: 5).

As we said in the introduction, the right to information is fundamental for all citizens in any real democracy and helping to transmit universal human values is also a duty and responsibility of the media as a public service. This study has tried to assert this right and demonstrate the importance of specific news spaces designed for children so they can truly be considered as citizens and be prepared to play their part completely in society.

Final note

This paper presents the results of the research *Children's news Topics, information quality and audience reception around Newsround, Logo and Info K*, which received the First prize of the XXIX CAC Awards for research on audiovisual communication.

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