Violence and Consolation: September 11th 2001 covered by the Dutch Children’s News

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ABSTRACT The present paper describes a content analysis of the coverage of the events related to September 11th 2001 by the Dutch Children’s News. Since 1980, the Dutch Broadcasting Corporation broadcasts a daily children’s news programme (Jeugdjournaal) that is specifically designed for children aged 9–12. The Children’s News selects news topics on the basis of their news value, which also implies coverage of violence and crime. To offset possible harmful effects of a violent news topic, the Children’s News usually applies several ‘consolation strategies’. These strategies may be applied at the programme level (e.g. alternating ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ topics), at the level of the news item (e.g. taking a child perspective, inclusion of reassuring comments), and at the shot level (e.g. not showing the most graphic film footage). In the present study, it was investigated to what extent the Children’s News applied these consolation strategies in the first week after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York.

Introduction

The attack on the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York on September 11th 2001 probably is one of the most well-covered acts of real-life violence to date. Apart from the enormous emotional and political impact of the events, to many people the dramatic reporting of the attacks was unprecedented. Usually, when an act of violence takes place, news reporters are not present to document the actual event and, as a consequence, news programmes frequently restrict themselves to talk about violence and showing pictures of its consequences. On September 11th, however, the complete violent sequence was documented, ranging from the threat of violence (e.g. of another attack and of the towers collapsing), to the actual violent events (e.g. the aircrafts hitting the towers), and to the profound physical and emotional consequences (e.g. of the ruined buildings and devastated people). The violent events were filmed from many different camera angles and the film footage contained extensive and very graphic pictures of violence and extreme physical and
emotional distress. Although to many viewers the events seemed almost ‘larger than life’, or even resembling a computer game, most adults and children realised that everything was, in fact, very real.

Research suggests that realism is an important contextual feature of television violence. Studies have shown that, compared with overt fictional violence, realistic violence may heighten levels of involvement (see Paik & Comstock, 1994), immediate fear and worry (for example, Cantor, 1998; Cantor & Nathansson, 1996; Smith & Wilson, 2000, 2002; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002), and the fear of being victimised (for example, Sparks & Ogles, 1990), particularly in adolescents and older school-aged children who are able to distinguish the real from the unreal on television. Given the realistic nature of the violent events on September 11th and given their overpowering graphic portrayal, it is not surprising that both children inside and outside the United States seemed effected by the events in similar ways. In fact, research conducted in The Netherlands has shown that about 50% of school-aged children were rather frightened by the news coverage, while 30% indicated that they were very frightened. Similar to US children, most Dutch children indicated that they were afraid that a terrorist attack would also happen close to them or that the events were the onset to a Third World War (Walma van der Molen & de Pundert, 2003).

Violence and consolation in the Children’s News

Most of the information about September 11th reached children through programmes that were not made for a child audience. However, in several European countries, most notably in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands, news programmes are produced that are specifically designed to make the main news comprehensible to children of about 8 to 12 years of age. These news programmes usually attract a lot of child viewers and in general are well understood and recalled (for example, Gunter et al., 2000; Walma van der Molen & van der Voort, 2000a, 2000b). The producers of the children’s news programmes often debate whether they should cover violent news events or not (for an overview, see Créton, 1994). On the one hand, their main goal is to select news topics on the basis of their news value, which does imply coverage of violence and crime. On the other hand, their policy is to prevent children from getting too upset by watching their programme.

To prevent children from getting too upset by certain news topics, most children’s news programmes usually make an effort to explain the seriousness of an event without showing the most graphic film footage. In addition, to offset possible harmful effects of a violent news topic, a ‘light’ news item usually follows a ‘heavy’ news item. Research suggests that these precautions indeed lead to fewer fears and anxieties in children than the manner in which violent news is presented in news programmes that are intended for an adult audience (Walma van der Molen & de Pundert, 2003; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). What we do not know, however, is how these strategies are employed in the case of profoundly shocking news events, such as the attacks that took place in the United States on September 11th.
Therefore, in the study to be presented here, a content analysis was conducted of the coverage by the Dutch Children’s News of the WTC attack and everything that happened in the first week after it. Since 1980, the Dutch Broadcasting Corporation has produced a children’s news programme (Jeugdjournaal), broadcast daily between 6.45 and 7.00 p.m. Together with BBC’s Newsround it is the oldest and most professional European news programme that is specifically made for older elementary school children. Apart from including topics that have news value for their particular child audience, the Children’s News covers the main national and international news events.

The Children’s News usually applies a range of precautions to offset possible harmful effects of violent news. However, the producers do not use a formal or explicit plan to guide these strategies (see de Vries, 2002). Rather, as has been observed for the general production and framing of other children’s news programmes as well (Buckingham, 1997), producers and reporters use certain strategies intuitively, based on their overall ideas about conveying emotional information to children. A first aim of the present study, therefore, was to make the strategies used by the Children’s News more explicit and to provide a typology of the protection measures that can be employed when children are confronted with violent or otherwise emotionally arousing news information. Apart from providing a frame for our content analysis, such a typology could also prove useful for other makers of informational programmes directed at children.

**A typology of consolation strategies**

We chose to call the precautions employed by the Children’s News ‘consolation strategies’. We are aware of the fact that consolation may be a relative quality. Some types of consolation may work better than others under certain circumstances with certain viewers. Therefore, we have chosen to define consolation from the perspective of the producers of the Children’s News. Thus, consolation strategies include all strategies intended by the producers to relieve their child audience or to provide their viewers with a better framework to understand the news information. It should be noted that the effectiveness of the employed consolation strategies can only be evaluated after the Children’s News has been broadcast, through survey research or an assessment of the e-mails that children often send to the Children’s News website. It could thus occur that part of a broadcast that was intended to relieve viewers proves ineffective. Usually, however, the long-term experience of the producers of the Children’s News will ensure that their efforts are efficient.

We have divided the possible consolation strategies into three categories:

(a) strategies applied at the programme level (e.g. alternating ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ topics);
(b) strategies applied at the level of the news item (e.g. taking a child perspective, inclusion of reassuring comments); and
(c) strategies applied at the shot level (e.g. not showing the most graphic film footage).
Considering the fact that it is sometimes impossible to ignore distressing news content, we believe it is important to evaluate the precautions taken by the Children’s News at different levels. The three categories that we propose may, in turn, be divided into different substrategies.

Consolation strategies applied at the programme level may be divided into two subcategories: (a) avoidance of certain very violent topics, and (b) the so-called sandwich formula, which implies that a ‘light’ news item succeeds a ‘heavy’ news item. ‘Light’ items usually cover positive or weird events about children or animals. The sandwich formula is a strategy that is applied very regularly by the Children’s News, because the producers believe that funny or otherwise light items may take the weight off previous negative information (see de Vries, 2002). In addition, if children are aware of the steady pattern of alternating heavy and light topics, light items may be even more consoling because children may know that their uncomfortable feelings may be relieved by positive information.

Regarding the consolation strategies that are usually applied at item level, three subcategories can be identified: (a) expert explanation, (b) personal accounts of children, and (c) paying attention to the reactions of viewers. Consolation by means of expert explanation is a technique that is also used relatively frequently in the Children’s News (de Vries, 2002). Experts, such as researchers or child psychologists, may explain to children that they are not the only ones feeling afraid or sad by certain news events. In addition, experts may emphasise the distance of events and the fact that certain violent incidents happen very rarely and/or are committed by very disturbed people. This sort of information is important, because it stresses the low chance for the child viewers to become victimised. Another important consolation method linked to explanation is paying attention to certain positive aspects of a shocking news event; for example, by making viewers see that it is possible to do something beneficial.

The second subcategory of consolation at item level – showing personal accounts of children – is in accordance with the policy of the Children’s News to present the news not only from an adult perspective, but also from a child perspective. On the one hand, taking a child perspective may enhance worry in child viewers because it may increase their empathy for the victims and may foster concerns that the same things may happen to themselves (Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). On the other hand, however, presentation of personal experiences by children may make certain news events more tangible. To a child viewer, a shocking event may get a better framework when explained by someone his/her age, because such a personal account might prevent child viewers from fantasising too much about what might have happened, something that may be scarier than hearing what really happened. In addition, personal accounts by children often also include positive endings; for example, when a child is rescued or when friends provided help. The third subcategory of consolation at item level – paying attention to the reactions of viewers – also agrees with the Children’s News policy of providing a framework to deal with emotions that violent events may induce. Sharing the reactions of other viewers may relieve children, because it may show them how other children are trying to cope
with their sorrow, fears, or worries and may establish some sort of ‘collective mourning’.

Consolation strategies applied at shot level may be divided into four subcategories: (a) avoidance of graphic violent pictures, (b) choosing a more distant camera position when violence is portrayed, (c) refraining from using additional set noise, such as people screaming or dramatic music, when this is not really necessary or not an integral part of the original footage, and (d) avoidance of repetitive broadcast of the same violent images. Consolation at shot level is important because many children refer to explicit depictions of violence or to graphic portrayals of its physical and emotional consequences when asked what type of news information in particular makes them fearful (see Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). Especially younger children, who are still more perceptually bound than children aged 11–12, are very responsive to explicitly violent film footage. To prevent children from getting too upset, a standard form of consolation at shot level thus is to avoid the most explicit pictures of violence. Therefore, the Children’s News usually avoids film footage that includes images of graphic interpersonal violence or its consequences, such as dead bodies, blood, or people screaming. When the producers of the Children’s News do decide to convey distressing images, they usually try to reduce the emotional impact of violence by showing it from a distance, refraining from additional set noise, and refraining from showing the same pictures more than once when a single conveyance is enough to inform their viewers.

In the present study, it was investigated to what extent the Children’s News applied the afore-explained consolation strategies in the first week after the WTC attack. In addition, we explored to what extent the reporting was adjusted when viewers’ reactions on the attacks came pouring in on the Children’s News website.

**Method**

On September 11th 2001, there was no doubt that the Children’s News should cover the events that took place in the United States. Although everyone realised that the accompanying pictures were shocking, they were broadcast because they were breaking world news at that time. However, in the days that followed, the reasons for providing continuous detailed coverage of the events were less obvious. Nevertheless, in the first week after the attacks, the Children’s News paid attention to the incidents every day. Therefore, in the present study, the Children’s News broadcasts from 11 September until 16 September were analysed.

To analyse the applied consolation strategies at all levels, first, each broadcast was divided into sub-items. A change of sub-item information was marked by a change of subject matter that was shortly introduced by the newsreader. For example, on September 11th, seven sub-items were distinguished:

(a) the newsreaders’ overall introduction;
(b) news about the attacks on the WTC buildings;
(c) news about the attack on the Pentagon;
(d) a studio interview with a Dutch expert on US affairs;
(e) news about the collapse of the WTC buildings;
(f) an interview with the Dutch correspondent in Washington; and
(g) more live coverage of the situation in New York and the collapse of the towers.

Subsequently, each sub-item was divided into shots. A shot was defined as the pictorial material between two cuts. Using a Microsoft Access database, for each sub-item a coding form was constructed that provided a detailed description of the pictorial and verbal information per shot. For each shot, the pictorial information was summarised and the exact concurrent verbal information was copied out. Also, the duration in seconds of each shot was reported and the type of shot (e.g. total shot, close-up shot) and background noise (e.g. tumult, people screaming) was recorded. This procedure resulted in an overview of six broadcasts, 43 sub-items, and 471 shots that were all related to the attacks. Table I provides an overview of the number of items, number of shots, and duration of information about the attacks for each broadcast day, respectively. On average, a broadcast consisted of six sub-items related to the attacks. Each item, on average, contained 11 shots.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of sub-items</th>
<th>11 September</th>
<th>12 September</th>
<th>13 September</th>
<th>14 September</th>
<th>15 September</th>
<th>16 September</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of shots</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total duration (seconds)</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>1743</td>
<td>994</td>
<td>698</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>5333</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One coder coded all the material. To establish coding reliability, a second independent coder recoded 35% of the sample. Inter-rater agreement as measured by Cohen’s kappa for the different measures ranged from 0.79 to 0.91. In content analytical research, these reliabilities are considered to be good reliability figures (Bakeman & Gottman, 1986).

Results

Consolation at programme level

To investigate to what extent the Children’s News applied their usual consolation strategies at programme level, the complete six broadcasts were taken as the unit of analysis. Unlike their normal procedure, the Children’s News did not apply consolation at programme level in the first 5 days after the attacks. All sub-items were
related to the events in the United States and no topics were specifically avoided. The numbers of sub-items for 11–15 September that are presented in Table I, therefore, represent a score of 100%. On Saturday 15 September, the Children’s News even skipped the weather forecast, something that is very unusual. It was not until 16 September that other news topics were covered. And even on this day, four out of seven of the sub-items were about the attacks.

Consolation at item level

To investigate consolation at item level, within each broadcast, sub-items were identified that contained information clearly included to comfort the child audience or to make the child viewers understand and come to terms with the situation more thoroughly. As it turned out, consolation at item level was almost exclusively found in ‘talking head items’; that is, sub-items that portrayed experts, correspondents, or other interviewees. All three categories of consolation at item level could be identified: (a) expert explanation, (b) personal accounts of children, and (c) paying attention to the reactions of viewers. Sub-items that predominantly showed film footage accompanied by a voice-over hardly contained consolation at this level of analysis.

In the present sample of news items, several experts provided consolation and explanation. The information they provided concerned the United States, terrorism in general and Bin Laden in particular, the Taliban, the relatively low chance of becoming a victim of a terrorist attack for Dutch children, the relatively low chance of a Third World War, etc. In addition, experts answered questions of child viewers, who sent about 1500 e-mails to the website of the Children’s News. In several sub-items, the experts reacted to the worries that were expressed by these viewers.

In addition, the news items about the attacks showed a fair number of children and adults who spoke about what had happened to them on September 11th and the days after. An example of a consoling personal account was the story of a Dutch girl living in New York who tells a reporter of the Children’s News that she is fine and that her family was not in danger. Also, in several sub-items after September 11th, the reactions of Dutch viewers were attended to; for example, by means of interviews at primary schools. Children’s concerns were shown, they could ask questions straight into the camera and they read out loud poems they wrote for the victims in the United States.

To analyse to what extent the Children’s News used the afore-described types of consolation at item level, both the sub-items and the individual shots were taken as units of analysis. As already indicated, first, sub-items were identified that contained some form of consolation at item level. Subsequently, the percentage of time devoted to each type of consolation method was calculated by summing up the duration of all shots that pertained to a particular category and dividing that by the total duration. It is important to note that the time devoted to consolation was taken as an indicator of the extent to which the Children’s News paid attention to this type of information, rather than the number of shots. This was done because shots may vary in length considerably. Shots that present talking heads, especially, tend to be
TABLE II. Percentages of time devoted to different categories of consolation at item level per programme day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>11 September</th>
<th>12 September</th>
<th>13 September</th>
<th>14 September</th>
<th>15 September</th>
<th>16 September</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No clearly intended consolation at item level</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended consolation at item level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert explanation</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal accounts of children</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewers’ reactions</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

much longer than the shots that make up film footage that is accompanied by a voice-over (see Walma van der Molen, 2001). Simply counting shots, therefore, would underestimate the informational value of the accounts of experts and other interviewees and overestimate the impact of other pictures. Table II lists the percentages of time devoted to the different categories per programme day.

As can be seen from Table II, the Children’s News devoted a lot of time to some form of consolation at item level every day. In fact, except for the broadcast of 13 September, more time was devoted to consoling than to non-consoling information (that predominantly consisted of pictures with a voice-over). The type of consoling information and the number of sub-items that contained consolation, however, varied across the broadcast days. In addition, some of the information that was intended to be consoling proved less effective. In order to judge the substance of this information, we have to look at the provided consolation strategies on a more qualitative level. On September 11th, for example, two very long sub-items were devoted to expert explanation. Maarten van Rossum, expert on US affairs, was invited to comment the events and Charles Groenhuijsen, Dutch correspondent in Washington, also provided a lengthy explanation. Maarten van Rossum, however, said some controversial things. Although some of his explanations were relieving, he also insinuated that a similar terrorist attack could happen in The Netherlands, and that the events in New York and Washington might culminate in a Third World War. That night, the e-mails on the Children’s News website showed that a lot of viewers were severely disturbed by that part of Van Rossum’s account.

As a consequence, the broadcast of 12 September, introduced a different expert on US affairs, Marianne van Leeuwen, who in two sub-items explained at length that attacks like these were unlikely to take place in The Netherlands and that there was little chance that a Third World War would break out. In addition, a personal account of a girl from New York who had not been in danger was presented and some of the viewers’ questions that the Children’s News had received on their website the night before were dealt with. US-expert Marianne van Leeuwen commented on the possibly frightening sub-items. She talked with a nice and easy
manner and told the viewers about the uncertainties that still existed, but assured them that there was no big threat.

The broadcasts of 13 and 14 September mainly focused on the physical and emotional consequences of the attacks, images that were quite disturbing. However, on 13 September, one sub-item did focus on expert explanation, while another item contained some consoling information from a child’s point of view. By means of expert explanation, a lot of useful information was given about Osama bin Laden. This was reassuring, because a lot of viewers wondered who could be the mastermind behind the horrible attacks. On 14 September, no expert explanation was provided, but two sub-items focused on the questions and reactions of Dutch school children and one sub-item provided consoling information through personal accounts of children.

The items presented on 15 September differed from the items in the other broadcasts, because they focused almost exclusively on consoling information. The broadcast as a whole seemed to be produced to neutralise the disturbing items presented the days before. Predominantly by means of expert explanation, the events in New York and Washington were framed, children’s worries and fears were presented as a normal reaction when a shocking event of this magnitude takes place, and information was given about how to deal with these worries. On 16 September, the Children’s News contained one sub-item that provided expert explanation and two sub-items that contained some consoling personal information by children.

**Consolation at shot level**

In general, it is difficult to determine exactly to what extent the Children’s News applies consolation at shot level, because that would involve accurate knowledge of all the material that was available to the producers at the time of broadcast. In the case of the attacks on September 11th 2001, however, it is somewhat easier to determine which pictures were excluded from the Children’s News because the film footage that went across the world has become so well known.

To analyse to what extent the Children’s News applied consolation at shot level, first, the percentage of time devoted to possibly distressing film footage per programme day was established by summing up the duration of all shots that showed the threat, the actual occurrence, or the harmful consequences of the attacks and dividing that by the total duration. As can be seen in Table III, except for 15 September, at each programme day a substantial proportion of the total broadcast time was devoted to possibly distressing pictures. Furthermore, a comparison of Tables II and III indicates that the majority of time devoted to information that was not specifically intended to be consoling was spent on distressing pictorial information, rather than on a mixture of neutral and distressing pictures. These figures suggest that the Children’s News did not avoid possibly shocking footage to a very large extent.

A closer examination of the news items confirmed this idea. On September 11th, the film footage mainly showed the actual occurrence of violence (e.g. the aircraft hitting the towers) and the profound consequences (e.g. the towers collapsing,
people in distress). The attacks and collapses of the towers were shown in their full horror and the same footage was used as in all other news programmes that are intended for an adult audience. The only shots that were left out were the pictures of people jumping out of the burning towers. The rest of the week, some other controversial pictures, such as close-ups of people bleeding or in shock, were also avoided. But except for these pictures, the Children’s News showed a lot of footage that was also conveyed in other broadcasts, including the ruins of the towers, the stressful rescue operations, the panic and disorder among people in the streets of New York, amateur pictures, pictures made by cameramen that were running for their lives, emotional reactions of survivors, and people desperately looking for missing family.

However, inclusion of distressing film footage does not exclude the possibility of other consolation strategies at shot level. If violent or otherwise emotionally arousing pictures are shown, the Children’s News usually chooses to do so in a manner that avoids unnecessary sensationalism (de Vries, 2002). Therefore, we also investigated which camera positions were used in the distressing film footage, whether unnecessary background noise was used, and to what extent the same violent pictures were shown more than once. Table III presents the distribution of possibly distressing shots across six different camera positions:

1. A very long shot was defined as a shot filmed from a far distance with a wide angle, such as pictures taken from the air.
2. A total shot was defined as a shot providing a total image of a given situation, but less wide and from a closer distance than a very long shot. An example of a total shot is a picture of one of the Twin Towers of the WTC in which the burning tower was visible from top to bottom.
3. Shots were labelled as medium shots when they showed only part of a larger image, such as the top of the burning Twin Towers, or a subgroup of people in a crowd. In a medium shot, people’s emotions are difficult to observe.
4. Close-up shots were labelled as close shots. Most close shots were shots of people’s faces in which people’s emotions were easily discernable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time devoted to distressing footage</th>
<th>11 September</th>
<th>12 September</th>
<th>13 September</th>
<th>14 September</th>
<th>15 September</th>
<th>16 September</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Distribution of distressing shots**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very long shot</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total shot</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium shot</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close shot</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme close shot</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable camera position</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Extreme close shots were defined as even closer than close-ups, that showed only part of a close shot, such as tears running down someone’s face.
6. A shot was assigned to the category ‘variable camera position’ when the camera-man was running or walking while filming.

As can be seen in Table III, the majority of the distressing shots were either very long, total, or medium shots. On 14 September, however, the Children’s News contained a lot of close-ups of children and adults in despair, which made the footage quite shocking.

The Children’s News did not use additional set or background sounds when it was not an integral part of existing film footage. This means that the Children’s News, unlike other news programmes, did not add an artificial dramatic effect to the images of the attacks or the collapse of the towers by means of music. On the contrary, the Children’s News even showed the shots of the aircraft hitting the WTC buildings without any commentary from the newsreader. In addition, the Children’s News only showed a few of the most iconic shots more than once, such as the shots showing the aircraft hitting the towers and the buildings collapsing. Other pictures, such as those of running and screaming people and of people on the search for missing family were avoided or shown only once.

Conclusion

The aim of the present study was twofold. First, we aimed to propose a typology of consolation strategies used by the Dutch Children’s News. Second, we analysed to what extent these strategies were used in the case of September 11th 2001. Because of their young audience, the producers of the Children’s News were particularly keen not to overemphasise the violent and emotional impact of the events (for an interview with the producers of the Children’s News on this subject, see de Vries, 2002). However, the results of our analysis showed that the Children’s News used a somewhat restricted range of consolation strategies in the case of the September 11th attacks compared with the coverage of other violent topics, such as the murder of a Dutch politician and cases of child abuse that are described elsewhere (de Vries, 2002). For example, unlike their usual procedure at programme level, the Children’s News did not alternate between ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ topics. On the one hand, this choice of the editorial staff seems illogical, because the use of the so-called ‘sandwich formula’ is considered an important tool in reducing anxiety among viewers of the Children’s News. On the other hand, the events were of such importance that the editors decided to explain everything to their child audience as well as possible, which implied reserving more time for the events and their aftermath.

Although many of the pictures shown by the Children’s News were shocking, such as the pictures of the aircraft hitting the Towers, these pictures could not possibly be ignored because they were breaking news at that time. Yet, the Children’s News refrained from showing close-up shots of violence as much as possible and it did not dramatise the events any further by adding music to already sensational film footage. In a way, the predominant use of expert explanation as a
consolation strategy compensated the lack of ‘light’ news items and the fairly large amount of time devoted to distressing pictures, because many potentially shocking sub-items were followed immediately by expert explanations or by experts reacting to viewers’ questions. These results underscore the importance of judging different types of strategies at different levels.

All in all, the manner in which the Children’s News covered the attacks does seem to follow the producers’ intentions to make the main news comprehensible to children aged 9–12 and to inform viewers about major problems in the world without making them too anxious. The fact that the producers are constantly aware of their viewers’ cognitive and emotional reactions to the programme is also reflected by their responses to viewers’ fears and questions. During the first days after the attacks in the United States, the Children’s News received over 1500 e-mails from children expressing their concerns. In response to these concerns, the Children’s News invited different experts to explain the events and paid more attention to children’s worries and ways to relieve them. The events that took place in the United States in September 2001 were of such magnitude that the Children’s News had no choice but to devote much of its time to the actual attacks, their profound consequences, and the threat of international terrorism. Coverage of the events, however, did not necessarily imply adopting an overdramatic approach. Overall, the producers of the Children’s News did remain responsive to their viewers’ understanding of the information and children’s emotional appraisal of the violent events.

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