The Fourth Estate in the Sixth Grade: Exploring “News” in the Lives of Canadian Pre-Teens Through Creative Media Inquiry

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores how young people conceive of and engage with news in the current Canadian context. It suggests the need to transcend notions of youth as either “disengaged” or “disenfranchised” in relation to news by exploring questions such as “what counts as ‘news’?” and “what does news engagement look like?” The study involved one class of Grade Six students (n=26) in the Greater Toronto Area in a mix of participatory creative activities and interviews. The results illustrated participants’ diverse ways of defining news or “news vocabularies” and the importance of friends and family members to the “news ecologies” they live in and interact with. Results also demonstrated the unique complexities pre-teens face in their relationships with news. Overall, this thesis calls for further critical thinking around how Canadian society understands young people as news users, and how young people utilize news to reproduce and transform the cultures they inhabit.
For the twenty-six outstanding students who participated in this research project:

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Stepping into Plainsview Elementary School, the smell is a familiar mix of dust and cleaning supplies. I feel as though I’ve travelled back in time to my own elementary school days but I’m really here to begin my first day of observation in Mr. Tilly’s Grade Six classroom. After checking in at the office, and grabbing my stick-on “visitor” nametag, I walk to the end of the hall and up a steep flight of stairs to the Grade Six room.

The classroom is large and colorful. It sits in its own little world at the back end of the school. The far wall features several large windows that bring in a warm and welcome sunlight on this cold day in January. The floor at the front of the room is covered in a brightly coloured carpet that sits in front of a wall-to-wall green chalkboard. In the corner, directly beside the door, sits an over-stuffed armchair.

The chair and the carpet evoke memories of “storytime”. Mr. Tilly still reads to students often during language period, but for this, they sit in their desks. These 11 and 12 year olds use the comfy carpet mostly as a place to work on group projects.

The walls are covered in the type of bright, colorful posters you would expect to find in an elementary school classroom. They feature lessons, like how to construct a useful question for reading comprehension. On the back wall, just outside the class’s tiny coatroom, hangs a bulletin board labeled “Word Wall”.

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1 The elementary school where this project took place is being referred to by a pseudonym to protect students’ anonymity and ensure the confidentiality of their responses.

2 Mr. Tilly is not a pseudonym. I am referring to Mr. Tilly by his real name in this project in order to acknowledge and explore his role as both a creator of the media literacy resource TeachingKidsNews.com and a teacher who uses the resource in his own classroom. This decision has been approved by the University of Toronto’s Office of Research Ethics and by the participating school board’s external research department.
This board features keywords the class has learned on various subjects arranged in neat rows on cue cards. In the media literacy row, “Bashar al-Assad” and “Chemical Weapons” are posted beside “United Nations” and “Costa Concordia”.

The afternoon recess has just finished and Mr. Tilly is beginning “TKN Hour”. Every Wednesday afternoon the class explores current events using a website Mr. Tilly created for this purpose, TeachingKidsNews.com (TKN). This TKN Hour, like most, begins with a discussion of recent headlines.

“Has anyone listened to or followed any news stories lately?” Mr. Tilly asks.

Several hands shoot up immediately. The upcoming Winter Olympics are a popular topic. Students are especially interested in which all-stars will lead Canada’s hockey teams. There is also talk of the medically induced coma doctors are using to treat a prominent Formula 1 racer. Then, Faith raises her hand.

She explains to her classmates that South Sudan’s vice president and president are fighting. She knows that people are leaving the country on boats and busses because of the violence that has erupted in the young country, but she is not entirely sure why the violence is occurring. In response, Mr. Tilly briefly and succinctly describes the way that ethnicity has been mobilized in recent conflicts in South Sudan. He was obviously prepared for this.

While students listen intently I feel the need to pinch myself. Is this really Grade Six?

In research on youth and news consumption, the narrative for the past several decades has been one of decline. Researchers argue that, as the media environment grows more diverse, young people are abandoning news in favour of other media content. Some research pegs the beginning of this trend at the mid-1970s (Times Mirror Center for the People and

\[3\] All students are referred to by pseudonym in this thesis to protect the confidentiality of their responses and ensure their anonymity.
the Press, 1996), while Putnam (as cited in Buckingham, 2000) and others (e.g. Howe, 2010) argue it may have emerged as early as the 1920s. The current picture, when posed statistically, is quite bleak. In the United States, around 1/3 (29%) of young adults (18 - 25) in a statistically representative survey reported getting no news on a typical day, including news from newer sources, such as online social media (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2012, p. 12). In Canada, Howe (2010) found similar results in a telephone survey of nearly 2,000 Canadians. One third (33%) of respondents between 18 and 34 (inclusive) were “decidedly inattentive to news media”, and reported spending less than three hours a week reading, viewing, and listening to news across all platforms (Howe, 2010, p. 117).

Some scholars argue that this decline in news interest among young people is the result of a “generational shift” (Mindich, 2005) away from news, and public life in general (e.g. Putnam, 2000; Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007; Howe, 2010). Others argue that young people are interested in current events and public life, but have been effectively disenfranchised by mainstream news outlets that either ignore their interests or stereotype them in their portrayals (e.g. Katz, 1993; Kelly, 2006; Poindexter, 2012). In his book The Making of Citizens: Young People, News, & Politics (2000), David Buckingham ultimately places himself in the latter group of scholars. However, he also suggests the need for further exploration into how both sides of this debate are constituted. Buckingham calls for more critical examination of ideas like “citizenship” and “news”, the terms at the center of this debate. In this thesis, I will respond to that call.

The idea that young people do not care about news, or do not care about news anymore raises several fundamental questions. For instance, what constitutes “news”? What does an interest in news look like in the modern, high-choice media environment? In
addition, how might today’s children, teenagers, and young adults conceive of news and what is newsworthy in comparison with previous generations? These questions nagged at me as I finished my undergraduate studies in journalism and applied to begin my master’s degree. In conceptualizing this project, I had many questions and very few answers -- or even guesses at answers. Thus, I constructed an exploratory study. My goal was to engage with young people around these questions and add to the academic literature surrounding “youth” and “news engagement”.

This thesis explores the question, “How do Canadian young people relate to ‘news’, in the modern, rapidly evolving, media context?” My specific research objectives are to: a) explore young participants’ own definitions of “news” and its relevancy and importance to them, b) examine how and where young Canadian participants encounter news in comparison with the participants of recent similar studies in other countries, and c) discover what types of knowledge and language young participants draw upon to describe their relationships with news. These are crucial lines of inquiry because they have important implications for how researchers account for and evaluate young people’s engagement with news. In turn, such research has the power to influence wider social perceptions of youth as “active” or “inactive”, “informed” or “apathetic” members of Canadian society.

It is rare that adults, especially those working outside the school environment, hear young people’s voices on issues like current events and public engagement. This project aims to promote cross-generational dialogue on such matters. In particular, it is my hope that news practitioners will benefit in some small way from this research, as it questions commonly-

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4 An equally important question would be how these various age groups conceive of news differently from one another. I have touched on this to a small extent in my thesis, though I focus primarily on the ideas of pre-teens in urban Canada. In this thesis, I use the term “young people” as a broad descriptor referring to people between the ages of 5 and 25 -- children, teens, and young adults -- because it allows me to speak at an abstract, generational level when necessary. However, I recognize the radically different experiences of various age groups within this broad categorization.
held assumptions about whether children and youth can be considered as part of a wider Canadian news audience. It is particularly crucial to study young people’s relationships with news in Canada because perspectives from the United States and the United Kingdom currently dominate research in this area. While these studies are helpful, further research is necessary to explore the relevance of their findings to the daily lives of Canadian young people in order to make them meaningful in our own context.

Background

I became interested in young people’s engagement with news while working part-time as a children’s news reporter for an educational website during my undergraduate studies. The website was called WIGUP.TV (While I Grow Up), a project of the busy Ottawa-Montreal production company Balestra Productions. Much like the TeachingKidsNews website, WIGUP aimed to bring current events to children (our target audience was nine to 14 year olds) in a meaningful and relevant manner.\(^5\) In my work, I met many children with a sharp awareness of current events. These children\(^6\) were using social media to stay informed and raise awareness for various causes. This was interesting to me because it seemed contradictory to the perception some adults hold that young people are too apathetic or pre-occupied with their own lives to be concerned about larger world issues. One of the goals of WIGUP was to eventually engage young readers in reporting their own news stories by offering basic journalism training and providing a platform for publication. It was

\(^5\) WIGUP.TV was put on hiatus in the fall of 2011 but has since returned in a different form. The site is now a creative social networking platform for teachers to use in their classrooms.

\(^6\) There are many ways to define “children”. In this thesis, I use the term to refer to young people 14 and under. I also use the term “pre-teen” to refer to a specific sub-category of children within this age group between the ages of nine and 14. This is a subjective categorization that differs slightly from study to study. For example, Pybus refers to “tweens” as eight to 13 year olds (2011). I include 14 year olds in this category because in my work with this age group I have found that they share more similarities with older school-aged children than with teens.
in helping develop this aspect of the website that I began to form the ideas that would ultimately become the research question and objectives for this thesis.

Before moving on, I feel it is important to clarify what stake I hold in this matter personally. As a 24-year-old researcher and graduate student I am both a young person myself as well as a researcher of youth culture. Claims about young people as “disengaged” or “disenfranchised” are not only claims about my generation, but also about me. It was in this personal sense that such claims first became problematic in my view. I was so interested in current events and public life as a teenager that I decided to pursue an undergraduate degree in journalism. I consider myself a well informed “news junkie” and while I may not be representative of my age group as a whole on this matter, I know my engagement with news as a young person is also not overly unique.

The purpose of revealing these details becomes clearer in reference to Foucault’s ideas on researching the marginalized in society. Foucault argues academic studies that produce knowledge about disadvantaged people (or those who generally hold less power in society) can play an active role in keeping these groups in such positions. However, “rather than seeing the production of knowledge as wholly oppressive,” Foucault argues that when marginalized groups produce research about their own experiences it can alter the status quo (Mills, 2003, p. 69).

I come from a different age group than the pre-teen participants in this study and do not pretend to fully understand their lived experiences. However, I believe that as a young person (and especially as a “millennial,” the age group which is currently the object of so much scrutiny and ire in the mainstream media) I have a unique perspective to offer in this exploration because I have grown up under a similar generational rhetoric as the one that surrounds these pre-teens.
Looking Ahead

My study explores “news” through the eyes of one classroom of Grade Six students (n=26) in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in Ontario, Canada. In the chapters that follow, I reflect on how these students define news, how they experience it, and how they discuss their relationship with it. In doing so, I aim to encourage a more complex understanding of these Canadian pre-teens as news consumers, or “users”, a more accurate term in the current media context (Poindexter, 2012). I also hope to show how deeply participants’ lived experiences with news are connected to the larger media landscape and socio-cultural context they are a part of.

In the following chapter, I offer a summary of the reviewed literature, which outlines the debate referenced above in more detail. This chapter explores the need for a research paradigm that accounts for young people as active participants in their relationships with news. In chapter three, I provide an overview of the conceptual framework that has influenced my decisions and interpretations in this project. The framework uses three conceptual models which, when combined, are useful for connecting the lived experiences of individual young people to the larger social structure and cultural environment they inhabit. In the next chapter, I explain how this framework is woven into the methodological structure of my study. This chapter highlights the blend of creativity and reflexivity that many (e.g. Lemish, 2007) consider to be essential to the exploration of children’s relationships with media. Chapter five presents a detailed account of my data analysis process and results. Here, the data are rendered as a complex “web” of themes that serve as a model for how the

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I use the terms “participants” and “students” interchangeably to refer to the specific group of young people who participated in my study. “Participants” is useful because it draws attention to the active participation of these students and the collaborative nature of their engagement in the research. “Students” is useful because it emphasizes that although the dynamics of school and schooling were not the subject of this thesis, my encounters with the participating children were institutionally situated in the school context (Buckingham, 2000). The possible impact of this context on the research is discussed briefly in chapter four.
participants in this study conceptualize and relate to “news”. Finally, in chapters six and seven, I provide my own interpretations of this thematic web or “network” and work towards some initial answers to my overall research question. This exploratory study identifies important lines of inquiry, which I hope will not only be useful for my own future research, but also for other scholars, media educators, news practitioners, and, importantly, for young people themselves. My goal is to provoke further critical, creative thinking about young people as news users and as members of Canadian society.
Chapter 2

Beyond “Disengaged” and “Disenfranchised”:

A Review of the Literature on Young People’s News Engagement in the Western Context

Introduction

“Few topics are more marginalized in the scholarly literature of mass communication, education and human development than the topic of children, current events, and news,” (Hobbs, Cohn-Geltner & Landis, 2011, p. 43). Scholars who specialize in the study of children and media have been making this point for more than a decade (e.g. Lemish, 1998; Sundin, 2008; Carter, 2013). Despite a slowly growing body of research on the topic, especially from researchers in Europe and the United Kingdom, one might ask, why have children’s relationships with news been so overlooked in research? There are several conceivable answers to this question. One obvious contributing factor is the long-held assumption in Western societies that news is irrelevant to children. It is assumed that news belongs to the world of serious adults, and, if you ask, children will often confirm this assumption themselves (see Buckingham, 1997, p. 119). Over the years, a small but dedicated group of scholars have established out a subfield of research by examining the evidence for and against this assumption. In this thesis, I have joined their ranks.

The goal of this research project is to explore how one group of pre-teen Canadians conceive of and engage with news. The purpose for doing so is to provoke critical thinking about how we as a society understand young people as news users, as well as to identify important directions for future inquiry around how children relate to news. In this chapter, I introduce the academic work that has influenced the shape and intent of this study. Here, I will build on reviewed scholarly literature to explain the need for a research paradigm that
situates children and young people as active participants in their relationships with news. In addition, I will outline two lines of questioning that emerge from the reviewed literature, which I have pursued throughout this thesis to contribute to the development of this new paradigm: “what constitutes news?” and “what does news engagement look like in the modern context?”

Historically, research into children’s engagement with news has been dominated by an interest in “political socialization” -- the phenomenon that describes how people develop their political understanding. This developmentally focused work became popular in the 1970s (Buckingham, 1997, p. 120), but Sundin (2008, p. 132) suggests it stretches back even further to researchers like Schramm in the late 1940s who was interested in how children learned to understand news. Alongside this body of research, or perhaps stemming from it, a broader body of work has developed around the news consumption habits of older youth, including more than 40 years of research on young adults’ declining interest in newspapers (Lewis, 2008, p. 36).

This line of research on young people’s news consumption habits can be connected to what some have called a “moral panic”8 around youth culture and mass media (Mazzarella, 2007) over the past several decades. In particular, scholars have examined whether young people’s turn away from news media may be connected with their apparent apathy toward participation in public life in general, especially in light of statistics on social trends such as declining voter turnout among young adults. Research focused on news consumption has drawn a larger public interest than the exploration of children and young people’s conceptualizations of or relationships with news, perhaps due to the fact that young people

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8 Mazzarella, citing Springhall, defines a moral panic as a cultural moment “when the official or press reaction to a deviant social or cultural phenomenon is ‘out of proportion’ to the actual threat offered” (2007, p. 49). McRobbie (as cited in Mazzarella, 2007, p. 49) has argued that such panics over youth culture are often mechanisms for disciplining young people through instilling fear in their parents.
are often seen as a “gauge of society’s successes or failures” (Spurgeon, Ferrier, Gunders & Graham, 2012, p. 913). In a time of unprecedented change and uncertainty for the news industry, some media practitioners and scholars have pondered what our future society would look like in the hands of a generation of “news illiterates” (see Poindexter, 2012 pp. 7-13).

**Decades of Decline**

Since the early 1990s, scholars interested in youth, news, and engagement have struggled to make sense of a growing body of large-scale survey data, mostly out of the United States, that suggests a major decline in news interest and interaction with news media among young people. Though most of this data has been collected from young people older than 18 to avoid difficulties around obtaining informed consent, it is usually assumed that the trends evident in these studies will carry forward, or perhaps grow even more pronounced as the current generation of younger children become young adults. Institutions like the Gallup Organization have performed this kind of research since at least the mid 20th century, but data on the issue became even more widely available in the North American context with the formation of the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press in 1990. The year it was formed, the Times Mirror Center published a study called “The Age of Indifference: A Study of Young Americans and How They View The News” which is cited as a foundational report justifying the narrative of decline mentioned above (Buckingham, 1997; 1999; 2000; Mindich, 2005).

This report drew upon public opinion polls and data from news quizzes dating back to the 1940s and compared it with the Centre’s current data. It concluded that there was a significant “news and information gap” between America’s young adults and older citizens, but also between the young adults of the 90s and previous youth generations (Times Mirror Centre 1990, p. 1). Furthermore, it maintained that this gap was most likely due to the drastic
drop in regular newspaper reading among young people. After the Times Mirror Center was subsumed by the Pew Charitable Trust, another, similar study was conducted in 1996, which focused instead on TV news viewership. Once again, this study concluded that young people’s interest in news was dwindling, which was evident in their disappearance from TV news audiences (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1996, p. 1).

In recent years digital technologies have widened and diversified the range of possible news sources for consumers. Nevertheless, in 2010 the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (hereafter referred to in the text as the Pew Research Center)\(^9\) reported that about a quarter (27%) of young adults (18 - 29) said they “got no news yesterday” even when mobile and online news sources were accounted for (p. 15). In 2012, the Pew Research Center decided to segment the youth audience further on this measure to show that the youngest population surveyed was “going newsless” most often. Twenty-Nine per cent of those younger than 25 said they got no news yesterday (p. 11). Similar patterns have been observed in the Canadian context. For instance, Howe (2010), looked at waning news interest among young Canadians by analyzing data drawn from a large-scale national survey conducted in 2007 - 08, from earlier periods in Canada, and from other countries. He concluded, “whereas previously the transition from inattentive youth to attentive adult was reliable and effective, it has gradually become more uncertain and imperfect” (p.101).

If one takes this narrative of decline at face value, it could be potentially very serious. As I will discuss below, news is a vital part of life in a democratic society. It not only helps people hold those in authority accountable but also helps facilitate social connection and 

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\(^9\) The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (formerly the Times Mirror Center) is not the only source of research on youth and news consumption. However, Pew, with its biennial survey on news consumption, is the most frequent and consistent supplier of comparable data in this area. In addition, with its large reach its data is likely some of the most confidently statistically representative, at least in the U.S. context. Statistics Canada has studied Canadians’ news consumption, but their most recent published data on the subject is from 2003.
cultural reproduction. Furthermore, news can also help populations deal with the emotional impact of current events as a collective. The importance of news in our society has inspired a number of studies that explore this narrative of decline in further detail. What lies behind young people’s rejection of news and who is responsible? In the section below, I will describe two very different approaches scholars have taken in explaining this perceived phenomenon.

**The Debate: Disengaged or Disenfranchised Youth?**

Research on young people’s declining interest in news often focuses on crunching audience and viewership numbers rather than exploring the reasons for this decline (Huang, 2009, p. 106). However, two major explanations of this trend have emerged over the years in opposition to one another. On one side of the debate, scholars argue that declining interest in news among young people is the result of a “generational shift” (Mindich, 2005) away from news, and public life in general (Putnam, 2000; Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007; Howe, 2010). Some scholars argue this shift “inward” might be a result of younger generations’ obsession with new forms of entertainment media. In addition, as Buckingham (2000, p. 4) explains, some scholars also attribute this shift to the failure of older generations to “adequately socialize the young”. Taken together, such arguments have contributed to what Bennett (2008) calls the “disengaged youth” research paradigm.

On the other side of the debate, scholars argue that young people are indeed interested in current events and public life, but have been effectively disenfranchised by mainstream news media. These scholars argue that mainstream news has repeatedly attacked youth culture and undermined young people’s interest in consuming news, particularly news concerning “politics” as it has been traditionally defined (Buckingham, 1997; 2000). Bennett (2008) calls this the “engaged youth” research paradigm, however, it may be more accurate
to label this body of research the “disenfranchised youth” (Carter, 2013, p. 256) paradigm, since much of the work in this vein focuses on how young people have been purposefully excluded by journalists and a news agenda that fail to take their concerns seriously and/or represent them accurately (Katz, 1993; Raeymaeckers, 2004; Kelly, 2006; Costera Meijer, 2007; Poindexter, 2012).

Most of the recent scholarship entering into this debate sits within this second camp. Scholars working under this lens have argued that the mainstream news media ignore children’s rights to be heard and included in society as citizens. This can be viewed as a progressive shift in line with a new approach to research involving on children and youth that positions them as active cultural agents rather than merely “adults-in-the-making” (Matthews, 2007, p. 323-4). However, as I will argue below, it is possible to recognize the rights and responsibilities of young people as citizens while overlooking their agency and ignoring how they exercise it.

**Beyond Disengaged and Disenfranchised: Making Space for Youth Agency**

In studies on news attitudes and consumption, Western young people are often constructed through conflicting binaries, which can place them in a “double bind” (Messenger Davies, 2010, p. 54). This type of ‘double bind’ is apparent in much of the literature surrounding the ‘disengaged or disenfranchised’ debate described above. On the one hand, the generational rhetoric surrounding young people’s disengagement from news sends the rather paralyzing message that young people have *already failed* to socialize into “active citizens” (Kennelly & Llewellyn, 2011), rendering unimportant their potentially innovative or unique strategies for staying informed on a daily basis. On the other hand, the narrative surrounding young people’s disenfranchise by news media might be seen as similarly paralyzing. As Buckingham explains, some scholars in this camp have also
employed a type of generational rhetoric -- one that defines “young” and “old” against each other, and “seems just as essentialist as the narrative of decline which it attempts to replace” (2000, p. 6). Moreover, the continued focus on the failure of the mainstream news media to adequately “engage” young audiences also ignores the myriad ways in which young people follow and interact with news regardless of the socializing efforts of mainstream media and other institutions. In light of the above, I suggest that both “disengagement” and “disenfranchisement” are inadequate descriptors for young people’s evolving relationships with news in the 21st Century because each fails to adequately account for the young people’s agency as participants in that relationship.

The question then becomes, how might we conceptualize young people’s relationships with news in the current media environment in a manner that is more attuned to their agency and lived experience? The reviewed literature does not offer a coherent framework as an alternative to the narratives of disengagement and disenfranchisement examined above. However, individual scholars have offered useful modes of inquiry into this debate. These modes of inquiry help to render visible some of the long-held assumptions that may need re-thinking in order for new conceptualizations around children and young people’s relationships with news to be formed. The following sections will explore two crucial lines of questioning that have opened up this field of study in recent years.

**What is “News”?**

The notion that young people no longer care about, or are increasingly disengaged from, news raises questions such as “what constitutes ‘news’?” Despite the hegemonic way it is often invoked in public and political discourse, “news” is rather hard to pin down as a concept. Scholars are constantly questioning and re-thinking the definition of news and its role in our lives. It is outside the scope of this literature review to delve fully into all the
many ways they have done so. However, to illustrate the multiplicity of ways in which news can be defined, I will briefly summarize various recent suggestions by scholars about how to define news according to its purpose, or the function it serves in a society.

Most commonly, at least in countries influenced by the British system of government, news has been described as the “Fourth Estate” -- a “watchdog” that operates on behalf of the people and allows constituents to be involved in the issues at stake in a representative democracy (Hampton, 2010). This notion of news as the “Fourth Estate” rests on the principle of journalistic independence. Many critics argue this principle is no longer present in the current news environment due to the growing concentration of media ownership by corporations with “non-media interests,” that took place during the 20th Century (see McChesney, 2008). Nevertheless, the definition of news and journalism as the “Fourth Estate” is perhaps still valuable as it provides a vision to which individual journalists can, and frequently do, aspire (Hampton, 2010, p. 10).

In a slightly more cynical vein, scholars have argued that news functions as a “social palliative” in society. In other words, engaging with news can be seen as a ritual people perform to feel they have discharged their responsibilities as citizens by staying informed. Buckingham, citing Graber, argues that this definition is far from warranted, but that it raises the possibility that the purpose of news goes beyond that of providing information (2000, p. 17). It is this point that scholars such as Dahlgren (1992, as cited in Buckingham, 2000) and Ettema (2010) have expanded on in writing about news as a cultural institution. These scholars point out how journalists acquire common tropes, frames, and forms from culture and apply them to their stories. Through this process, journalists create myth-like structures

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10 News can also be defined according to characteristics like its form (see Fenton, 2010) or its content (see Rowe, 2010).
that allow people to interpret and make sense of what they learn in the news (Ettema, 2010, p. 290 - 91).

Along with shaping and reflecting the cultural sphere, news has also been conceptualized as a shaper of the “emotional public sphere”. This idea builds on the Habermasian notion of the “public sphere” as the realm of social life in which attempts at forming public opinion can be made (Habermas, 1964/1974). Barry Richards defines the emotional public sphere as “the emotions [that] are involved in the political life of a nation” (2010, P. 301). He argues that news is the largest influence on how these emotions are shaped and how much strength they gain among the public. For instance, Richards argues that when news coverage attacks or shames politicians who display any deviation from a “rigid fixity of mind,” for example, by contradicting themselves over time, it essentially disallows the examination of mixed feelings and leaves no room for emotional realism in society. Thus, Richards warns that the adversarial style of coverage in mainstream news media should be carefully reconsidered in terms of what types of emotional discourse or environment it creates and how that shapes the public mood (2010, p. 310).

The above is just a short summary of recent literature that grapples with the definition of news, in relation to its purpose and function in our society. Though news is often constructed in a traditional manner in public discourse, most often connected with the ideal of the “Fourth Estate”, many scholars argue that its purpose extends beyond providing information to citizens. According to the sources mentioned above, news also serves profound social, cultural, and emotional purposes. This summary serves to illustrate the multiple ways in which news can be defined and to demonstrate that it is not as “fixed” a concept as it is often made out to be.
Furthermore, the modern high-choice media environment has made news even harder to define due to the proliferation of news sources and styles of production. In light of these developments, Edgerly (2012) suggests that news has become a more personally contingent concept:

Whereas news was once easily identifiable—produced by a news organization and delivered by a journalist—news is now a murky, more interpretable, concept. One person’s news is another person’s entertainment. One person’s blog is another person’s news. In other words, news has become open to interpretation. (p. 55)

Thus, in examining how news is defined in studies on young people’s news engagement, it is important to question whose definition of news is being operationalized.

**Youthful Definitions of News**

Theresa O’Toole (2003) notes that a key problem with many studies on young people’s political engagement is that they often impose a certain definition or concept of politics on participants rather than asking young people how they understand the term. O’Toole explains that these studies often measure an individual’s engagement by his or her participation in a certain range of prescribed activities deemed “political” by the researcher (2003, p. 73). This is also a problem when it comes to studies on young people’s engagement with news. In such studies a hegemonic idea of news is often imposed on participants in the form of a list of “newsworthy items” one should know about. If participants do not know about or have an interest in those items, they are said not to be engaged with “the news.”

In response to this approach, a small number of scholars have argued for the need to engage with young people’s own definitions of news. For instance, Dafna Lemish (1998) found that sociocultural context played a major role in how kindergarten-age children conceived of and defined news. Comparing interview data between two groups of children,
one in the United States and one in Israel, Lemish found children’s opinions about what constituted “relevant” news material differed greatly depending on their location. American children were more interested in weather news and the private sphere, while Israeli children saw news to be more about collective identity and national security (Lemish, 1998, p. 501).

More recently, Sundin (2008) compared how Canadian pre-teens (studied in 2006) and a group of pre-teens from Sweden (studied in 2001) thought about news. In both cases, young people’s definitions were quite similar. Both groups of nine to 13-year-old participants described news either in a broad, abstract manner as “information”, or in a more literal, immediate manner, as “what’s going on” or “events”. Interestingly, these were also the most common approaches to defining news from young participants in a study in the United Kingdom a few years later. However, a notable addition from the participants in this study was the idea of news as a global phenomenon, with repeated mention of terms like “the world” in their descriptions (Carter, Messenger Davies, Allan, Mendes, Milani & Wass, 2009).

It is interesting here to note that aside from pieces by Marchi (2012), and Costera Meijer (2007), the reviewed literature shows little evidence of the social function of news as part of young respondents’ own definitions or conceptualizations. This is despite the findings of certain studies on children’s information behaviour that highlight the importance of access to other people as key sources of information for young people (Meyers, Fisher & Marcoux, 2009). As I will discuss further on, this is an important potential area for further exploration by qualitative researchers, because young people’s social interactions with news are currently not well captured in large-scale, influential research on youth news engagement, such as the studies produced by the Pew Research Center.
In this section, I have suggested that one fruitful way of “opening up” debates around young people’s declining use of and interest in news is to ask “what constitutes news?” and also “whose definition of news is at work in this debate?” As outlined above, a small number of scholars have emphasized the importance of exploring young people’s own definitions of news in research on engagement and consumption and my research adds to this emphasis. In highlighting this emphasis, it is not my aim to suggest that young people are somehow outside of, or uninfluenced by, dominant discourses about news and its purposes. As Carter et al (2009) note, many of their participants simply reproduced hegemonic or traditional definitions in their responses when asked how they would define news in their own words. However, this reproduction in itself must be seen as a social act worthy of analysis (Buckingham, 2000, p. 67). I will return to this point in later chapters.

**What does news engagement look like?**

Another way of opening up existing conceptualizations around young people’s relationships with news is to explore what it looks like to be engaged with news as a young person in the modern context. This line of inquiry also raises questions about how scholarly and public research can adequately investigate and measure that engagement. Some scholars have argued that current generations of young people are not indifferent when it comes to news, they are simply different -- that is, they are differently engaged with current events and information (e.g. Marchi, 2012; Costera Meijer, 2007; Meyers et al, 2009). Their work offers a productive series of insights about what young people actually do with news, which are useful for my pursuit of a research paradigm that positions young people more actively as participants in their relationships with news.
**Blending sources and “news grazing.”** Several scholars, especially those working under the uses and gratifications approach to media research\(^{11}\), have argued that while younger audiences may not make a daily habit of reading newspapers, watching TV news, listening to news radio, or logging onto official news web sites, they are more likely to blend traditional news sources like newspapers with Internet searches and other and new media sources (Sidlow, 2008, p. 61; Pew Research Centre, 2008, p. 2; Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Spurgeon et al, 2012) in a less scheduled, more sporadic à la carte model of news consumption (Marchi, 2012, p. 248). This behaviour has earned them titles like “news grazers” (Diddi & LaRose, 2006) or “snackers” (Costera Meijer, 2007) in the academic literature. Despite sounding rather superficial, these descriptors may be evidence of a purposeful and discerning mode of newsgathering youth have adapted to stay informed (Marchi, 2012, p. 252). Thus, such research suggests that to get a clear picture of young people’s engagement with news one must look not only at what young people consume, but also at how they consume it (Marchi, 2012). I will pursue this suggestion in chapter five as I explore participants’ engagement in their own “news ecologies”.

**The value of opinion and “fake news.”** As well, research has shown that many young people engage with current events and information through media content that researchers and young people alike would not necessarily describe as “news”. For example, it is now well documented that young adults and teens make up a sizeable share of the audiences of “comedy - news” or “fake news” programming such as Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* or Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report* (Lewis, 2008, p. 4; Feldman, 2007)\(^{12}\).

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\(^{11}\) This is an approach to media studies that was popularized in the 1960s and 1970s. It argues that audiences actively choose media to gratify certain needs and desires (Lewis, 2008, p. 37).

\(^{12}\) More recently, the Pew Research Center seems to be catching on to this trend. Whereas in its 2010 report on news consumption the Center referred to programming like *The Daily Show* as “comedy,” in its 2012 report the
Marchi’s (2012) work with teens in the northeastern United States suggests that these programs, along with opinion-based current affairs programming such as *The O’Reilly Factor* appeal to young people because they eschew the traditional journalistic commitment to objectivity in favour of “telling it like it is.” This gives young people a better sense of what’s at stake in each story (Marchi, 2012, p. 256). However, because these shows are not usually understood as “news” programming, they may not be accounted for young people’s descriptions of their engagement with news in academic studies that are focused on a more traditional concept of news.

**News engagement beyond consumption.** With the proliferation of digital platforms for accessing news, it is no longer sufficient to write of young people (or, for that matter, adults) as “news consumers” (Poindexter, 2012). In this thesis, I have instead used the term news “users” and focused on news “engagement”. These terms encompass traditional consumer practices such as reading a newspaper or watching a TV newscast, but also include news practices like tweeting about a news story, uploading a video on YouTube, or blogging about news, which research has shown are popular ways of interacting with news among young people. This idea of conceptualizing news engagement beyond consumption is captured in recent research on social media as news platforms and the importance of young people’s personal relationships to their engagement with news.

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13 Though they are not a topic of focus in this thesis, other research suggests that, for many young people, opinion-based and satirical television shows fulfill the role of the “watchdog press” by attempting to hold authorities accountable for what they say and do (see Baym, 2010).
Greenhow and Reifman’s research has suggested online social media platforms such as Facebook can be appealing spaces for young people’s interaction with news\(^\text{14}\) (2009). Some young research participants have attributed this appeal to “the ability to connect and contribute to ongoing conversations about news via posting comments and/or content on social networking sites and blogs” and the immediacy of the exchanges one can have on these platforms (Marchi, 2012, p. 252). Of interest here is the fact that the Pew Research Center (2012) currently categorizes young people’s time spent with social media separately from their time spent with news, explaining that “for young people, news faces stiff competition from ... social networking”\(^\text{15}\) (p. 13). However, depending on how one understands and defines “news,” one might argue that these are not necessarily two separate uses of young people’s time.

Additionally, research has shown that for many young people, trusted adults and peers serve as news “filters” and “translators” helping youth connect current events to their own worlds and lived experience (Marchi, 2012, p. 252; Meyers et al, 2009, Weintraub Austin, 2013). Thus, for some youth, a conversation about current events with a parent or close friend might constitute as meaningful an interaction with news as reading a story in the newspaper or online. This is significant because it evidences a more ephemeral, sporadic and

\(^{14}\) Other young respondents have reported viewing social networking as more about social interaction than newsgathering (Williamson, Qayyum, Hider & Liu, 2012, p. 236). These respondents were slightly older and living in a different country than those interviewed by Marchi, which may or may not account for their dissimilar answers. This is an important example of the need for attention to contextual specificity and the unique experiences of one’s participants in writing about research involving youth.

\(^{15}\) The Pew study also notes that among those younger than 30, more played a game yesterday than watched TV news (2012, p. 13) Anecdotally, it is a common trope in media discourse to position gaming (on consoles, computers, mobile devices) in opposition to more “socially responsible” engagements with media such as consuming/sharing news. However, I am interested in the extent to which modern role-playing games (RPGs) and online world-building communities such as MineCraft encourage “staying informed” by sustaining and supporting their own niche ‘news cultures’. This idea emerged organically from interaction with one of my young participants and I am keen to find literature that might support it. However, such literature would be slightly adjacent to the aims of this literature review.
social mode of engagement with news than is typically recognized in research on the topic. Additionally, such engagement may be difficult to capture with the quantitative methods used in large-scale research on young people and news, such as the surveys used by the Pew Research Center. I will explore this relational mode of engagement with news further in chapters five and six.

This section outlined three emerging trends that describe, to some extent, what young people’s news engagement looks like in the current context, but which may be difficult to measure and capture, especially with large-scale, quantitative research methods. Studies continue to measure “engagement” with news in terms of young people’s interaction with traditionally defined “news” sources (e.g., Erentaitė, Žukauskienė, Beyers, & Pilkauskaitė-Valickienė, 2012), and the length of time spent with news sources (e.g., Pew Research Centre, 2012), even while recent studies (Marchi, 2012; Costera Meijer, 2007) show that many young people prefer to spend smaller amounts of time with a wider variety of news sources and often get their news and current affairs information from non-traditional sources and in ways that go beyond “consumption”. As I will elaborate in chapter six, in my research, participants’ descriptions of their regular encounters with news produced new insights about what engagement with news might look like in the modern media context. This is a crucial line of inquiry that, along with critical reflection on what counts as “news”, can lead to a better understanding of young people as news users in the modern media context.

Chapter Summary

This chapter offers a summary of the literature on young people’s news engagement I reviewed throughout this project. Altogether, my review of the literature demonstrates the need for critical and imaginative thinking when it comes to conceptualizing young people’s relationships with news in the current media environment. I have outlined the limitations of
both the narrative of disengagement and the narrative of disenfranchisement in trying to make sense of these relationships. The reviewed literature offers crucial lines of inquiry such as “what is news?” and “what does young people’s news engagement look like in the modern context?” which, I argue, may be useful for beginning to theorize outside of, or beyond, these established narratives. The following chapter will explain the conceptual framework I have relied on in my attempt to pursue and build on these emerging modes of inquiry.
Chapter 3

Conceptual Framework:

Understanding Children, Mass Communication, and Cultural (Re)Production

Introduction

In this exploratory project, I am working with a research problem that is broad and complex. As such, I have approached it from multiple angles, using a combination of conceptual models. Fundamentally, I am exploring how young people make meaning from their encounters with news. This exploration requires a model that can explain how media messages are created and circulated in society and what role media audiences play in this process. For this, I have drawn from British Cultural Studies, particularly Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980/2012). In addition, because my study attempts to understand the experiences of a specific audience -- pre-teen children -- the exploration requires a model that explains children’s unique positions in the social structure. For this, I have drawn from the new sociology of children and childhood. Specifically, I have drawn on James, Jenks, and Prout’s (1998) four models for the study of children and childhood. Finally, my attempt to better understand the role of news in young people’s lives requires a model that accounts for how young people construct and maintain their relationships with news, not only through their individual news engagement but through their use of news at a cultural, interactional level as well. For this, I have drawn from childhood scholar William Corsaro’s (1992; 2011) model of interpretive reproduction. The following chapter explains each of these models in detail and identifies the important conceptual concern they share.

This chapter is structured around three major theoretical assertions that result from the conceptual models described above. I begin each section by stating the assertion and giving further detail about the conceptual model it summarizes. I then give a short
description as to how each model influenced my research approach and project. Finally, I bring all three models together to describe my overall conceptual framework which serves as the foundation for this study.

**Assertion I: Audience Members are Active Participants in the Process of Meaning-Making**

The scholars at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (hereafter referred to as the Birmingham Centre) were among the first to study the effects of popular texts (such as newspapers) on various audiences and engage theoretically with how these audiences interpreted and used media in different manners and contexts (Durham & Kellner, 2012, p. 11). In particular, Stuart Hall (the former Director of the Birmingham Centre) and his ideological descendants have emphasized individuals’ agency as active participants in creating meaning and determining “popular” culture (Durham & Kellner, 2012, p. 11). It is from this body of scholarship that I have drawn one of the fundamental models for my conceptual framework: Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model (1980/2012).

Hall’s (1980/2012) model is influenced by the semiological approach of thinkers like Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes. Semiology investigates the way events or messages are signified in a culture, particularly through language, in other words, it is the study of how the content media messages come to mean what they do. The encoding/decoding model focuses on key moments in the operation of discourse. The encoding/decoding model was developed to emphasize how the production of discourse is a distinct process from other models of production in society (Hall, 1980/2012, p. 173), such as industrial production. The

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16 Brooker (2002) defines “discourse” as the patterns of language and representation that produce and structure fields of knowledge in particular cultural and historical settings (pp. 78 - 79).
model also emphasizes how the production of meaning is a necessary byproduct of the consumption of media.

The model consists of four distinct (yet co-dependent) moments in the process of communication at a societal level: production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction. For production, the creator of the message draws from various societal beliefs and values to “encode” the message. During circulation, the message is sent out to consumers in a specific medium and format, which will influence its reception and interpretation. Next comes the “use” stage, the point of distribution/consumption. Here, audience members actively take up and decode the messages they receive while drawing on their own experience and the way the message has been signified/represented. After audience members have decoded the message it takes on new meaning. It may also be acted upon in various ways as it enters and/or re-enters the “structure of social practices,” (or the public domain) in a society (Hall, 1980/2012, p. 138). Hall calls this moment reproduction.

As Hall explains, “The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical” (1980/2012, p.138). Whether a message is understood or misunderstood depends on the degree of similarity between the ideological positions of the encoder (producer) and the decoder (receiver) (Hall, 1980/2012, p. 138). However, Hall also explains that the roles of producer and receiver are strongly linked. This is because media messages always draw from what already exists in audience members’ cultures -- from their lives, preferences, and attitudes (Hall, 1980/2012, p. 138). In this way, the encoding/decoding model emphasizes how the audience can be considered as both the “source” and the “receiver” of the media message.17 This is what makes the model a break from more traditional conceptions of communication as a linear process from sender to receiver. It is

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17 Hall discussed television in particular.
this emphasis that makes the encoding/decoding model so attractive to scholars in the field of
critical media literacy, which originally inspired my project. Such scholars have long relied
on Hall’s model to demonstrate the role of the audience as active participants in the process
of meaning-making, insisting there is no such thing as a passive media consumer (Kellner &
Share, 2007, p. 62). This idea is reflected in my project’s focus on relationships between
young people and news, which I conceive of as a product of the social process of mass
communication.

Despite the room Hall’s model makes for individual agency in this process of
decoding, he also emphasizes that all decodings (all readings of a certain media text) are not
equal. “Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its
classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a dominant
cultural order, though it is never univocal or uncontested,” (Hall, 1980/2012, p. 141). In other
words, an audience member’s decoding of a media text is always constrained to a certain
extent by the cultural histories and social norms of the society he or she is a part of, though
these alone do not determine the audience member’s response to the text. From this
perspective then, meaning-making is never a purely individual act. Rather, it is a relational
process.

In this way, Hall’s encoding/decoding model acts as a sort of theoretical balance
beam. It places as much weight on audiences’ active role as participants in the process of
making meaning as it does on the role of hegemonic structures in society that cause certain
discourses to be continuously produced and consumed in a more-or-less uniform manner.
This idea acts as a thread, binding together each of the conceptual models in my framework.
Assertion II: Children are Social Beings. Childhood is Part of, Not Prior to, Society

In recent decades, scholars of children and childhood have attempted to move in a new direction. The field they have forged with their work has been given many labels, such as the “new social studies of childhood”, or “new sociology of children”. I choose to use the term “new sociology of children and childhood,” because it reflects the dual focus I have attempted to maintain in my research. I feel it is important to root my analysis at both the individual and the institutional levels, as I will explain in more detail below. Whatever one chooses to label it, this body of work has provided me with a useful framework for articulating my commitment to supporting children’s agency as part of my larger research approach, and for conceptualizing children’s interactions within the sphere of social relations in my specific context: middle-class, urban Canada.

This “new” sociological approach moves away from frameworks that conceptualized childhood as merely a period of socialization/acculturation that children experience on their way to becoming adults (Christensen & Prout, 2005, p. 46). This focus on socialization often lead to children being depicted as “incomplete” or “in process” in research literature. Such depictions were deemed problematic because they suggested that children were somehow deficient in comparison to adults. The new sociologists argue that this suggestion could obscure the ways in which children might also be disadvantaged and even oppressed in comparison to adults (Matthews, 2007, p. 326). Under the new sociological approach, children are given “conceptual autonomy”. This means they are regarded as social actors that are capable of reflexivity (Matthews, 2007, p. 324). This shift from the “old” to the “new” sociology of children and childhood provides crucial context for my study. My decision to do

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18 Other scholars choose to privilege one focus over the other. For instance, Sara Matthews states that her use of the label “the new sociology of childhood” “is intended to acknowledge that the experiences of children cannot be divorced from the institution of childhood, which, as Qvortrup (2002) argues, is universal,” (2007, p. 323).
research with children, investigating how they produce knowledge through the media they engage with is itself a reflection of this idea of “conceptual autonomy.”

In this thesis, I tried to find and emphasize connections between what James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) have called the “socially constructed child” and the “social structural child”. These are two of the four different models the authors suggest for studying children under the new paradigm described above. Each model suggests a different emphasis or focus when it comes to conceptualizing children in research.

The model of the socially constructed child represents the idea that there is no essential child and that our conception of childhood should be seen as “built” relative to our cultural world-view (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 214). “In direct refutation of the pre-sociological models of childhood, there is no universal ‘child’ with which to engage” under this model (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 27). Rather, this model posits that childhood should be seen as a variable phenomenon; no overarching experience of childhood can be claimed as “truth.” The model also captures the idea that a child’s subjectivity is cut across by many factors other than age, such as race, socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. This approach is useful for stepping past biological determinism and looking at children’s experiences in a grounded and sensitive manner. In spite of these benefits, the authors admit that the approach also positions childhood as a local rather than a global experience and thus tends to be extremely particularistic (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998, p. 214).

In contrast to this approach, James, Jenks and Prout offer the model of the social structural child. This model represents the idea that childhood is an enduring feature of every society, although its nature is constantly changing. The social structural model sees children collectively: “they form a group, a body of social actors, and as citizens, they have needs and
rights” (1998, p. 32). The benefit to this approach is that if childhood constitutes a coherent and recognizable status of personhood, children can claim a strong sense of identity and solidarity with each other and be empowered by that. On the other hand, this may also be an inherent danger of the approach. Focusing on this shared identity and solidarity between a large group of children might cause researchers to gloss over important differences in experience and identification among the children being studied.

These two models, the socially constructed child and the social structural child, represent an ongoing tension within the new sociology of children and childhood between a focus on children as individuals and a focus on childhood as a social structure. However, Christensen and Prout suggest that it is possible to move back and forth between these two modes of analysis in a productive manner (2005, p. 53). This can be achieved, they argue, by linking large-scale trends in the constitution of childhood in a particular context to the local interactions of children with other children and with adults and to the personal experiences of particular children (Christensen & Prout, 2005, p.54).

Continuing with the analogy of a balance beam introduced previously, it is easy to connect the approach I am taking by mixing these two models from James, Jenks and Prout (1998) with Hall’s approach in the encoding/decoding model (1980/2012). My approach attempts to place the socially constructed child, acknowledging children as individual social actors, on one side of the balance beam, while placing the social structural child, which acknowledges childhood as a universal social structure, on the other. This hybrid approach recognizes that young people’s unique identities and lived experiences greatly influence their personal relationships with news. However, their position as children in this particular society also has a large impact on that relationship.
So far, we have a model that conceptualizes audiences’ roles in the production of discourse and a hybrid model that conceptualizes children as group (or audience) made up of individuals, but we have yet to bring the two together. For this, I will turn to Corsaro’s theory of interpretive reproduction.

**Assertion III: Children are Active Participants in Cultural Production**

William Corsaro’s model of interpretive reproduction draws on progress in the field of developmental psychology and expands on it for the purposes of the sociological study of children. The model was originally proposed to shift the focus in childhood studies from development as an individual, biological process, to a collective, interactional process (Corsaro, 1992). Corsaro positioned his model as an extension of constructivist models of childhood socialization, such as those offered by Piaget or Vygotsky. He felt that childhood socialization -- the “process by which children adapt to and internalize society” (Corsaro, 2011, p. 9) -- should not be understood as the progression of a single child toward adulthood, but as a social and collective process. Like Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980/2012), Corsaro’s model disrupts the teleology of a process that is often thought to be linear (cultural communication in Hall’s case, child development in Corsaro’s). In essence, he argues that children are not only influenced by, but also influence the dominant cultural order.

This notion is what makes Corsaro’s model useful for explaining children’s roles as agents in the production/reproduction of culture -- the process I am investigating in this study. Corsaro argues that through their collective process of development, children mutually construct unique peer cultures.\(^{19}\) Through their production of and participation in these peer cultures, children contribute to the reproduction and extension of the wider societal culture,\(^{19}\)

\(^{19}\) Corsaro defines a peer culture as “a set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns, that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (Corsaro, 1992, p. 161).
which Corsaro describes as “adult culture” (Corsaro, 1992; 2011). Corsaro’s model is a complicated one. It would be difficult to explain in full detail in this chapter, however, the following section will offer a condensed explanation.

In short, the model is based on four “steps” or processes. Corsaro observed that in order to deal with the confusions, concerns, fears, and conflicts that arise from their interactions with adults, children produce new routines within their peer cultures. Once children have established these routines, they reference shared knowledge to build frames for interpretation (primary frameworks) within their routine. With these frames for interpretation in place, children contextualize the routine with specific features of social life (i.e. specific ways of making arguments, or specific cultural stereotypes). Finally, children playfully transform the frame of interpretation in their particular routine through various strategies. As Corsaro observed, the most common of these strategies is embellishment, where the meaning of certain elements in the framework becomes intensified or magnified through exaggeration, repetition, and the addition of related but unessential action to the routine (Corsaro, 1992, pp. 162-165). Through this and other strategies, children transform the cultural routine, contributing to the transformation or extension of the “adult culture” at large. In summary, according to Corsaro:

The process is reproductive in the sense that children do not merely internalize individually the external adult culture. Rather, children become a part of adult culture -- that is they contribute to its reproduction -- through their negotiations with adults, and their creative production of a series of peer cultures with other children. (1992, p. 169)

Corsaro’s model of interpretive reproduction is more useful for me than traditional notions of childhood as a period of socialization because it accounts for the collective processes through which children take up news and use it in their daily lives. In other words, it accounts for how one might see children to be in an active relationship with news even
though they (usually) do not produce news for a mass audience, and are rarely given a meaningful chance to interact with news media professionals and/or organizations.

Corsaro’s model also evidences the balanced approach I discussed in relation to Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980/2012) and the hybrid model I have drawn from James, Jenks, and Prout (1998). In the same way that Hall argues audiences do not decode messages without the influence of the dominant cultural order in a society, Corsaro’s model dispenses with the idea of placing children “outside” of society and its institutions. He instead argues that children can be seen as a part of cultural production along with adults. In other words, this model suggests that children may reproduce hegemonic ideology in the process of cultural production at the same time as they add their own creative input, and slightly transform the cultural sphere each time they do so. This opens up a crucial space of inquiry for me and comes closer to identifying how a dual focus on “children” and “childhood” might be achieved. However, I have yet to discuss the practical application of these three models in combination with one another. In the following section, I will address the strategies I have used to find connections between these two levels of sociological analysis.

**Applying the Models: The Socio-Cultural Analysis of Children’s Talk**

Audiences do not create meaning in a vacuum. My thesis research is built around the idea that children’s readings and interpretations of media texts are always, to some extent, influenced and constrained by the existing social and cultural order that surrounds them. David Buckingham is one scholar of children and media who is similarly concerned with finding a balance between acknowledging children as ‘active’ producers of meaning and recognizing the ideological and formal constraints young people navigate in the production of such meanings. Buckingham has used a focus on children’s “talk” to help maintain this
balance in his work (2008). Instead of taking children’s talk about media for granted, “as some kind of self-evident reflection of what they ‘really’ think or believe,” Buckingham’s approach draws from the tools of discourse analysis and suggests that talk should be seen as a form of social action or performance which is worthy of analysis in itself (Buckingham, 2008, p. 14). Through this assertion, one can see the influence of Hall’s brand of British Cultural Studies, which emphasized the production of discourse as a distinctly social and cultural process unlike any other type of production in society (Hall, 1980/2012, p. 173).

For example, Buckingham focused on young people’s “talk” about television news programming and politics in one study where he conducted a series of small-group interviews with young people in both the United Kingdom and the United States. As he begins his analysis in that study, Buckingham explains, “This is not a study of how young people interpret what they watch, but of how they talk about it,” (2000, p. 62). In this particular study, Buckingham’s analysis of his participants’ talk allowed him to dig deeper into their apparent cynicism about news and politics, a finding I will return to in light of my own interview data later on. Buckingham argues that focusing on talk and conversation not only allows a researcher to learn about participants’ interpretations and judgments of media content, but also about how they define themselves and claim “particular social identities” (2000, p. 63). In other words, it allows Buckingham to access how his participants see themselves in relationship to others and to the larger structure of social relations. Though I have not relied as heavily on discourse analysis as a methodological tool in my project, it has inspired my overall analytical approach. Buckingham’s emphasis on “talk” as a form of

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20 Though instead of the term “balancing”, Buckingham prefers to describe it as theorizing the relationship between the power of the audience and the power of the text (2000, p. 64).
social action was useful for me in making sense of the rich narratives my participants offered about their relationships with news, which I will explore in further detail in chapter six.

Creating My Own Model

In his lecture “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” (1992) Stuart Hall emphasized the difference between intellectual and academic work.

I come back to the critical distinction between intellectual work and academic work: they overlap, they abut with one another, they feed off one another, the one provides you with the means to do the other. But they are not the same thing. (p. 286)

In the sections above, I have outlined the theoretical assertions that have allowed me to do intellectual work at a new level in my thesis research. These assumptions structured my thinking as I developed my research questions and shaped my choice of methods as I ventured out to engage with research participants. They also gave rise to multiple cycles of investigation and questioning as I analyzed my data. In sum, I view the academic work of this thesis as a window into the intellectual journey I have been on for the past two years.

My conceptual framework is built out of three major models, which I have worked to locate, understand and apply throughout these two years. I began with Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980/2012). I then formed a hybrid version of James, Jenks, and Prout’s models of the social structural and socially constructed child (1998). Finally, while I initially overlooked Corsaro’s model of interpretive reproduction (1992; 2011), I was ultimately (and thankfully) re-united with this particular conceptual model. In my mind, these models form a series of concentric circles that represent my overall framework. Each circle shares the same core; a concern with locating the individual within the society that surrounds them and a commitment to theorizing the relationship between agency and structure through the examination of lived experience.
Drawing on these models allows me to understand how audience members produce meaning through their interactions with media, to conceptualize the relationship between children as social actors and childhood as a social structure, and to explain children’s important roles in the process of cultural production. In the next chapter, I will outline how I applied these models in my research methodology by employing a series of enabling and creative research methods during my data collection and an emphasis on “talk” and discourse in my analysis process. With this approach, I strove to respect young participants’ agency and creativity as individuals, while acknowledging the social norms, structures and institutions that shape what it means to be a middle-class pre-teen in urban Canada today.
Chapter 4

Methodology:

A Scaffolded Approach to Researching Children’s Relationships with Media

On my computer’s desktop there is a virtual sticky note that I posted almost two years ago. This “sticky” contains a brief, initial outline of my research project with certain items marked in bold. These bolded items were the ideas and questions I originally wanted to focus on in my project. Now, the project is much more closely related to the unbolded items on the note. I have never deleted or edited the sticky, because it reminds me of how much my project has evolved since its conception. After two years of careful research and revision, I have been drawn towards the ideas and aims I initially overlooked. The scope of my project has changed, as has my approach to the major research question. However, the project’s overall purpose remains the same: to work with young Canadians to explore their relationships with “news”.21

In my first two chapters, I described the “why” and the “what” of this study. First, I explained the need for a new way to explain young people’s relationships with news that acknowledges their agency within those relationships. Then, I explained the conceptual models and ideological assertions I have relied on as guides for this exploration. In this chapter, I will focus on the element of “how.” I will explain how I structured my investigation and came to my interpretation of the resulting data. I will begin by addressing the epistemological considerations that have influenced my research approach and then describe the procedure I followed through my fieldwork exploring news as a concept with one classroom of Grade Six students. Finally, I will explain my analytical approach and

21 My specific objectives are to explore young participants’ definitions of “news” and thoughts about its relevance, examine which sources and spaces they deem important for engaging with news, and discover what types of knowledge and language these young people draw upon to describe their relationships with news.
describe the steps I took in making sense of data from my interviews with participants, which I focus on in chapters five and six. The overall objective of this chapter is to highlight the particular blend of creativity and reflection that has guided my methodological decisions throughout this project.

**Epistemological Considerations**

**Children as “Beings”**

As explored in my conceptual framework, I subscribe to the view of scholars in the new sociology of children and childhood that young people are active social agents with the capacity for reflection. This view positions children and youth as “beings” in their own right (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 207; Adams, 2014, p. 2) who are developing, but not deficient, in relation to adults. This is in comparison to some quantitative research approaches that focus children as “becomings.” For example, quantitative methods have often been used to study on the “effects” of media on children (Lemish, 2007, p. 76), such as the impact that children’s exposure to television news can have on their perception of crime and other communities (Smith & Wilson, 2002 cited in Lemish, 2007, p. 77). Such studies usually focus on media as a force in children’s development toward an adult future. In comparison, positioning children as “beings” leads scholars to focus on the meanings media have for young people in the present\(^{22}\) (Lemish, 2007, p. 78). This focus on children as “beings” is reflected in my research objective of engaging in participants’ meaning making processes about news. My goal during my time in the classroom was to elicit students’ current thoughts and interpretations about news and their relationships with it, approaching them as experts about their own lives (Adams, 2014).

\(^{22}\) While I did include interview questions that asked participants to hypothesize about what their relationships with news might be like in the future, I did so in an attempt to elicit responses that would suggest how they saw their current relationships with news in comparison to those of adults. I also included this question to investigate whether participants saw an interest in news as being related to age.
This approach was not without its difficulties. Many researchers in childhood studies and other disciplines have noted how challenging it can be to access children’s interpretations, thoughts, and feelings especially when relying on verbal responses and reflections as data. The difficulty in this approach lies in the gap that exists between children’s knowledge and their ability to fully express that knowledge linguistically at different ages. Because of this, Lemish and others (e.g. Buckingham, 2000) warn against the assumption that language is a “clear indicator of the child’s actual inner world” (2007, p. 74). In addition, the power differential between adult researchers and child or youth participants must be kept in mind. This can cause young people to feel uncomfortable or shy, which might inhibit their responses or participation. It may also cause them to offer manipulated responses out of their eagerness to produce the “right” answer (Matthews, 2007, p. 328). This phenomenon was perhaps exacerbated in my case by the fact that we were in the school setting. School is a highly regulated and controlled space where young people might feel an added pressure to respond in the “correct” manner (Spyrou, 2011, p. 155).

As a result of these and other complexities involved in investigating children’s relationships with media from their own situated perspectives, Lemish suggests employing “creative research methods that engage children in pleasurable activities that can optimize their cooperation and facilitate a more valid understanding of their inner worlds” (2007, P. 75). In other words, this type of research requires methods that engage young people as “co-ethnographers” (Prasad, 2013) of their own lived experience. These methods should not only make children feel confident and respected enough to participate, but should also allow them to enjoy themselves while doing so and perhaps even learn and/or benefit from the research process. I took Lemish’s suggestion seriously when structuring my research activities. I
chose a mix of qualitative methods, including participatory group activities, creative production methods and interviews in pairs and small groups.

**On Children’s Voices**

Before moving on to describe my methods and procedures, it is important to place a caveat here about how I approached participants’ accounts of their “inner worlds” in my research. Though my goal was to elicit children’s unique perspectives on news in this study, I was aware that this would not be as simple as listening to the young participants carefully and quoting them accurately in the body of this thesis. This awareness stemmed from my engagement with the growing conversation on child and youth “voice” that has emerged in childhood studies (see Thomson, 2008).

For over two decades, scholars in the ‘new’ sociology of children and childhood have challenged research approaches that often privileged adults’ views over children’s about issues related to children’s lives. As a result of these challenges, contemporary researchers usually prefer to interact directly with children by inviting the m to contribute to research. Scholars emphasize the importance of acknowledging children’s participation (Matthews, 2007, p. 327; James, 2007, p. 262), and presenting their accounts of important issues in their own words. But in recent years, some (e.g., Spyrou, 2011; James, 2007) have criticized the heightened emphasis such research places on presenting young people’s voices as “authentic”. Critics such as James (2007) and Spyrou (2011) suggest that this pre-occupation with children and youth’s “voices” can lead to an over-romanticized view of children that amounts to stereotyping. In addition, these scholars argue that such research often fails to critically account for issues of interpretation and representation in academic work.

What I have taken from this debate is that simply allowing children to speak does not necessarily mean their voices will be heard in research (James, 2007, p. 262). For instance,
such a simple approach does not take into account the power imbalances that exist in various research contexts, which can constrain or limit the responses children are able to give in certain situations, as I have noted above (Alldred & Burman, 2005; Spyrou, 2011, p. 155). In addition, there is the risk that researchers might use children’s voices selectively to confirm established prejudices, rather than giving new insights from children’s own perspectives. Also, and importantly, in emphasizing “the voices of children” or “youth’s voices”, there is the risk that researchers will gloss over the diversity of children’s lived experiences in order to present participants in a favourable and empowered light (James, 2007, p. 262).

Taking the above into consideration, I wish to emphasize the interpretive approach of this study. I have done my utmost in my analysis and writing to preserve what I felt were participants’ intentions as they offered their input and reflections. This has meant critically examining my own worldview in relationship to these responses and situating participants’ interview responses in comparison to their written reflections collected throughout the project. However, scholarly research with children is never wholly organic or “authentic” when adults are involved in conceiving the methodology, conducting or facilitating the research, and writing up and disseminating the results. I have entered into this discussion to provide a reminder that, although this thesis explores young participants’ perspectives, interpretations and ideas about news, it ultimately offers my own interpretation of the data generated in our research activities. Mine is an informed interpretation; it has been carefully constructed and systematically interrogated. However, it is still only one among many.

23 Media education scholar Donna Alvermann has noted the problematic way in which the term “empowerment” is often employed in media literacy research. For instance, Alvermann and other educational researchers have noted that pursuing student “empowerment” through the exploration of media in a classroom setting assumes that power is a commodity that can be held and transferred to others. It also assumes that educators are necessarily empowered themselves (Alvermann, 1996, 285). Both of these notions are questionable in my view, which is why, counter to an emphasis on “empowering” student participants through my research, I sought out a mixture of methods that might be enabling for them. My goal was to ensure participants would feel comfortable enough to engage in the project, and enjoy or perhaps even benefit from their involvement.
possible interpretations of the data generated from this project: nothing more, and nothing less.

**Fieldwork Summary**

In this study, I explored an under-researched topic (Hobbs, Cohn-Geltner, & Landis, 2011) with participants that are not often included in research about news (Marchi, 2012). Thus, I decided on an exploratory approach that would allow me to get a sense of where the interesting lines of inquiry lay within this new domain. As I decided on methods to use during my classroom research, I made sure to include space for reflection alongside research activities. Allowing space for reflection was crucial so that students and I could work together to develop a sense of what was important in relation to the project’s exploratory research objectives (Farmer & Prasad, 2014).

Drawing on Yin (2009), my project could be defined more specifically as an exploratory case study. Yin writes that exploratory case studies arise when existing knowledge on a specific topic is limited and the available literature does not provide many hypotheses of note pertaining to one’s specific research question (2009, p.53). As I outlined in my literature review, the knowledge provided in the literature on my topic is limited to two sides of a debate. In this study I am looking for a way to open up that debate by exploring emerging lines of inquiry.

This exploratory case study demonstrates what Yin (2009) calls an embedded case study design. This design occurs when there is one central unit of analysis or “case” but attention is also given to subunits within that case in the analysis (Yin, 2009, p. 44). For example, I worked with students as a class but also engaged with individual students in that class and tried to make sense of the factors contributing to their own unique points of view. In fact, my research objectives are primarily focused on exploring the thoughts, views, and
opinions of individual young people in my participant group. However, because the classroom served as an access point for interactions with these young people and because I took an interest in the news literacy curriculum students were exposed to as a class, I also often reflected on the class as a group and students’ shared experiences. This meant the class itself also acted as a “case” or unit of analysis in my study.

**Participants**

This study involved one classroom of 26 children, 13 boys and 13 girls, who were 11 and 12 years old at the time of their participation. I chose to undertake this research project with pre-teen children, or “tweens” (as they are now often called in media and marketing spheres) because my initial research demonstrated that they were an understudied population in relation to my topic. I also had experience working with this age group through my work at WIGUP.TV. I was also curious about the fact that this age group, which has become so vital and influential to the agendas of advertisers and the entertainment industry (see Pybus, 2011), did not seem to have the same sway when it came to being covered or catered to by news media.

The research took place in one Grade Six classroom in an elementary school in a middle-class neighborhood in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). I used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2009) and selected this classroom because the students were within the desired age group (between 11 and 14 years old), and because of their regular exposure to news in the classroom through TeachingKidsNews.com, a media literacy teaching resource their teacher helped to develop. The project began in January, which meant that students had
already become familiar with each other and had formed what seemed to be a strong and respectful relationship with their teacher.\textsuperscript{24}

Once I obtained approval for this study from the University of Toronto’s Office of Research Ethics\textsuperscript{25} and the participating school board’s external research review committee, I sought written permission from the principal of the school and participating teacher. In early January 2014, I visited the classroom to introduce myself to students, explain the project, and distribute an information letter/consent form to students for their parents to sign (see Appendix A). This visit also served as part of the informed assent process. During this visit, I gave a brief presentation that explained the benefits and risks of participation and the fact that participants could refuse to participate and/or withdraw from the study at any point (see Appendix B for presentation outline). To my surprise, all 26 students received full parental consent to participate in the project and to be videotaped during research activities and interviews. All of the students also chose to participate in the participatory group activity portion of the project. Later in the project, all participants but one re-affirmed their informed assent and chose to take part in interviews in pairs and small groups.

\textsuperscript{24} In my initial observation of the classroom, I noticed a “group” or “team” dynamic, where students often referred to the class as a collective and generally respected each others’ ideas and input.

\textsuperscript{25} It is well documented that researchers often feel conflicted between respecting the individual rights of young respondents and ensuring a strict adherence to the policies and procedures of university ethics boards aiming to protect children and young people involved in research (Skelton, 2008). At first I did not think this would be an issue in my study. However, I have since discovered how much effort it takes to engage in an exploratory study that is able to evolve along with young participants’ input while maintaining a strict adherence to the institutional ethical review process. As my project evolved, I maintained constant contact with the University of Toronto’s Office of Research Ethics and had to amend the record of my project with this office twice, which took time and meticulous attention. This is not an indictment of the ethical review process, as I feel this process has been vital in helping me maintain ethical rigour in my project. However, I offer my experience here as a note to other novice researchers who are contemplating a similarly exploratory methodology. One must build in ample time for the maintenance of one’s ethical protocol throughout the thesis timeline when engaging in such research.
Fieldwork Procedure

**Classroom observation.** To begin the project, I spent four days observing the dynamics and structure of the classroom. This served as an acclimatization period in the classroom and school community. In this period, I followed an observation guide (see Appendix C) that focused on classroom routines, how lessons were typically structured, and the overall dynamics of students’ interactions with one another and their teacher. This familiarity with the classroom helped me to better structure the participatory group activities that followed because I had a better sense of what activities this particular group of students would enjoy and which activities might not work in this setting (e.g. due to slow computers, scheduling conflicts, etc.). I also built this period into my research timeline in order to allow the students to become more accustomed to my presence, and therefore, hopefully, less likely to alter their behaviour in a significant way during the group activities and interviews to follow (Shaffer, 1993, p. 19, cited in Faulkner & Woodhead, 2008, p. 17). Finally, this observation period provided me with an early sense of my own ideas and interpretations for future analysis, which I was able to revisit and interrogate later in light of participants’ interview responses.

**Participatory group activities.** Next, I facilitated a series of group activities with the class, resembling a mini-unit in media literacy. In this series of activities, we explored “news” through a blend of creative research methods and participatory group research methods. These creative and participatory methods included large group discussions, individual artistic production, and imagination and creation work in small groups (please see Appendix D for a detailed outline of these activities).

For example, our first activity was a brainstorming collage where students cut and pasted material from books, newspapers, and magazines alongside their own drawings and
writing to illustrate what came to mind when they heard the word “news”. This activity produced important insight into students’ pre-existing notions and attitudes about news. In another activity, we conducted a “human poll” where students responded to a series of made up headlines by grouping themselves in the classroom according to whether they thought the headline was “news” or “not news”. This activity provided a sense of the distribution of opinion within this group of students and allowed for fruitful group discussion about news values. I later facilitated another large-class discussion by using a digital audio recorder to create a press conference scenario, which allowed students to “show and tell” about the news topics they felt were important. Our last activity was a group project where students were invited to redesign the homepage of the TeachingKidsNews (TKN) website for a hypothetical “by Grade Six, for Grade Six” edition. Creating these designs allowed students time and space to reflect on their personal news interests and produced important insight into how students understood their age group as a “news audience”.

O’Kane (2008) notes that participatory group activities are particularly useful in research with children because they can diminish methodological problems around the interpretation of children’s activities by an adult researcher. This is because the dialogue that arises from participating in such activities provides researchers with a rich source of information about participants’ meaning-making processes (see Farmer & Prasad, 2014). In designing my own creative methods to use as in-class research activities, I adapted and employed certain journalistic tasks (i.e. the story pitch and the editorial meeting) that exposed students to the decision-making processes that take place in the newsroom.  

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26 This was not an educational intervention study. My goal in this study was not to “teach” students about news, but to facilitate activities that would allow students to teach or share with me what they felt was important about news. However, as we generated knowledge alongside each other in this project, and due to my goal of being as transparent as possible with children about the research process, it is reasonable to assume that students also learned a few things from interacting with me and/or experienced learning outcomes from our group activities. I would consider these to be positive outcomes of the research.
Other research activities focused on creative production. According to British sociologist and media scholar David Gauntlett, creative methods are a good fit for media researchers because they often explore and access the visual plane just as popular media do. This allows researchers to create a match between participants’ mediated lived experiences and the method being used to explore them (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006, p. 85). In addition, as Thomson (2008, p.11) notes, images may elicit different responses from participants than speech or writing. For instance, responses to images may be more immediate and emotionally motivated (i.e. students’ use of the word “disappointment” beside images of a prominent municipal politician on their brainstorming collages). Thomson also notes that children who have a harder time expressing themselves verbally may find images easier and more pleasurable to work with (2008).

Using visual creative methods benefitted my study in particular because they allowed me to directly observe students in the process of making meaning from news as they explored and manipulated news texts with their own hands. In our interviews following the in-class activities, students also described these creative visual tasks as fun and beneficial. For instance, Dawson discussed how the brainstorming collage activity was a good way to ‘hook’ students’ interests in the project.

I think it was a good start because lots of kids like art and things like that so I think it was a good start to get all of us into, uhm, the whole topic. 'Cuz, if you started with, like, "Write a five page essay about what news is" kids would be like, "Aw, I don't like Averie, she's going to be boring," and stuff, but you started with a really, with a really good topic ... It was basically a free task about what news is and we had the ability to show things, like, artsy that we liked. (Dawson, 11, Pairs Interview 1)

During these participatory group activities and creative production periods, I took written notes and studied the language and images they used to discuss and describe news as they worked on their creations or came to group decisions. I also noted how participants’ views on news as a concept and opinions about news media differed or shared similarities.
On some occasions, I also took pictures of students and their creations to use later as reminders of our process. After every activity, participants were invited to complete a very short written reflection about their experience and their evolving thoughts on news and the project.

These reflections served many purposes but were particularly useful for observing the knowledge and language students were drawing from at different points in the project to make sense of their relationships with news, which was one of my specific research objectives in this project. Unfortunately, the increasing time constraints as our activities grew more complex made these reflections more difficult to fully complete as we neared the end of this series of activities. This was partially remedied when I returned to the classroom later on in the school year to provide an additional opportunity for students’ feedback on their experience in the research project. During this visit, I also invited students’ thoughts about my initial data analysis results, and their suggestions about additional important points I may have overlooked.

**Semi-Structured interviews in pairs and groups.** Following the participatory and creative activities, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants in pairs and small groups\(^\text{27}\) in February of 2014 (see Appendices E and F for interview guides). Interviews are well suited for eliciting respondents’ perceptions (Adams, 2014). I wanted to get at participants’ perceptions of news and their relationships with it. In addition, interviewing in pairs and small groups can be less intimidating for young participants, as it allows discussion

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\(^{27}\) Initially, I meant only to conduct six interviews with pairs of students. However, as the interviews drew nearer I was receiving many questions and requests from students about whether they would be able to participate in the interviews. So, I decided to include all willing participants in the interview process. Because all students had participated in the group activities, it seemed only fair that all students should be given the chance to reflect on their experience in the project in a culminating manner through the interviews, especially given their teacher’s flexibility and my own. Five interviews in pairs were conducted between February 7th and 14th, 2014, and one pair and the three group interviews were conducted on February 26th and 27th, 2014.
to develop amongst them (Adams, 2014). These interviews happened during school hours and were scheduled according to teacher and student preferences. Most interviews lasted around 30 minutes, though one pair interview and the three group interviews were closer to an hour in length. Additionally, I interviewed the participating teacher on one lunch hour break for approximately 30 minutes. This interview focused on his relationship with news, his thoughts on his students’ relationships with news, and the role of news in his teaching practice (see Appendix G for interview guide).

My interviews with students focused heavily on their interpretations of the visual creations they produced in our group activities. These artifacts were used as discussion prompts to guide a large portion of each interview. According to Prasad (2013), using participants’ creations as artifacts in follow-up interviews is an especially effective approach with children and young people. These artifacts provide students with cues that can facilitate their narrative telling and also provoke questions from other students and the researcher that might not have surfaced without the visual aid (2013, p.141; see also Scott, 2008, p. 94). This artifact-centered approach can also allow participants to feel more in control of the overall flow of the interview, by allowing them to shape the direction of the conversation (Noland, 2006, p. 10), which can be especially useful for counteracting the power differential between an adult researcher and a child or youth participant. Thus, in the first half of the interviews I encouraged and pursued students’ own questions or comments about these creations.

To build outwards from our conversations of these visual creations, the latter half of the interviews incorporated questions from a loosely structured interview guide, which differed slightly between the pair and group interviews. The guide included a variety of

28 Additionally, one student who struggled with English was interviewed separately in an informal conversation recorded via written notes. This was done to allow the student more time and space to express their thoughts.
possible questions that explored topics such as participants’ definitions of “news” and how these definitions might have changed throughout the project, and issues of access and exposure regarding young people’s news consumption. Sometimes, if time permitted, the conversations ended on a discussion of what participants thought their relationships with news might be like at different points in their lives, such as when they are adults.

All interviews were video recorded to ensure accuracy in the resulting data analysis. During the interviews, I took note of time codes on the video camera at moments I felt were particularly rich. However, I tried to limit my note taking as much as possible in order to allow the conversation to flow naturally and to minimize any discomfort participants might feel in the unfamiliar interview setting. I kept the interview guide close at hand to use for steering the conversation back to the project’s central questions when I felt we had begun to stray too far off topic (Edgerly, 2012, p. 68). Interviews ended by consulting participants on whether and how they thought the interview approach could be improved. Finally, I reminded participants of how to contact me if they had further questions or concerns (in class or via email).

In summary, my data collection methods attempted to position young people as “co-ethnographers” (Prasad, 2013) of their own experiences through a mix of enabling group research activities, creative production and follow-up interviews. In the interviews, my goal was to elicit participants’ own interpretations of their participation in the unit in order to bridge into a larger conversation about their thoughts and feelings about news. This is a developing approach to knowledge generation in media research, which explores popular media through creation, rather than through critique.

Prasad (2013) calls this type of collaborative, arts-informed research “altern(at)ive inquiry”. The research is alternative in the sense that it draws on non-traditional but
legitimate approaches to studying the social world; and, “alter-ative” in the sense that it transforms the researcher-participant relationship, creating new power structures that allow participants -- particularly young participants -- a greater sense of involvement and influence in the study (p. 25; Farmer & Prasad, 2014). This alter(n)ative approach was particularly beneficial to my research, as is evident from the richness of the interview data that I analyze in this thesis.

Data Analysis

Approach

I chose the mix of qualitative, creative and participatory methods outlined above in service of the ethnographic endeavour of raising understanding around a particular issue by exploring the points of view of those who are impacted by it from their own perspectives. However, I am also aware of the arguments of Spyrou (2011), James (2007) and others that it is misguided and perhaps even irresponsible to assume that there are self-evident political advantages for children in simply having their ‘voices’ heard in research (see also Alldred & Burman, 2005). As such, I required an analytical approach that could reconcile the necessity of engaging with participants’ unique perspectives and the necessity of recognizing the many factors (social, cultural, and contextual) that can impact how participants share their perspectives. To reconcile these competing factors, I drew on the ideological framework of discourse analysis.

The ideology of discourse analysis is evident in my conceptual framework from the way that I recognize “talk” as a research medium that can connect participants’ unique lived experiences with the larger social structures that have shaped them. My analysis of the interview data focused on children’s lived experiences and the meanings they assigned to those experiences, but I examined those experiences at a cultural, rather than individual level.
(Alldred & Burman, 2005, p. 175). My approach was to examine students’ accounts by reflecting on what discourses they were able to make use of in these accounts, how these discourses positioned the student through their speech, and what effect participants’ reliance on these discourses might have on the culture they were drawn from. This approach recognizes how children’s perspectives and choices contribute to and transform the wider cultural sphere. However, it also recognizes that “children's ‘voices’ cannot be heard outside of ... cultural understandings of childhood and the cultural meanings assigned to their communication” (Alldred & Burman, 2005, p. 177-8). This is the central point in the diagram of concentric circles I use to illustrate my project’s conceptual framework in the previous chapter (see figure 3).

**Analysis Procedure**

**Reflexive memoing.** Many scholars (e.g. Creswell, 2009; Alldred & Burman, 2005) argue that analysis is never separate or “after” data collection in qualitative research, but occurs naturally throughout the study. Thus, my data analysis process began on my first day of observation in the classroom, from which I produced a reflexive memo. I tried to memo every day when I left the school and often when I reviewed students’ creations, worksheets, and/or reflections. These memos included my reflections on what I saw and heard in the classroom and on developing themes or questions I had in relation to my research topic. I also documented my own feelings, celebrations, and concerns about the progress of the project, and the choices I made along the way.

Leavy describes this kind of memoing as an "internal dialogue". She states that it can be especially useful for researchers employing creative methods because it allows them to “monitor their emotional, psychological, carnal and intellectual responses throughout the process,” (2009, p. 19). For example, these memos can provide a history of when and how
various analytical concepts or methodological decisions arose. I have gone back to organize, and review these memos several times since the end of my time in the classroom. Through this reviewing process, these memos have fortified my interpretations of the data by allowing me to maintain a constant search for consistent and disconfirming evidence (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). I looked for similarities and differences between my analysis of the interview data and my observations during my time in the classroom to reflect on the credibility of my own interpretation of the data.

**Making sense of the interview data.** I selected videotapes of my interviews with participants in pairs and small groups as a data set because they served as culminating reflections on participants’ thinking and learning about news throughout the project, as I have discussed above. Instead of analyzing the outcomes of each participant’s creative process in our interviews individually by performing content analysis on their creations, I invited participants to interpret their own creative process by reflecting on a visual artifact they produced. I then studied and described these interpretations and related them to my conceptual framework to build a more comprehensive, holistic analysis to match my project’s broad research question and objectives.

As Gauntlett argues, when employing creative methods the researcher needs to “listen to what is said overall and then come back in at the end and develop conclusions and theory, based on an overview of all that has been created and recorded,” (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006, p. 87).

To develop these conclusions and begin to generate theory about participants’ relationships with news, I began with an initial thematic study of the interview data, moved on to a detailed descriptive coding of the interviews, and then constructed a thematic network and explored and interpreted it through the lens of my research question and objectives. These
three steps, in combination with a constant review of my memos from throughout the project, helped me build “pathways through the data” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 46).

The initial thematic study of the data involved multiple viewings of the interviews and the production of a set of three memos for each interview. First, I “free associated” with the text, considering connections and surprising ideas (Alldred & Burman, p. 187). In the other two memos, I identified important “moments” throughout the interviews that captured the project’s core research objectives in a contextualized, interactional manner. Following this initial thematic study, I performed qualitative coding on the interviews to distance myself from the body of data in order to make connections between interviews, to explore the significance of the discursive themes I had already identified, and possibly, to pick up on new ones.

I chose NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software for my coding process because this software allows researchers to code directly on the timeline of uploaded interview videos. Coding on the video directly allowed me to understand participants’ responses in the context of their physical behaviour and the affective responses of their interview partners. For instance, close observation of one group’s non-verbal behaviour during their discussion of a scary rumour that had recently been covered in the news allowed me to observe a game-like routine of “scaremongering” that took place in the discussion. If I had not been able to observe participants’ body language at the same time that I examined their pattern of speech during this interaction, I might have overlooked this important moment.

Though the term “coding” implies a rather mechanistic, prescribed procedure, most qualitative researchers have come to view it differently. As Coffey and Atkinson state, “We prefer to think in terms of generating concepts from and with our data, using coding as a means of achieving this” (1996, p. 26). Coding can thus be thought of as a way of relating
one’s data to one’s ideas about the data. However, a researcher’s specific coding procedures will depend on his or her intentions for data analysis. Having already explored my data thematically, I knew I wanted to code my data on a more basic level, as a means of surveying what patterns of speech and topics were present throughout the interviews. To achieve this, I performed a descriptive coding of the data.

This type of coding assigns a label to a small segment of data to summarize, in a word or short phrase, the basic topic of the passage. This approach is useful, especially for ethnographies, because it eventually provides an inventory of topics for indexing and categorizing into higher-level concepts (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p. 74). However, this explanation may perhaps render my process a bit too simplistically. The coding process I undertook was not simply a matter of “counting” or quantifying participants’ various ideas, but also of questioning and examining statements and ordering and reordering codes in order to begin to read (and build) the story of the data (Coffey & Atkinson, p. 29).

My descriptive coding process produced 194 subcodes, which were studied and revised until 161 subcodes remained. At this point, the subcodes were grouped together under 22 codes, which described the subcodes at a more abstract level. Then, I watched all the interviews again in the context of these codes and their attached subcodes to check that the groupings I had made fit the data, and also to produce the “basic themes” that I would use in my thematic network analysis.²⁹

Many scholars of qualitative methods have warned that coding should not be considered a substitute for the analysis or interpretation of data. Rather, it is a crucial step

²⁹ Throughout the coding process, I kept track of which codes and subcodes were referenced across the interviews most frequently, and which were referenced for the longest durations. These were used to check against my own interpretations of which discursive themes seemed to be most important, however, not all of the data described in this thesis are linked to codes that were among this list of most frequently mentioned codes or codes discussed at the most length. Some significant moments emerged in isolation but are useful because of their direct relation to the research question and objectives.
towards that analytical work (Coffey & Atkinson, p. 26). Thus, after my descriptive coding, I needed a way to theorize upwards from my coded data set in order to build my interpretation of the interviews. For this, I drew inspiration from Attride-Stirling’s (2001) model of thematic network analysis. According to Attride-Stirling, “thematic analyses seek to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels” (2001, p. 387). Thematic ‘networks’ are tools that can be used in this discovery process, allowing researchers to construct a descriptive image out of their data by creating and organizing different levels of themes. These networks can then be described, examined, and related to theory as a data analysis strategy.

Attride-Stirling’s model uses three levels of themes to make up thematic “network” -- “basic themes”, “organizing themes”, and “global themes”. Using my set of 22 codes as the “basic themes” (first level themes) in my network, I abstracted from these themes to create thematic statements. I then summarized these statements to create the six “organizing” themes (second level themes) in the network. At this point, each group of themes (organizing theme and connected “basic themes”) was described in full and connections were drawn between the various groups.30 The idea of “relationships with news” encapsulated this network well and was used as the “global theme” (or title) of the network. I then built off of my description of this network to guide my examination of each group of themes (see chapter five) and related the resulting ideas to my conceptual framework and my project’s research objectives to create my own unique interpretation of the data (see chapter six).

In summary, my analytical approach in this project focused on gathering participants’ interpretations of their relationships with news in their own words and then examining these interpretations as a whole to identify and explore the discursive themes contained in the

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30 One of the organizing themes, “reflections” encapsulated a set of codes or basic themes that captured references participants made to the project itself and the research methods, which have been used as context throughout the interpretation of my major thematic network about participants’ relationships with news.
collected responses. Through an initial thematic study of the data, a detailed descriptive coding process, and a subsequent thematic network analysis, I was able to review the data at various levels of proximity, which helped me build a more complex and connected understanding of the data. I then examined this understanding, or “overview” (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006), and related it to my project’s objectives and conceptual framework to create my own interpretation of the data, which is described and discussed in the remaining chapters of this thesis.

**Chapter Summary**

In this project, I employed a scaffolded methodology (Farmer & Prasad, 2014) to encourage young participants to explore and reflect on their relationships with news carefully before sharing their interpretations more formally in the interview setting. This approach required a great deal of creative thinking and flexibility in order to come up with research activities that would be truly generative and to be able to keep up with participants’ input and suggestions as co-ethnographers (Prasad, 2013). The key to this creative and iterative approach has been continued reflexivity. From the very first “sticky note” I placed on my computer’s desktop to the endless notes I have scribbled in the margins of previous drafts of this thesis, I kept and consulted a record of my thoughts, feelings, and decisions throughout this project, many of which are detailed above.

In this chapter, I explained how I conceptualized and carried out my research in this project. This summary is meant to provide context for the results that will be described and discussed in the following chapters. First, I discussed the notion of children as “beings” rather than “becomings” and the need for critical thinking when it comes to incorporating children’s “voices” in one’s research. I also outlined my fieldwork procedure, which was scaffolded in order to access participants’ meaning-making processes and explore their
relationships with news from their own perspectives. I then described my analytical approach, which drew from the ideological framework of discourse analysis to gather and connect participants’ perspectives and study them at a more abstract, cultural level. Finally, I described my analysis process, which included the ongoing production of reflexive memos, as well as the descriptive coding of interview data and a subsequent thematic network analysis.

In chapters six and seven, I will provide my insights about the “story” I feel this thematic network illustrates in relation to my conceptual framework and research question. But first, I will describe and examine this network, drawing on my descriptive coding of the data. In the next chapter, I will explain the complex web of themes that I have drawn from participants’ descriptions of “news” and its role in their lives.
Chapter 5

Results:

A Thematic Network Analysis of Children’s Relationships with News

Introduction

In their book, *Reading Media Writing*, Hoechsmann and Low write: “Popular culture is transient, shifting, contradictory and multifaceted, and academic frameworks will always be ten steps behind, struggling to keep up. Cultural Studies embraces the chase, alert to the changing shapes and directions of the popular ...” (2008, p. 31). I began my project with the knowledge that young people are constantly changing, the media environment is rapidly evolving, and the relationships between the two are anything but static. However, I have chosen to “embrace the chase” using an exploratory approach. In this thesis I am pursuing important lines of questioning in an attempt to open up scholarly debates around young people as “disengaged” and/or “disenfranchised” in their relationships with news. The goal of my project is to contribute to the formation of a research paradigm that would be more amenable to the study of such elusive concepts as “youth”, “news” and “engagement”.

In this chapter I will outline a web of key themes that, when taken together, present a picture of the dynamic, complex relationships participants in my study discussed having with news. These themes were drawn from the nine interviews I conducted with participants in pairs and small groups in February 2014. This chapter describes, explains and begins to analyse these themes and the relationships between them to offer an “overview” of the data collected in this project. This overview, depicted in the network diagram below, brings me closer to answering my major research question: “How do Canadian young people relate to ‘news’, in the modern, rapidly evolving, media context?” The following chapter provides context for the further analysis and theorizing captured in the remainder of this thesis.
Figure 2. Thematic Network Diagram. This figure illustrates the web of themes that emerged from a thematic network analysis of the coded interview data.
Conceptualizations of News

Given that one of my project’s major objectives was to explore participants’ definitions of news and its relevance to them, one of the most robust categories to emerge from my thematic analysis was “conceptualizations of news.” This organizing theme deals with participants’ ideas about news as a concept, institution, and industry. It is made up of five of the largest basic themes that emerged from my coding of the interviews: Definitions, Purposes, Tropes, Insights, and Descriptors.

Definitions

The most obvious way that participants referenced their conceptualizations of news throughout the interviews was by offering phrases or labels as definitions. Most of these emerged around a specific question I posed to participants: “We began the unit by thinking about our personal definitions of news. Now that we’ve gone through some activities about news together, how would you define news?” In response to this question, several participants explained how they had come away from the project with a more complex understanding of news as a subjective phenomenon. They offered that news could be something that is only “new to you” as well as something that affected many people.

Participants offered labels like “big” and “worldwide” to describe news from their point of view. In this case “big” was meant in a manner related to the news value of “prominence” -- that is, events that are widely known about or people that hold a position of significance in the public domain of a society. “Worldwide” was used to emphasize the global scope of news today. For instance, some participants described news as a system that transmits information to and from all over the world, which was also emphasized in a recent study with children and young people in the UK context (see Carter et al, 2009, p. 13).
Purpose

Another way in which participants explained how they conceived of news was by describing its purposes. Again, these descriptions typically arose in response to one particular question I asked participants, “What do you think news is for?” As might be expected, one of the most common responses to this question was that the purpose of news is to inform people. This echoes the idea of news as the “Fourth Estate” (Hampton, 2010), which I discussed as a dominant perspective on news in my review of the literature above. Yet, rather than emphasizing the role of the press as a “watchdog” to help them perform their civic duty, most participants discussed the informative capacity of news on a more social level. Participants explained that news is for helping people gain a broader perspective of the world, and that it facilitates connection between individuals and the world at large. Another commonly cited purpose of news was as a cautionary mechanism. Several participants described how news gives people warnings or lessons so that they can protect themselves from dangerous things, such as drugs, or in dangerous situations, such as natural disasters.

Two surprising ideas that emerged from participants’ discussions of the purpose of news were about news as a public relations (PR) tool and as part of the advertising system. The public relations function of news became apparent as participants described how news shapes public opinion and can be used for image management. For instance, in the second group interview, Joanna explained that a local municipal politician, who was embroiled in a series of scandals at the time of this research, could use news coverage to “make people to like him” again. In a similar vein, Caroline mentioned that news could be used “to get people to buy things”. This was an unexpected description of the purpose of news, due to its sophisticated and somewhat cynical nature, however some scholars suggest it is an increasingly accurate description of the mainstream news environment (see McChesney,
2008, pp. 43-44, p. 270). Furthermore, it is possible to understand the emphasis Caroline and her conversation partner Tessa placed on the commercialization of news as an outcome of their exposure to media literacy education such as the TeachingKidsNews program.\footnote{31}

**Tropes**

Participants also explained their concepts of news by relying on familiar news *tropes* to create shared frames of reference in their explanations. A trope is a conventional idea that people use to make connections between the topic of conversation at hand and a larger, more abstract point they are trying to make. These ideas arose in a variety of different contexts, such as when participants were asked to define news, and when they described what kinds of news might interest various age groups. Usually, the tropes took the form of news stories that are covered often (maybe too often) in mainstream news such as budget stories, election stories, celebrity news or “gossip”, and police stories. For instance, two different groups of participants brought up the ‘missing child story’ as a news trope. One group used this trope to explain what kinds of news kids\footnote{32} would pay attention to, while another participant group used the ‘missing child story’ trope to illustrate the kind of news that would make adult audiences pay attention.

The way participants relied on common news topics as tropes to explain their views on news underscores the purpose of news as a cultural form, which I discussed above in my literature review. Scholars like Ettema (2010) have noted that journalists apply common

\footnote{31 For example, one of the goals the founders of TKN state on their “About Us” page is to deliver news children actually want to know about “the real stuff, not just the fluff that the marketers are always pushing at them”. This statement suggests that Mr. Tilly and his colleagues are aware of the increasing commercialization of the news industry, and it is reasonable to assume that he might share such information with students as they discuss the coverage of different news stories in class.}

\footnote{32 In this chapter, I introduce the term “kids” in reference to children and pre-teens to reflect young participants’ own use of the term throughout our interviews. While the term is somewhat vague and informal, and does not necessarily reflect the manner in which other scholars in childhood studies prefer to describe this age group, it was the term the respondents used to describe themselves. For example, participants told me they preferred being called “kids” to “pre-teens”, although I have found it necessary to use the latter term at different points in this study to differentiate this age group from other groups of children.}
tropes as frames to their news stories. This allows people to interpret current events more easily, by relying on recognizable cultural forms to help them create understandings around new information. This seemed to be the process that the young participants in my study were engaging in when they brought these news tropes into our conversations. The presence of these news tropes in our interviews suggests that participants understood that news could have functions in society beyond facilitating civic and citizen engagement, which is the main function focused on in the “disengaged vs. disenfranchised” debate described in my literature review above. In this way, the basic theme of Tropes is also heavily connected to its sister theme, Purpose, described above.

**Insights**

While explaining their conceptualizations of news, participants also offered several pieces of specialized knowledge or insights about how news works and its role in our society. References to this type of specialized, even professional, knowledge often arose in relation to participants’ personal definitions of news. In particular, these insights suggest that the pre-teen participants in this study had already begun to develop a strong grasp of news as a business and industry; as is evident in the discussions of news as a PR and advertising tool mentioned under the theme of Purposes above. Participants also offered particularly sophisticated insights about how they thought news might evolve and change over time. Eli, the only participant who mentioned purposefully using a mobile app for getting news, said he thought the evolution of news was heavily tied to the emergence of new digital technologies.

One really big thing I see that uh, has evolved news is probably the smartphone camera, because, a phone is something you typically have on you, especially when you get older, like, just a little bit older than us, and uhmm people, like, if they were around what happened to Justin Bieber, then they could take photos instantly and they could share it, and that's a way that everything gets shared, so, I see that-- (Éli, 12, Pairs Interview 1)
These sophisticated insights made it clear that, regardless of their interest in news engagement, these pre-teens were far from ignorant about news media or the news industry and how it operates.

Descriptors

The final basic theme that helps explain participants’ conceptualizations of news is **Descriptors**. This basic theme groups together several evaluative, subjective labels participants used to explain news from their point of view. These descriptors were mostly discussed in reference to news at an institutional level but some also emerged when participants discussed a specific news medium or outlet. For example, some participants described news websites as “dependable”. This type of evaluation provided valuable insight into participants’ news preferences and routines, which I will discuss further on in this chapter.

For instance, in reference to the ongoing news coverage of the scandal-ridden municipal politician mentioned above, Meghan and her group discussed how news could be “annoying.”

Meghan: News can be annoying. Like, people talking--

Stephany: [quietly] The Senate scandal was really annoying!

Meghan: --people talking about (name of politician) can get really annoying.

Rebeca: My mom, like, freaked out every time! [laughs]

Meghan: It’ssss.. It’s so.. Why would you follow around this man who’s, like, an idiot, and he’s so weird!

Averie: Why do you think they do?

Meghan: No because, he’s just, ... someone in that kind of power should not be acting like that, and uhm, I guess.. people are interested, uhm, that he was elected. But I think everyone’s hoping for him to resign and that’s why they’re, like, following him and they want to get him annoyed. At least that’s what I would (say). And uhm. but, it’s just like, really annoying.
With this statement, Meghan seems to be explaining the phenomenon of “pack journalism” as part of her conceptualization of news. This term describes the consensus that sometimes arises among a group of journalists who work in close proximity and produce an unintended consensus on what is worth covering due to a constant awareness of what stories their colleagues are chasing. However, Meghan’s statement can also be seen as an explanation related to her own news engagement, as she is describing this behaviour as something that turns her off of news. Thus, even though I chose to place Descriptors under the thematic category Conceptualizations of News, but it also fits very well in the thematic category Explaining News Engagement. This is because in using labels such as “embarrassing,” “entertaining,” “funny,” and “boring” to describe news, participants were not only characterizing news as a concept, but also describing how news engages them and makes them feel.

In sum, although they are highly interconnected and also connected to other thematic categories, Definitions, Purposes, Tropes, Insights and Descriptors have been described in isolation above to illustrate how participants explained their conceptualizations of news throughout our interviews. Together, these themes contribute to my overall research objective of exploring young participants’ own definitions of “news”. This exploration suggests that participants’ definitions of news are well informed and insightful, and also heavily influenced by common cultural narratives about news, a finding I explore further in chapter seven.

33 It is interesting to note how the last part of this statement from Meghan seems to be making a pointed criticism of the media industry. Meghan seems like she can’t quite decide whether the “ends justify the means” in this case of reporters attempting to annoy the politician into revealing information. This could be evidence of a deeper level of questioning about news and journalism ethics on Meghan’s part.
News Ecologies

Another of my project’s major objectives was to discover how and where the participants in my study encountered news. I have gathered participants’ descriptions and explanations of these encounters with news under the organizing theme News Ecologies. This is a term I adapted from the broader concept of “media ecologies”, which has become common in the study of people’s relationships with media in our increasingly connected world (see Milberry, 2012). Horst, Herr-Stephenson and Robinson (2010) used the metaphor of media “ecology” to emphasize how young people’s uses of and interactions with new media are always situationally contingent. In using the term “ecology” the authors emphasize that young peoples’ various uses of new media are impacted by a series of interrelated factors, such as “everyday practices of youth, existing structural conditions, infrastructures of place, and technologies” (p. 31).

By choosing the term “ecologies” to describe participants’ experiences with news, I too wish to emphasize the way in which the elements of participants’ encounters with news must be seen as interrelated and context-specific. It is not enough to note that participants use mobile devices, Google searches, conversations with parents, and hard-copy newspapers lying around their homes to engage with news. These various strategies of engagement should be understood as interrelated, and specific to the particular media environments and social networks these participants inhabit as middle-class pre-teens in urban Canada. Thus, the thematic category News Ecologies encompasses the many media and specific news outlets that make up participants’ news environments but also captures how participants described their actions and interactions with other people, within those environments. The basic themes that I drew from participants’ descriptions of their news ecologies are Sources, Medium, Behaviours and Relationships.
Sources

The basic theme Sources groups together the explicitly mentioned names of media outlets participants referenced when discussing news and their relationships with news in our interviews. References to these sources usually arose when I asked them to tell me about how they came across news in their daily lives when they weren’t necessarily looking for it, and the ways in which they might go about getting news when they were looking for it. While most news outlets in this category were referenced for their usefulness, Owen also described how he included one major American news network among his “go-to” news sources purely for comic relief. “I would go on (news network) just ‘cuz it’s hilarious, it’s the worst news ever,” he explained (Owen, 11, Group Interview 1). This reference is significant because it shows an attempt on Owen’s part to distance himself from the regular audience of this network and perhaps also to display a certain amount of sophistication by emphasizing his own ability to discern news quality. This provides important context for the conversation in the next chapter around participants’ use of criticism as a discursive strategy.

Participants also frequently mentioned Teaching Kids News.com (TKN), as one of their “go-to” news sources. TKN is a website that features news stories explained in simple language for students in grades two through eight. The website was designed and is maintained in part by the participants’ teacher, Mr. Tilly, and participants engage with this website every week in a dedicated media literacy class period. According to Mr. Tilly, TKN is meant to be a resource for teachers, not a full-scale news outlet for children. However, evidence from our interviews suggests that the website is hitting above its weight. Many students described using TKN at home on their own time. Some of this use, of course, was motivated by the focus on the site in their classroom curriculum -- students check TKN to
become familiar with stories that might be discussed in class. However, students also described using the site at home to support their comprehension of stories they were following in the “regular” (not kid-specific) news, and as a primary source for news. This prompted several students to express their wishes for TKN to grow and become more interactive.

Other sources mentioned throughout the interviews included the Globe and Mail, the Huffington Post and Google News. With 19 references, CBC was the most referenced news outlet across the interviews. Participants also mentioned CP24 as a news outlet that they were exposed to by parents at home. The Toronto Star was the most popular print newspaper mentioned, but had only five references. Most participants did not consider online social networks such as Twitter and Facebook as news sources, due to the fact that they were not yet allowed to have accounts on them. However, most participants had accounts on Instagram, the popular mobile photo-sharing app, and some mentioned that they occasionally encountered news on this social media platform. Overall, participants’ discussions of news sources in the interviews revealed their interest in and regular exposure to a wide variety of major Canadian and American news outlets.

Medium

As referenced above, specific news media were also discussed at length throughout the nine interviews. I gathered these discussions under the basic theme Medium because I felt the singular form of the word accurately captured the separate and comparative manner in which participants referenced different news media in our conversations. These various media were usually introduced and considered as participants recounted their daily encounters with news and strategies for following specific news stories. Throughout the interviews, participants showed significant understanding of the concept of medium
specificity -- how one medium compares to others and what features make it unique. For example, the boys in the first group interview discussed newspapers as a superior news medium to TV.

Brendon: I like the newspaper more because it provides more detail

Averie: Okay. As Compared to, like, TV?

Brendon: ye- or on a website. No not on a website, ‘cuz they’re the same thing, but like, on the TV, they don’t always provide everything.

Owen: Ya, the stories are kinda just, like, they tell you what’s going on and then they just stop.

Brendon: Ya exactly.

Hugo: Ya.

Owen: It’s the smallest amount and then they move on to the next so they can go quickly, but it’s not always the best way to get your news, even though it’s a quick way. (Brendon, 12, Owen, 12, and Hugo, 11, Group Interview 1)

This interaction is important because it contradicts the idea of youth as news “snackers” who prefer to get their information in bite-sized tidbits, though several studies have shown evidence of the growth of this trend (see Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Costera Meijer, 2007).

Websites were by far the most preferred medium among participants for purposefully gathering news, while most described encountering radio news only by chance, through their alarm clocks or in the car. In addition, although participants often referenced their ability to access news on a wide variety of new media devices such as smartphones and tablets, very few participants actually mentioned these new media as part of their regular engagement with news.

Relationships

Participants’ personal relationships with family, friends, and parents were an important part of their news ecologies. Sometimes these relationships were described as
sources of news in and of themselves. However participants also mentioned being motivated to engage with news directly after hearing about a story from a friend or parent. Parents were mentioned more than double the number of times that friends were mentioned, suggesting that these pre-teens felt their parents had a large impact on their relationship with news at this stage in their lives. For instance, several participants discussed how their own news habits were built around engaging with their parents. As Joanna explained:

Normally, when my dad comes home from work, he hears what it says on the news and (tells me). Then I go on to Teaching Kids News or CBC and I try to find a bit more about it, and then, like, at dinnertime, I just tell my family what I know. (Joanna, 11, Group Interview 2)

Further research could be useful for exploring the role of news in parents and children’s personal relationships at different stages in their lives. Overall, participants described their personal relationships as mutually beneficial with their relationships with news. Personal relationships with friends and family -- children’s offline social networks -- acted as sources of news for these young people, while at the same time, news acted as a source of discussion and bonding in these personal relationships. This mutually beneficial relationship helped me identify a larger discourse throughout the interviews around news and social inclusion, which I will explore further in chapter seven.

**Behaviours**

Finally, news ecologies are not only made up of the settings and sources that provide access to news, but also the practices through which people interact with news. I have grouped these practices under the basic theme **behaviours**. These practices took place in multiple settings -- both at school and at home, and notably, in the car on the way in between these spaces, which participants described as a space for chatting with their parents about news. Two popular practices covered under Behaviours were the practice of “scanning” for news, and “sharing” news. For example, Faith described “scanning” news as part of her
routine of glancing through the top stories on the Huffington Post as she ate breakfast each morning. In addition, many participants described “sharing news” they had heard recently as they met up with friends at school.

Several participants also described “Googling” (looking for a story on the Google search engine) as their first course of action when they were curious about a news story or topic. In our interview, Dawson described how Googling can sometimes lead to the experience of getting lost in online, which he felt could be a positive experience rather than a negative way to engage with news. He recalled this experience as he described his research strategy for a recent science project.

For example, it’s like my biodiversity project I’m doing. I had a topic, and in researching that topic, I found a topic that I liked more. It’s just like news. You could be looking at, uhm, something you want to do and you could see something interesting about news and then you could go and research about that article, and when you’re researching about that article you see something else, and you just keep going like a domino effect, and you could slowly learn about all these different types of news.

(Dawson, 11, Pairs Interview 1)

This “domino effect” is likely a familiar experience for many who rely on the Internet for news, as these participants primarily did.

In summary, the thematic category of News Ecologies and its related basic themes Sources, Medium, Relationships and Behaviours contribute to my research objective of exploring what young people’s news engagement looks like in the modern context as a way of opening up debates about whether or not younger generations can be seen as engaged with or interested in news. These concrete examples from my interviews with participants suggest that their engagement with news goes beyond traditional conceptions of news “consumption” to include more social and strategic modes of engagement. This is an important finding because it suggests the need for a research paradigm and approach that better accounts for
emerging news engagement practices, a point which scholars like Marchi (2012) and Costera Meijer (2007) have also emphasized.

**Explaining News Engagement**

The organizing theme Explaining News Engagement is connected to my project’s objective of discovering the knowledge and language young people use to describe their relationships with news. The theme also offers further detail about where and how the particular young people I worked with prefer to engage with news. The basic themes that contribute to this thematic category are Engagement, Mediating Factors, Projections and Social Change. These themes capture moments in the interviews where participants explained people’s investment in following news, the factors that motivate people to engage with news, and what they think their own relationships with news will be like at different stages in their lives.

**Engagement**

*Engagement* is a large and broadly defined theme that emerged from my analysis of the interview data. This theme captures portions of interviews where participants discussed their own investment in following news, and evaluated other people’s news engagement. As I coded the interview data, it was interesting to note that interest or investment in news was discussed for around 20 minutes total during our interviews, while disinterest in or disengagement from news was only discussed for a total of around eight minutes. This provides useful evidence of the positive tone that characterized most of my conversations about news with this group of students.

One important idea that is linked to this basic theme of engagement is the question of whether of young people are even aware of their own investment in and engagement with news.
Malia and her classmates raised this idea in the second group interview.

They don’t understand that, like.. they see news, like, every day but they don’t care to, like, read it or, like, search it up because they think it’s like, a waste of their time, but ... they don’t know that they’re learning it, like, every day of their lives. (Malia, 11, Group Interview 2).

In the third group interview, Meghan discussed the opposite idea. She suggested that adults lack awareness about the many different ways in which young people are engaged with news in the current media environment and suggested that this lack of awareness might be what has led researchers to the conclusion that young people are disengaged from news, which she deemed inaccurate. Malia and Meghan’s arguments suggest that when explaining news engagement, one must consider the quality of that engagement, and how it is measured.

Mediating Factors

Another way in which participants explained their own news engagement and others’ was by enumerating the many variables that might impact one’s engagement with news. I captured these conversations under the basic theme Mediating Factors. The term “mediating factors” comes from the field of media effects research, which was traditionally rather deterministic about the strong impact media could have on people’s behaviour and attitudes. Joseph Klapper first used “mediating factors” to describe the psychological and social influences that could moderate the strong persuasive impact of mass media communication in people’s lives. Klapper’s approach impacted the development of media effects research by essentially putting a damper on it. He suggested that “the widespread assumption of strong media effects had to be modified” by considering the specific conditions in which media were experienced and how these conditions might determine what effects were possible (Eilders, 2009). In my thematic analysis, I used the term “mediating factors” in a more general way, untethered to the theoretical implications of media effects. However, it is interesting to note how Klapper’s use and development of this term encouraged researchers
to consider media consumer and their particular situations more carefully, as is my own emphasis in this thesis.

One mediating factor participants brought up to explain young people’s engagement with news was personal responsibility. Young people’s personal responsibility was seen as a key factor in whether or not they maintained enough balance in their media ‘diet’, by balancing informational/educational media content such as news with entertainment media such as video games. Participants positioned video games in opposition to news media frequently in our interviews. The notion of personal responsibility as a mediating factor for news engagement was especially evident in one conversation between Milo and Wes.

If they’re the kids that play video games all day, they won’t really care, but if they’re the kids that wanna go to the park, like, work out -- something like that, they will want to see what’s happening there, like if everything’s alright. (Milo, 11, Pairs Interview 3)

This comment in particular reveals an interesting discourse that arose in some interviews around the regulation of ‘screen time’. The increasing amount of hours per day that children spend with media, at home and elsewhere, has become a major public concern in recent years, as is evident from the consistent coverage the topic receives from major news organizations (e.g. CBC News, 2014). My interviews suggest that this discourse of regulation has had a significant influence on some participants’ conceptualizations of their own media consumption.

Other mediating factors that participants used to explain news engagement were one’s desire to learn, gender differences, kids’ inexperience with news, the amount of influence kids have in news, the ability of kids to understand the news they come across, and one’s personal experiences and interests. Overall, these factors were of great importance to my analysis of the interview data, as they captured moments where participants used a variety of
different types of knowledge, such as the discourse around media use described above, to reflect on their own engagement with news.

**Social Change**

*Social Change* is a less robust theme and could almost be seen as a mediating factor in itself related to young people’s news engagement. However, I have chosen to make it its own basic theme, because it usually emerged separately from other motivating or mediating factors in the interviews. This basic theme represents statements with an overtly activist or altruistic tone participants made as they described news and news engagement. It also contributes to the thematic category of Conceptualizations of News because through these statements news was conceptualized as a tool for action and involvement, one that could help young people “make a difference”. As Caroline explained:

> I've heard so many things, some teachers saying, like "Kids can make a difference, kids can do all these things." But, if you don't know what you're trying to make a difference on --and that's kind of what news tells you about, what's going on around the world and what you can help -- then, it doesn't really work. (Caroline, 11, Pairs Interview 5)

Participants also described news as a motivator for kids to become more “involved” in their communities, and suggested that kids would be more interested in news if more news involved them directly. Wes alluded to this as he explained what kind of news he’d like to see more of.

> The more, kinda “kid-friendly” stuff, like ... “Oh, Plainsview (Elementary School) is gonna go sing the national anthem at the baseball game.” So it’s *involving* kids, and it’s like, “Oh, I wanna go ask my principal if maybe we could do that!” And then, like, you get more kids involved from just that one story. (Wes’ own emphasis, 11, Pairs Interview 3)

I also used the basic theme Social Change to capture the explicit statements participants made during our interviews about their disappointment in or dislike of a prominent municipal politician who had recently been involved in a series of scandals that
were covered extensively in the news. Echoing the idea of news as a motivator for involvement and action, several students used our “design the homepage” group activity to suggest that this politician resign from office. These actions and statements show a slightly different idea of social change and its impact on news engagement. By inventing satirical news stories about this politician and mocking him in our interviews, participants may have been expressing their desire for greater political influence.

**Projections**

Finally, when explaining their thoughts about their own engagement with news, participants often made statements about how one’s relationship with news grows and changes with age. I gathered these statements under the basic theme *Projections*. In most interviews, these projections were tied to a specific question I asked participants: Do you think you’ll feel differently about the news as you get older? How so? In response to this question, one group of participants described how they saw their teenage years as a time where their news engagement was likely to drop because they had seen this pattern happen among older siblings.

Owen: I have one brother that’s 16 -- er-- 17, and one brother that’s, uh, 20, and when the one that is 17, when he was 15, like, he never really read the news or anything.

Brendon: That’s what I would have thought, that they just leave it after a while.

Owen: -- and same as my other brother, like, both my brothers don’t really read the news.

Averie: What do you mean by that Brendon, that they, that they --

Brendon: -- like, they just lose interest in all news after a while. Like they just don’t like watching it, they don’t like reading it. (Owen, 12, and Brendon, 12, Group Interview 1)

In contrast, this same group of participants concluded that they would be more likely to be engaged with news when they were adults because, according to Owen, news is “what all
middle aged people talk about.” Such statements were interesting to me because they revealed traces of a societal “truism” that news is mainly an adult interest. I am interested by how this truism found its way into participants’ explanations around news engagement when these same participants often stressed their interest in news as children. I see this contradiction as a reflection of one of the central points in my conceptual framework: that people’s understandings of media are always already impacted by the cultural histories and social norms of the society they belong to. This question of whether or how news can be considered a “kid’s interest” is captured by the next thematic category.

**Kids as a News Audience**

During my data collection, I was not only interested in discovering participants’ concepts and definitions of news, but also how and whether they conceived of themselves as part of a group or collective. Students discussed kids’ preferences, their habits, their similarities and differences of opinion, and how kids compared to other age groups as an audience. I grouped these references together under the organizing theme Kids as a News Audience.

Again, this theme relates to my third research objective of discovering the knowledge and language young people use to describe their relationships with news. In this case, a generational language was used to classify “kids” as separate from other age groups. In this way, the category “projections” above, could easily also be grouped under this thematic category due to its focus on the differences in people’s interests at different stages of their

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34 Emilia actually argued that news was *more* interesting for children and young people because of their fresh perspective on the world: “We find news interesting because it's not as, ... like with an adult, like they know that things can happen that are sad or that are happy, but when you're a kid, ... it's more fun to hear about things. Like, when you're older, it's not really that big of a deal, like something happens like, uhm, ... someone wins the Olympics. ... Sometimes adults are like, "Oh it's another one, that other people win, it's fine." But like (for) kids it's like one of the first times like seeing things like that, and it's pretty big, so I think that hearing news is a lot more interesting if you are a kid.” (Emilia,11, pair interview 4)
lives. I used the basic themes Audiences, Evaluations and Components to illustrate this larger organizing theme of Kids as a News Audience.

**Audiences**

Throughout the interviews, participants segmented the general public in various ways in order to speak about their own experiences comparatively. It seemed in these instances that participants were speaking of the differences between certain audiences. For example, as noted above under Projections, participants compared their experiences with news to that of other age groups such as “adults,” and “teenagers”. However, there were a few important instances in the interviews where participants felt it was important to distinguish themselves by age from other groups of children as well. For this, they referred to younger children as “little kids”.

Conversely, the basic theme Audiences also represents participants’ references to news as something that interests all audiences, regardless of age, as Eli’s highlights.

> News is for -- I think it can be for almost all ages. Like, from whatever age you can interpret things properly from, that’s when I’d say you could start looking at news, and uhmm, I think they could honestly uh post ... I mean they could post almost anything and at least a few hundred people will be interested instantaneously after notifying -- after being notified. (Eli, 12, Pairs Interview 1)

One of the goals of my project, stated in my introduction, was to question commonly-held assumptions about whether children can be said to be part of a wider Canadian news audience. This basic theme represents my effort to take that question to young Canadians themselves. Although these participants may not have explicitly referred to their age group as a “news audience”, they often drew on group characteristics to discuss their relationships with news in a more collective manner, and could point out specific media preferences among their peers, as is evident from the next two basic themes.
Components and Evaluations

The basic themes Components and Evaluations represent the aspects of news content participants explained as valuable or important to them. In my thematic analysis, I used the basic theme Components to capture references participants made to what news features and types of content kids liked to see most, particularly in relation to online news. The basic theme Evaluations captures participants’ assessments of news content and references to the aspects or characteristics that were most important or attractive to them. Both of these basic themes are particularly relevant to the discussions I had with participants about the poster-sized “mock-ups” they produced as part of an activity where they were asked to redesign the TKN homepage as if it were for a special “by Grade Six, for Grade Six” edition of the website.

Discussions of particular news components mostly came up in response to my question, “Overall, how does your version of the TKN homepage compare with the TKN homepage we regularly see?” Many participants answered this question by emphasizing the interactive features they had added to the TKN homepage (see Figure 2). For example, Jacob discussed how he added blog content, a comment section, and a user polls to his TKN homepage design because “kids like sharing their opinions” (Jacob, 11, Pairs Interview 2). Additionally, some participants felt they would be targeting their Grade Six audience well by emphasizing TKN’s pedagogical aims and adding more educational features (see Figure 3). Some of the educational features suggested by participants were links to math websites, “Try This at Home” sections, and news comprehension games. These interactive and educational components were explained as crucial for capturing kids’ interest while they surfed the site for news.
Figure 3. Illustration of Interactive Features. This photo compilation illustrates some of the interactive features students added to their redesigned TKN homepages.

Figure 4. Illustration of Educational Features. This photo compilation illustrates some of the educational features students added to their redesigned TKN homepages.
Participants also provided several evaluations of their TKN homepage redesign. Often, these evaluations focused on the visual aspects or characteristics of news websites they liked best or felt were most important. In particular, participants focused heavily on their use of color and space in designing their “by kids, for kids” news product. For example, participants from two different girls’ groups explained how they decided to redesign the logo for TKN to make it more bright and colorful. This way, they explained, the site would attract more kids than it does with its current streamlined colour scheme of black, white, and red. Though I had designed the activity as more of a thinking exercise than an artistic one, most participants took the visual layout of their designs very seriously. This supports Thomson’s warning that as researchers using creative methods, we cannot ignore the aesthetic aspects of our work. “We cannot gloss over the reality that working with images can be important and enjoyable in its own right, and that the process of producing visual data may mean more to children than just the research and its outcomes,” (2008, p. 15). Indeed, participants in my project explicitly discussed the benefit of this approach in our interviews, as is demonstrated in my methodology chapter above.

However, the basic theme Evaluations also applies to judgments participants made about news at a more conceptual level in the interviews. These judgments often emerged as they discussed their own news preferences and routines. For instance, some participants critiqued the lack of context and detail they often noticed in mainstream news reporting.

Averie: If you could maybe, you know, meet with a journalist at the Toronto Star, or something like that, how would you, kind of, talk to them about news, and what you want to see in the news?

Caroline: I would probably, uhm, it seems like if there’s stories you’re following -- say there’s a (name of politician) story you’re following, ‘cuz I know I, I, I like to read (name politician) stories, but say, I’d want more information, ‘cuz there seems, like, if there’s a video that you’re watching, it’s good and stuff, but you don’t know all the details, like, what people said to that. You want ... like more about it, like you want…
Averie: A bit more explanation?
Caroline: yah. (Caroline, 11, Pairs Interview 5)

In summary, being part of the ‘kid audience’ was identified in the interviews as an influence on not only what kind of news stories participants were interested in, but also on how they preferred to have those stories delivered, and what kind of expectations they had when it came to the quality of news delivery. However, it was clear from our interviews that belonging to the ‘kid news audience’ also meant having to navigate and negotiate a confusing set of boundaries when it comes to accessing news, as I will examine below.

**Analyzing News Access**

The final organizing theme that I used to build my thematic network is Analyzing News Access. This theme captures participants’ discussions of the quality and quantity of their access to news. The theme is deeply connected to several other organizing themes, such as participants’ News Ecologies and their reflections on Kids as a News Audience. This thematic category is made up of two basic themes: **Exposure** and **Protectionism**. Together, they represent participants’ descriptions of where they have the most access to news, the factors that limit or restrict their interaction with news, and their feelings about these limits and restrictions. These themes are closely related to my analytical goal of connecting participants lived experiences as individuals to the larger social structure and cultural environment they inhabit. Many of the participants experienced a similar amount of encouragement from adults in their lives at home and at school to engage with news and current events. However, participants’ narratives about their access to news also revealed common experiences of regulation and uncertainty around the “appropriateness” of certain news topics. The connections between these narratives forced me to reflect on the larger
cultural institutions at work in children’s relationships with news, which I will discuss further in the next chapter.

**Exposure**

The basic theme Exposure captures references participants made to the settings in which they regularly come across or interact with news. Participants often discussed these settings in terms of the quality of access to news they allowed. For example, several participants alluded to their school as a site of particularly privileged access to news, especially due to the TKN program. Through this program students receive visits from a parent in the community who is also a journalist. Eli and Dawson described these visits as an exciting and fun opportunity that gave them and their classmates privileged access to news -- especially last year, when these visits were more frequent.

Eli: We knew everything that was going on, because she informed us about almost everything.

Dawson: Yah and everyone was always super excited for it.. [inaudible].

Eli: She gave us one news article from each section -- so from politics, entertainment, sports.. and it was really good, I think it’s, uh.. I think it should be mandatory for everybody to have a journalist in the class.

Dawson: ‘Cuz she, answered all the questions to anything you’d ask and.. at one, like, we, I remember we’d have it right before -- uhm, right after music, and we’d all be waiting for it -- for music -- to end so we could all run upstairs and we’d all try to get the best seat in front of the board. (Eli, 12, and Dawson, 11, Pairs Interview 1)

Their privileged experience with news in the classroom led some participants to make declarative statements about the importance of news and media literacy as curriculum components throughout our interviews. For instance, Mackenzie that she felt news should be a bigger part of the media literacy curriculum, and that Media Literacy, as a school subject, should be given as much time and attention as subjects such as Math are given.
Protectionism

In opposition to the privileged access to news participants described above, they also described many factors they perceived as barriers preventing them from interacting with news. Most of these had to do with adults’ efforts to protect them from being upset by shocking or disturbing news. Thus, I used the basic theme Protectionism to represent these references. Protectionism is deeply connected to the thematic category of News ecologies, mentioned above. Participants often described their experiences with protectionism or used protectionist language when they discussed the sources that made up their news environments. For instance, Eva described her getting news from the CBC Radio 1 in a way that made it seem like a special privilege, due to the rather grown up nature of the news content on the station.

Averie: When you listen to the radio with your mom, what kind of stations -- like, is it usually music (stations) or --

Eva: Uhm, no it’s, it’s, CBC, yah.. 99.1 (fm) or something like that. Uhm, and, yah, they’re not as kid-friendly as TKN, but, uh, I really like hearing about all the stuff and I like, like, I feel that, like, I should know it too. (Eva’s own emphasis, 11, Pairs Interview 4)

The basic theme Protectionism also captures many instances where participants used the explicit term “kid-friendly” to describe news content that was appropriate for their age group. During the interviews, I was surprised by how often this term was used, because it sounds more like the type of jargon one might hear adults using when they talk about children rather than a term that children would use to refer to themselves. In this way, when participants used the term, it had a distancing effect. Using this term made participants sound as if they were speaking from outside of themselves.

In addition, Protectionism also applies to moments during interviews where participants discussed site moderation and content censorship online. This was identified as a
sort of necessary evil to make sure that kids are protected from harmful or offensive content and behaviour online. For instance, when discussing their TKN homepage redesigns, some participants discussed the need to have a moderation system in place alongside the interactive features they added to TKN (such as live chat features or comment sections). It was surprising to me that participants brought up the need for these monitoring systems even in this hypothetical situation, which was meant to allow them imaginative freedom. The first time I came across this idea was in Jacob and Kieran’s interview.

Kieran: I would add a comment section, but that’s probably where some.. *playing* happens [smirks].

Averie: Oh yah? What kind of playing?

Kieran: Not-- Not playing. Like, on some comment sections on websites people are mean to each other.

Jacob: It’s true they’d probably have to have like a--


Jacob: moderator.

(Jacob, 11, and Kieran, 12, Pairs Interview 2, Keiran’s own emphasis)

In summary, participants discussed the online environment as a place of great opportunity for their increased interactivity with news, but one where their access is limited by age restrictions and regulated through the moderation of adults. However, surprisingly, several participants seemed to accept and tolerate rather than resent these restrictions.\(^{35}\) These are just a few examples of instances where participants offered descriptions or analyses of their own access to news as children in the Canadian context. As I will discuss in the next chapter,

\(^{35}\) In fact, recent research with pre-teen students in several different Canadian cities reflected this age groups’ welcoming of such restrictions due their fears that without such limits they might come across content that would make them feel uncomfortable (Steeves, 2014).
discourses around access and protectionism were often linked to participants’ desire for a news outlet they could claim as their own.

**Outliers**

In addition to those described above, there were three basic themes that seemed to be of equal fit for multiple thematic categories. Try as I might, I could not pick out an appropriate category for Genres, Examples, and Names. The basic theme **Genres** groups together various types of news that were explicitly mentioned by participants throughout our interviews, such as Sports and Politics but also categories like Foreign Language News. **Examples** groups together the most frequently mentioned and some of the most surprising references to events, issues, and stories participants made during our interviews. For instance, participants talked about the mobile app Flappy Bird, and how their friends and classmates were very interested in the news that this app was deleted from the mobile app store by its developer. In a more serious vein, participants also discussed the ongoing story about protests that overtook the Ukrainian capital Kiev in the early spring of 2014 as an example of “scary” news. Finally, in a similar manner to these examples, participants also referenced the **names** of certain people in the news when describing their definitions of news and relationships with it. Sometimes, as with the story of the prominent municipal politician embroiled in scandal, these names became genres or categories of news in themselves. Other names were mentioned only once, in reference to an individual that a certain participant found to be interesting and newsworthy.

Each of these basic themes seemed to fit equally well under the organizing themes of News Ecologies, Conceptualizations of News, Explaining News Engagement, and Kids as a News Audience. To some extent, this can be explained by the preliminary nature of these themes. Due to the qualitative, exploratory nature of this project and analysis, these
categories cannot be seen as definitive. Rather, they should be seen as emergent comprehension guides that I have identified and developed to help make sense of the data. However, the fact that the three basic themes above remain as outliers may also point to their usefulness as “nodes” that can show the interconnected nature of these thematic categories.

The references captured by the basic themes of Genres, Examples and Names, were utilized by participants to describe and explain their own news engagement (Explaining News Engagement), the types of news they encountered often in their immediate environment (News Ecologies), which types of news the ‘kid audience’ would most likely be interested in (Kids as a News Audience), and how different stories were delivered for different purposes (Conceptualizations of News). In some ways, Examples and Names might also fit equally well under the thematic category Analyzing News Exposure, because they capture some moments where participants discussed the kinds of news that would be problematic or inappropriate for kids to engage with due to its subject matter. This observation suggests the possibility for further research into how various news items, names, and genres operate as nodes between young people’s conceptions of news and their lived experiences with news as inhabitants of specific news ecologies.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I described a complex web of themes, characterizations, and discourses about news that I have identified as salient ideas from my interviews with participants. By explaining a set of five major (organizing) themes and the lower-level (basic) themes that contribute to them, I have attempted to provide a snapshot of a moving object -- the relationship between young people and news. The goal of my project is to contribute to the formation of a research paradigm that would be more amenable to the study of such elusive concepts as “youth”, “news” and “engagement” and would better account for
young people’s agency as participants in their relationships with news. This chapter supports that goal by offering an overview of how the young people who participated in my study took up and explained these concepts and how they characterized their own activity and interactions with news. In the next chapter, I will build on this overview to share my further analysis and theorizing around participants’ narratives about news and news engagement.
Chapter 6

Discussion Part I:
Definitions of and Encounters with News

In the previous chapter I provided a primary level of analysis that depicted participants’ relationships with news as a complex “web” of interrelated ideas, influences, and practices. In this chapter and the next I will build off the overview provided above in order to offer a rich and nuanced interpretation of these relationships. With this nuanced account, I aim to contribute to a research paradigm that can transcend notions of youth as “disengaged” and/or “disenfranchised” in their relationships with news and better understand their agency as active participants in those relationships.

In the following discussion I reflect on the data previously presented in relation to my first two research objectives. First, I explore the diverse ways in which participants expressed their own definitions of news throughout our research and discuss how their understandings of news reflect the modern, rapidly evolving media context they inhabit. Then, I explain the inferences I have made from participants’ descriptions of their encounters with news and connect these descriptions to two similar studies from different national contexts -- one in the U.S. and one in the Netherlands. As I discuss participants’ “news vocabularies” (Edgerly, 2012) and the nature of their “news ecologies”, my focus in this chapter falls more on the individual experiences of the children who participated in my study than on childhood as a phenomenon. This focus on children’s individual experiences reflects James, Jenks, and Prout’s concept of the socially constructed child (1998). I return to this model in order to study participants’ experiences with news in a grounded, contextually situated manner. From this lens, I aim to generate a better understanding of how participants’ lived experiences influence how they relate to news as a concept and a part of their culture.
I: How Do Young Participants Define “News” and Discuss Its Relevancy and Importance?

One of my primary goals in this project was to find out how the young people I engaged with in the project understood “news” and its role in their lives. Such information provides crucial context with which to reflect on how young people exercise agency in their relationships with news. How can researchers expect to accurately study young people’s news engagement without first building some understanding about what counts as news to their young participants? As I explored earlier in my review of the literature, “news” is a rather difficult concept to pin down, despite the way it is often discussed as a self-evident concept in public and political discourse.36

Subjectivity and the Complexity of News

Participants had just begun to tackle the ideas of “objectivity” and “subjectivity” in their language classes during the week in which I began observing their class for my project. It was interesting to watch as students’ understandings of these ideas developed through our class activities about news and its meaning. News as a subjective phenomenon was an important idea for students from the very beginning of our activities together. Participants seemed intrigued by the fact that “news” might mean different things to different people, though for some, this idea was confusing at first.

Throughout these activities, participants developed various “keywords” to help them explain and define “news” as a concept. Terms like “worldwide” and “big” arose consistently as students discussed their definitions of news during our interviews. This could be due to the similarity between students’ news environments, or it could be that their shared social

36 For further interrogation of how news is defined, and by whom, see Bettag (2000) and Ewart, Forde, Foxwell & Meadows (2005).
networks have shaped their understandings of news in similar ways (Edgerly, 2012, p. 172). However, certain students also came up with unique keywords that they clung to and championed as their own throughout the research. For example, on the very first day we brainstormed about news as a class, Jill added the word “inclusion” to our brainstorming web on the chalkboard. She also stressed “involvement” during our class discussions. A few weeks later, these keywords still resonated with her, as she explained during a group interview.

Jill (explaining her brainstorming collage about news): I just kinda put, like, ... what I thought news was. Like, uhm, I have a picture of books here, and I have a picture of the world, and I thought "involvement" was a lot about media and news.

Averie: Yah, tell me about that! I remember you talking about that.

Jill: Well I think it's kind of, like, everyone as one. That's kind of what it is. ... It's almost like a system that helps us communicate and, and understand what's happening everywhere else in the world. Uhm, so it's kind of being involved, so you don't feel totally separate, uhm, so we feel actually like one world not just, like, different parts - - different places. (Jill, 11, Group Interview 3)

Keywords such as “involvement” and “inclusion” can be explained as the building blocks of participants’ personal “news vocabularies” (Edgerly, 2012). Edgerly (2012) uses this concept to explain that news is an “open text”, which can be read and interpreted in multiple ways. She suggests, “living in the media world results in an acquired vocabulary about the news media (e.g., what is news, who is a journalist, what sources are credible, who can be trusted?), and this vocabulary shapes how we understand and talk about the news media,” (Edgerly, 2012, pp. 60 - 61). In other words, through our interactions with news, we acquire ways of defining it, and those ways of defining and talking about news also shape how we personally understand and interact with it.

This idea that one’s understanding of news shapes but is also shaped by one’s news vocabulary provides a concrete example of Hall’s process of encoding/decoding
(1980/2012). As I explain in my conceptual framework chapter, media scholars have studied this model for decades because it emphasizes how the audience can be considered both the receiver and the source of the media messages they encounter. Audience members actively produce meaning from the media messages they encounter, but those messages are already encoded with meanings from of the culture that surrounds the audience member, which they themselves have helped produce.

In this way, the concept of news vocabularies is also useful for refuting the notion that young people can ever be understood as wholly disengaged from news. On the contrary, this concept, in conjunction with Hall’s encoding/decoding model, suggests that young people are constantly engaged with news and its production through their roles as contributors to and consumers of the cultural sphere (the sphere that news comes from and represents). This is an important point in relation to the purpose of my study because it shifts the question from whether young people are engaged in news to how their engagement with news might shape their own understandings of news, and even impact the constitution of news itself. To summarize, my discussions with young participants revealed a wide range of subjective understandings about news as a concept. These understandings were expressed in the form of news vocabularies (Edgerly, 2012) that shape young people’s engagement with news, but are also shaped by it.

In our interviews participants seemed comfortable with the idea of news as a subjective concept -- an “open text”. This was evident from the way participants often referred to what news “can be” rather than what news “is”. As Meghan explained:

I find it really hard to define news, 'cuz Rebeca said it was new stuff but then, sometimes, uhm, this is kind of, like, weird, but uhm on, like, the radio they talk about death a lot, and uh, sometimes ... there was an article I saw and it was a couple that died, and it was, like, three years ago and now they're bringing it back and they're talking about it again. So, it doesn't always have to be new, and so like, there's always another side to what you say news is. (Meghan, 11, Group Interview 3)
With this statement, Meghan is explaining that there isn’t necessarily one “right” way to think about news. This openness to a diversity of definitions of news might be understood as an accurate reflection of the news and media environment Meghan and her classmates have grown up in. Since at least the advent of the Internet (but arguably dating back to the mid-90s when the three American 24-hour news networks felt the need to differentiate from each other) news coverage has been increasingly segmented to serve a wider array of interests (Edgerly, 2012, p. 9). This is apparent just from glancing at the wide range of news sections available on popular news websites like HuffingtonPost.ca, which covers everything from Canadian politics, to divorce, and the “weird news” beat. This has no doubt complicated, but perhaps also expanded, people’s understandings of what “counts” as news. Edgerly (2012) cites the advent of this type of “niche news” as one of the most important developments shaping news vocabularies in the modern context.

In sum, the young participants in this study defined news in an open and subjective manner and explained that different aspects of news might be relevant and important to different people. This willingness to explore the subjectivity and complexity of news should be taken as evidence of their situation in an increasingly personalized and diverse media landscape, which they help construct as active cultural producers. This has important implications for the study of young people’s news engagement. Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980/2012) helps make it clear that young people’s understandings of news are shaped by their interactions with it, but their interactions with news also shape the possible ways in which news can be understood. As active cultural contributors, young people are influenced by, but also influence news and its function in society.

I have entered into this discussion as a provocation to suggest that young people are always already actively engaged with news at the conceptual level. It highlights and connects
with approaches from the new sociology of children and childhood that assert children don’t just absorb cultures, they affect them by reproducing and reinterpreting them, as I will explain further in the next chapter. In addition, this discussion demonstrates that understanding young people’s relationships with news takes much more than a survey or set of interview questions that measures how many hours of news they consume per week. An evolving research paradigm for the study of young people’s news engagement must account for the complex and symbiotic nature of these relationships.

II: How and Where Do Young Canadian Participants Encounter News, in Comparison with Young People from Other Countries?

Consistent and up-to-date data on young people’s exposure to and engagement with news is hard to find in the Canadian context. Studies such as the 2007 Canada Online! Survey (Zamaria & Fletcher, 2008) survey and MediaSmarts’ ongoing Young Canadians in a Wired World project (Steeves, 2014) have provided researchers with useful data on young people’s exposure to the Internet and new digital technologies. However, this data does not provide a comprehensive picture of where and how young people encounter news in their everyday lives. As such, one of my primary goals in this study was to come to a better understanding of participants’ encounters with all kinds of news sources. To truly understand young people’s relationships with news one needs a clear sense of what young people’s engagement with news looks like and how they interact with news. Where do they come across news, and how often? How is news built into their daily routines? In this section, I will identify aspects of participants’ encounters and experiences with news that would be beneficial avenues for further exploration in the Canadian context, perhaps on a larger scale.
Surrounded by News

One important idea that emerged in my conversations with participants was the notion that, as young people in the urban Canadian context, they are constantly surrounded by news. They listen to the din of news headlines on TV from their living room as they get ready for school in the morning. They brush past newspapers bearing headlines about major political scandals as they walk down their block. They glimpse constant updates on screens in transit stations. They discuss the conflict in South Sudan in class. In fact, this idea of being surrounded by news could perhaps count doubly for the middle class young people who took part in this study, who have ample access to the Internet at home, take mobile devices with them to school, and benefit from an explicit focus on media literacy in their classroom.

Some participants felt that because they were constantly surrounded by news, they were bound to be informed whether they actively engaged with news or not. As Jacob explained:

Well, I think that, like, maybe kids don't seek out the news, so that's might-- might be why people don't, they don't think that they know the news, but, just by, like, their parents listening to the radio or reading the newspaper, then they're going to see that, or hear it, and they're still going to pick up on the news. (Jacob, 11, Pairs Interview 2)

Costera Meijer made a similar conclusion about the youth who participated in her large-scale study in the Netherlands. She explains that because they have been inundated with texts and images throughout their lives in a way that older viewers never were, “many youngsters will pick up a lot of information without watching a specific program attentively” (Costera Meijer, 2007, p. 103).

Costera Meijer notes that this ability is evident from young people’s preference for multi-tasking with media -- using and monitoring several media sources at the same time. She argues that, though some suggest this trend is an indication of the deficit in younger audiences’ attention spans, or of their fickle nature, “multitasking” should be seen as a result
of younger generations’ commitment to the public sphere. For Costera Meijer, a young person texting their friends while watching TV and scanning news online is a reflection of that young person’s eagerness to constantly know what is going on. This perspective was supported by the discussions I had with participants in my study who emphasized that they and their peers use news to stay connected and because they “don’t want to be in the dark” (Jacob, 11, Pairs interview 2).

This emphasis suggests the importance of exploring young people’s encounters with news from their own perspectives. To the untrained eye, behaviours that might seem to support the narrative of disengagement surrounding young people’s relationships with news might actually be evidence of a young person’s heightened desire to stay connected with their world. Overall, participants’ references to growing up surrounded by news suggest the need for further critical examination of what researchers mean by “engagement”. For instance, does more time spent engaging with news create a deeper understanding of current events and political issues? Recent evidence suggests that this is not necessarily the case (see Banaji & Cammaerts, 2014).

**Human Connections to News**

The explosion of new media technology in the past two decades has not only meant that many Canadian children and teenagers have grown up “surrounded” by news, but also that they have grown up in constant contact with friends and family members. For example, the number of pre-teen students in Mr. Tilly’s classroom with a mobile phone (most had smartphones, many had iPhones) was so great that Mr. Tilly created the “hotel-o-phone” to manage the use of these devices in class. The “hotel-o-phone” was a hanging organizer at the back of the classroom that had a slot for each student’s phone or mobile device. These were
generally off limits unless Mr. Tilly allowed for the integration of the devices for accessing the Internet during a certain activity.

Costera Meijer’s Dutch participants explained their constant connectivity to friends and family as a substitute for direct and personal interactions with news. She explains, “because young people are almost permanently in contact with their peers, siblings or parents through various new means of communication, they feel no need to watch the news all the time. They will soon be informed about important news anyway” (2007, p.105). As noted in the previous chapter, participants in my study also cited their real life social networks -- their connections with parents and close friends -- as among their top sources for news. But though some participants felt these human sources exposed them to enough news that they didn’t have to seek it out on their own, more often, they described human connections such as parents or friends as influential motivators for their own direct engagement with news. For example, Eli described how he is motivated to look for certain types of news that he can use for “bonding” with his dad.

My parents aren't the biggest ones into politics or anything that they want to really hear about all the time. So when I come across something I can relate to with my dad -- 'cuz he likes technology, same as me, sports, anything like that -- then I will get interested in it, because we can talk about it, we can discuss it, and there's different things we can do.. it sort of just, I don't know, we bond over that sometimes. (Eli, 12, Pairs Interview 1)

Similarly, Marchi (2012) explains how trusted adults can be seen as news “filters” or “translators” in young people’s lives. They turn to these adults to help them make sense of the world of “information overload” they inhabit by pointing out important stories and explaining the relevance of various news items (Marchi, 2012, p. 251 - 252). This was also

37 For example, when I asked Rebeca’s group about how they viewed their relationships with news, she replied (somewhat flippantly) “It’s called a relationship with my mother” (Rebeca, 11, Group Interview 3).
evident in my own study. For instance, Meghan described her dad as a news translator in her life, and explained how they often listened to news on the radio together on the way to school in the car. “If I would hear an article that I don't really understand, I would just, like we would, turn it off, and I would ask my dad questions about, like, what it was about, and, uhm, he would try, his best to explain it to me in, like, a way that I can comprehend” (Meghan, 11, Group Interview 3).

Thus, my interview data confirms other scholars’ (Costera Meijer, 2007; Marchi, 2012) suggestions that young people’s personal relationships are vital to their engagement with news. Whether as primary sources of news, as motivators for exploring news further, or as “translators” of news they encounter or experience elsewhere, the participants in my study relied on parents and family members (and to some extent, their friends) to help them connect with news on a regular basis. This is important because such personal relationships are usually not considered “news sources” in the traditional sense of the term, and are therefore often overlooked in large-scale studies that measure and evaluate young people’s news engagement.

Turning to TKN

Just as young people often turn to their parents as news “filters” or “translators”, participants in my study also described the website TeachingKidsNews.com (TKN) as a useful resource when they couldn’t fully understand a story they came across elsewhere. As mentioned in the previous chapter, TKN is meant to be a curriculum resource for teachers, not an all-encompassing news source for kids. However, my examination suggests several participants have built a reliance on the site after only one or two years38 of exposure to it.

38 Some students had been exposed to the site by teachers in previous years.
TKN was seen as a useful comprehension supplement, fulfilling a similar role in participants’ news ecologies to that of a trusted adult (Marchi, 2012).

This points not only to the strengths of TKN as a learning resource, but also to the particular strategies participants had developed for engaging with news as pre-teens. Participants described combining TKN with “regular” news sources (mainly websites) in order to satisfy their news appetite. They sought out “regular news” for more frequent and broad news coverage than TKN could provide, but supplemented these websites with TKN to support their desire for a deeper, stronger understanding of major news stories. This strategy of “clarifying” their understandings of mainstream news via TKN is an important addition to news engagement behaviours like “scanning”, “sharing”, and “Googling”, mentioned in the previous chapter.

This range of practices again reinforces my argument for the need for a research paradigm that is not so much focused on whether young people are engaged with news, but how. The latter mode of inquiry is, I argue, more productive and necessary in light of the rapidly evolving media context young people inhabit. For example, knowing how these young participants are using TKN to supplement their interaction with mainstream news helped me discover that they lacked a news outlet that they felt could fully meet their needs; a point I will return to in the next chapter.

News, Social Networking, and Interactivity

Recent studies with teens and young adults have shown that young people are increasingly interacting with news via social networking platforms online, such as Twitter or Facebook (MacArthur Research Network on Youth & Participatory Politics, 2012; Greenhow & Reifman, 2009; Huang, 2009). Marchi (2012) explains that her participants used online social networks to connect with news via friends and family in much the same way as they
pursued these connections in their offline interactions -- as “filters” bringing various stories to their attention and helping them understand their relevance.³⁹ For the American teens in her study, social networking sites were valuable because they allow users to stay connected and up to date, while also allowing them to contribute their thoughts and opinions to ongoing conversations about news. The teens also valued the sense of immediacy that came with interacting with news in real-time via these platforms (Marchi, 2009, p. 252).

For the pre-teen participants in my study, these social networks and other social media were not top of mind when they thought about news.⁴⁰ As Eli explained:

> We are a younger group, it's not like everybody has Facebook, I know there's a few people, and we're not technically allowed to at this age, but it's not like we have it all. Like, only a few of us have Twitter, only a few of us have Facebook, and most of us don't even have that. (Eli, 11, Pairs Interview 1)

However, while these pre-teens did not utilize online social networks in the same way or to the same extent as Marchi’s teen participants, I argue that they have developed the same appreciation for connectivity and immediacy in their relationships with news. These values help to explain a puzzling design choice most participants made when they were invited to redesign the TKN homepage for a Grade Six audience for our final in-class activity.

All but one of the students’ TKN homepage designs included links to major social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, despite the fact that very few of these students were

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³⁹ Curiously, these are the same benefits participants in my study described getting from TKN, as is evident in the previous section. By making this comparison, I am not suggesting that TKN has simply taken the place of online social networks for these pre-teens, but I am suggesting that it provides a similar supplemental function to “regular news” content.

⁴⁰ Although participants did not identify social media platforms as being “for news”, several participants described getting news from Instagram, the popular image-sharing mobile app for iPhone and Android. For instance, Dawson described following Nike to get sports news, and Rebeca and several other participants described accessing the schedule for the 2014 Winter Olympics on Instagram. Instagram was seen as the defining social networking platform for this group of participants, and was used widely, even though its terms and conditions also state that one must be over 13 to use the app. In addition to Instagram, Eli described using the news aggregator app Digg to access sports news, and Wes described following users on Youtube as a potential way to get news.
actually allowed to use these online social networks. When participants discussed this design decision in more detail, most explained that these links would take a user to TKN’s own social media pages, rather than allow users to share TKN stories on their own social media pages. By including links to TKN’s social media pages, students were inviting their imaginary users to “follow” TKN, to “stay in touch” with the TKN staff, and to ask them questions. These links were included to offer users a wider range of ways to stay connected to news through TKN and a more personal, interactive news experience.

I interpreted the presence of these links in much the same way as I interpreted the presence of comment sections, blogs or polls on students’ homepage redesigns. I took them as evidence of participants’ desire for more opportunities to interact with news and make their voices and opinions heard as part of the experience of engaging with news (Carter et al, 2009; Costera Meijer, 2007). As I note in the previous chapter, participants described an affinity for interactive features as one of the defining attitudes of “kids as a news audience”.

In the sections above, I have outlined the some of the key takeaway points that illustrate how and where the young people who participated in my study encountered news in their daily lives. I learned that these particular pre-teen Canadians are surrounded by news on a regular basis. They often pick up on news unintentionally, but this doesn’t mean they aren’t interested in engaging with it directly. I also learned that participants follow up on the news they hear with human connections like friends and parents and that, vice versa, their human connections often act as motivators for further direct engagement with news. The value of TKN as a news source was also clear from my conversations with participants. Several students positioned TKN as a comprehension aide, suggesting “clarifying” as a particular strategy necessary for pre-teens’ engagement with news. Finally, even though participants did not see online social networking sites and other social media as part of their relationships
with news currently, it became clear from our discussions that they greatly valued the kind of
constant connectivity and interactivity that such platforms allow.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined my interpretations of the interview data in connection
with my first two research objectives: exploring young people’s definitions of news and
examining how and where they encounter news in their daily lives. These objectives required
an examination that focused more on participants’ individual lived experiences and studied
their relationships with news at a more local level. For this examination, I drew from James,
Jenks and Prout’s (1998) model of the socially constructed child to try and understand how
participants’ lived experiences may have influenced how they relate to news as a concept and
a part of their culture. In the following chapter, I will focus on my third research objective,
discovering the knowledge and language participants used to describe their relationships with
news. In this discussion, I will build upward from participants’ individual experiences and
reflect on what they can tell us about the way “youth”, “news”, and “engagement” are
currently understood in Canadian society.
Chapter 7

Discussion Part II:

Discursive Themes and the Operation of News

In exploring my first two research objectives, I was able to gain a better sense of the complex and subjective manner in which young participants understood news and the spaces and sources that are meaningful to their relationships with news in the modern context. This examination offers a situated understanding of the news environment the participants in my study inhabit. However, this information on its own is not enough. When it comes to understanding young people’s relationships with news, one must consider not only how (or whether) young people conceive of and exercise this relationship, but also how they represent it. In other words, how do they describe the role of news in their lives, and what do those descriptions suggest about the way “youth”, “news” and “engagement” are currently constructed and circulated in public discourse?

Whereas the previous chapter focused more on children’s individual experiences, reflecting James, Jenks, and Prout’s (1998) model of the socially constructed child, this chapter will focus more on childhood as a social structure. The following discussion is more closely related to the authors’ model of the social structural child, as it attempts to understand the collective experience of being a Canadian pre-teen in the rapidly evolving media context. In this chapter, I introduce and explore a series of discursive themes that emerged from my thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) of the interviews I conducted with participants. From this analysis, four major discursive themes emerged: criticism, social inclusion, “kid-friendly” content, and protectionism. In the following discussion, I suggest that these discursive themes are not only meaningful illustrations of how the young participants in my study understood and related to news, but also of the larger cultural forces
that have impacted how we, as a society, think about news and understand children as news users.

III: What Types of Knowledge and Language Do Young Participants Draw on to Describe Their Relationships with News?

People don’t always think in straight lines, much less speak in them. We mumble; we equivocate; we contradict ourselves. Talk is an inherently ‘slippery’ medium (Buckingham, 2000, p. 63), which makes it an extremely difficult object for analysis. However, when held at a critical distance, talk can help illuminate issues and ideas that would be impossible to glean from action alone. This is because the mobilization of language— the very act of speaking -- is an inherently social act. In the following sections, I explore participants’ self-reflexive talk about their relationships and examine how this talk is shaped and/or constrained by various larger discourses and social norms.

Media Literate Criticism

A major discursive theme that arose from my interviews with participants revolved around the subtleties in participants’ negative characterizations of news. Though, as previously mentioned, most conversations about news in the interviews were characterized by a positive tone, it did not come as a surprise to me that some participants took our conversations to an overtly negative or irreverent place. To some extent, this is an understandable product of the interview context. My invitation for students to participate in a research interview about their thoughts and feelings about news perhaps implied an invitation for some amount of critique (e.g., Buckingham, 2000, p. 89). However, over the course of the interviews, I observed participants employing critique and criticism in strategic ways, which suggested that this negative discourse was not simply due to the performativity of the interview setting.
Before discussing the negative discourse at work in some of my interviews, it is important to note the difference between cynicism and criticism. Buckingham (2000) emphasizes that these are two very different strategies, which people used to claim very different social positions. Cynicism, Buckingham writes, is a more distancing position than criticism. It implies a “wholesale rejection of the text”, which is often used to justify one’s degree of disengagement, from others or from the political sphere at large (Buckingham, 2000, p. 216-17). Criticism, (as in the approach of a literary critic) on the other hand, implies a belief in the reality that a text represents. When one offers a criticism, one implicitly acknowledges that action should be taken to change or intervene in how a text is structured and/or represented (Buckingham, 2000, p. 217). Thus, critics can be seen as inherently invested or engaged in the object of their criticism.

Very few of participants in my study displayed a cynical attitude toward news. While several participants noted that news often deals with things that are uninteresting or irrelevant to them and their age group, most Upheld its importance and suggested types of news that interested them or engaged them, at least sometimes. The comments from Tessa below are among the only comments from participants that could perhaps be viewed as cynical -- as “wholesale rejections” of news, perhaps meant to sanction her own disengagement from it (Buckingham, 2000, p. 216-17).

[When asked how she would define news, personally]:

Tessa: Mm, "tragic." Yup.

Averie: “Tragic”?

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41 This lack of cynicism could be partially explained by the fact that the pair and group interviews were carried out after participants and I had engaged in several activities exploring news and what meaning it might have in their lives. To simply reject news in our culminating interviews might have seemed a rejection of the project itself, for which these students were too well mannered.
Tessa: Yah, ’cuz they, they really talk a lot about, uhm, people dying, like, a lot, and murders and all this kinda stuff, like bank robbings, so, yah, it's more tragic. And.. the only where you see most people smiling is on the advertisements they show. Yah, so [giggles].

[When asked if she thought there was any truth to research that claims kids are no longer interested in following news]:

Tessa: We're younger so we don't really have a lot of worries like adults do, and, I guess news is kind of boring for us. They’re just sitting there, they’re talking about uhm, the weather and other stuff where kids could be watching, like, their favourite TV shows... uhm, yah. Like they watch some things like "Modern Family" maybe, that, that kind of.. lets them laugh. ... Uhm, where news is just kind of, for us right now it's a little bit boring. (Tessa, 11, Pairs Interview 5).

Even these statements don’t seem to provide thorough evidence of the kind of ‘cynical chic’ (Eliasoph, 1990) attitude Buckingham detected among some of his participants. Both statements imply Tessa’s distance from, and perhaps indifference to, events in the news. However, neither statement suggests that Tessa feels ignorant or powerless when it comes to news, which Eliasoph (1990) suggests is usually the impetus for cynical statements. In the case of the latter statement, Tessa’s response seems more pragmatic than cynical -- she even uses the qualifier “for us right now” at the end, implying the likelihood of future engagement with news.

In contrast, a critical stance was far more common among participants as they discussed their thoughts and feelings about news. For instance, several participants offered criticisms of mainstream news agendas, especially their focus on topics like politics and the economy, which participants deemed boring and irrelevant to kids. In addition, one comment from Meghan (see page 67) seemed to imply a critique of journalistic practice, touching on the phenomenon referred to in media circles as “pack journalism”. Some participants also offered criticisms of news form and presentation. For instance, Emilia insisted that if
journalists knew more kids were watching news, they would make significant changes in their delivery.

Emilia: It might change, like, on the radio, you know how there's, like, sometimes there's those long things where there's, like, this deep voice and they always talk like really, kinda like either fast or like, really strange? I think that maybe they would change that just because if kids are listening its kind of like,

Eva: "What's going on?!" [smirks]

Emilia: [smirks] it's not as easy to, like, listen to. (Emilia, 11, and Eva, 11, Pairs Interview 4)

What might account for participants’ preference for the discursive strategy of criticism? Why do they lack the cynical outlook towards news that so many have attributed to today’s youth? Buckingham interprets this as an issue of class identity. In his comparative study, he notes that it was mainly middle-class, well-educated participants who tended to employ the discourse of a literary critic instead of a disengaged cynic. He explains, “This critical stance is thus not so much a matter of the resentment of the powerless, ... On the contrary, it would appear to represent a typically ‘educated’ discourse about the media” (92).

The same might be said for the participants in my study. It is likely that these young people would want to highlight or emphasize their experience and specialized knowledge of news by taking up the role of the media critic in the interviews because, as was discussed by Eli and Dawson in the first pair interview, this group of participants has “grown up with news.” In particular, these students have regularly had their news consumption reinforced and reflected back to them in their classroom curriculum through the TKN program. TKN lessons sometimes emphasize critical thinking through the “curriculum connections” activities Mr. Tilly suggests at the end of every article on the website. For instance, past curriculum connection activities have encouraged students to re-read through articles to identify potential evidence of the authors’ biases. In sum, it is likely that the critical media literacy training these students have received with news in the classroom contributed to the
presence of a discourse of media literate criticism in their discussions of news and news content throughout our interviews.

While this type of criticism was not overly surprising to me, coming from this particular group of students, I was surprised by how particular students in the group extended this critical stance by placing judgment on other kids for their lack of understanding about and/or lack of engagement with news. As Buckingham notes, in taking up the role of the ‘media critic’ participants often implicitly construct an “other” against which to compare themselves. In the case of his participants, this took the form of “the mass audience of viewers who are gullible enough to be influenced by what they watch” (2000, p. 89; Sugarman, 2007). In my study I observed some participants constructing an “other” out of the mass audience of kids their own age, whom they positioned as too apathetic or self-centred to be interested in news. The number of participants who referred to “other” kids in this way was very small, but the presence of this discursive strategy was still significant because of its connection to the narrative of disengagement that partially inspired my study.

These comments usually arose as gut reactions. For example, when I asked Malia and her group members about whether they thought researchers (see Poindexter, 2012) were justified in claiming that young people today are no longer interested in news, Malia was quick to respond.

Maybe kids, uhm, find out some of their news, like, from their friends or something, when they're talking about it, but I don't think they really care, 'cuz like, they probably just care about, like, playing video games or something. Like, I'm not judging, I'm just, like, saying. (Malia’s emphasis, 11, Group Interview 3)

However, Malia did not feel this characterization applied to her, personally.

Malia: I'd rather go to news than play games, just 'cuz, well, like.. just 'cuz I wanna learn more. 'Cuz games -- okay, you--

Faith: it's a better use of your time?
Malia: Yah! Like, okay you learn how to play a game, that's great, then you know how to play at different levels. But, news, like, once you know it, you know, like, the, the, the issue, or something, like, you know and you can tell other people. (Malia and Faith, 11, Group Interview 3)

Malia later equivocated around this response, agreeing with Faith’s suggestion that kids do care about news, they just don’t know that they care, or they don’t count the news they engage with as “news”. However, this gut reaction, where Malia painted her own engagement with news in stark contrast to the disengagement of most kids was significant as it was echoed (albeit less explicitly) in statements from a few other participants as well.

This critical stance toward other young people may be another example of participants using criticism to distance themselves from the mass audience of “other” kids in order to highlight or accentuate their own engagement with and investment in news. By constructing a general kid audience and using it as an “other” against which to compare themselves, participants were able to highlight their own engagement with news, casting themselves in the role of the responsible or “active citizen” (Kennelly & Llewellyn, 2011). However, it should be noted that Malia and her classmates did not simply pull this discourse out of thin air. Rather, these statements can be taken as evidence that, even as children are increasingly recognized and applauded as agents of social change, as I will explore below, this society still has a difficult time recognizing and understanding children and young people as news audiences (Mendes, Carter, & Messenger Davies, 2010). This is potentially harmful, for, as Eli explained, this attitude may also make it harder for young people to recognize themselves as a news audience.

Well I think if people were to stop pushing and saying that kids don't care about news maybe kids would have a -- like, wouldn't think that, because, if everyone (would) go and read and see "kids don't like news" then maybe they'll be like, "Okay, if people are saying that, then I won't like it either." So, it, it's also the influence that kids have on what they see and what they read and what they hear. (Eli, 12, Pairs Interview 1)
Of course, children are not bound to reproduce such discourses (and indeed, many participants in my study did not). However, it is important to question how this type of critical stance has become so readily available, at least to certain young people.

**News and Social Inclusion**

Another major discursive theme that arose from my interviews with participants was the idea of news as a tool for facilitating social inclusion. This theme was linked to explanations for why people in general engage with news, but also to participants’ explanations of their engagement with news as pre-teens. Importantly, participants touched on news and social inclusion at two different levels: social inclusion in society at large, and social inclusion among one’s peers.

Though participants did not explicitly use terms such as “citizenship” and “democracy” as they discussed news and its purpose, several participants described how news was meant to connect people to their society and to inspire social action. It was usually girls who discussed this connection between news and civic engagement (see Carter et al, 2009). For instance, Faith discussed how news “should make you want to do something about it.” In addition, Emilia referenced this discourse around news and social change when discussing her recommendations for changes to TKN.

Uhm, I think that, like, like, on TKN ... most of the stories are about good things that are happening, and, like, about how, ... people that are, like, making a difference, and doing really good things. But I think it's also kind of important to see, like, the other side of things that are, like, more upsetting, because it would kinda show about how, like, we need to help them. ... So if we don't show that, then, it's.. kind of like, just knowing about the things that are good happening, but not really doing anything about it because it's already good. (Emilia, 11, Pairs Interview 4)

Caroline echoed this sentiment.

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42 However, certain comments from boys in my study could be evidence of this discourse as well, such as Owen’s discussion of how he appreciated news coverage of Edward Snowden, who leaked NSA documents about the U.S. government’s surveillance program, as someone who stood up for “what is right.”
I remember, like, I've heard, like, there's been speeches, and I've heard so many things, some teachers saying, like "Kids can make a difference, kids can do all these things." But, if you don't know what you're trying to make a difference on --and that's kind of what news tells you about, what's going on around the world and what you can help -- then, it doesn't really work. (Caroline, 11, Pairs Interview 5)

This discourse of news as a tool for social action echoes Mr. Tilly’s emphasis on empowering students for social action in our interview about TKN and his teaching approach. Mr. Tilly said he feels that news has lost its ability to empower -- that mainstream news practitioners are more concerned with producing a continuous flow of content than helping people engage with what’s going on around them. “The purpose of news right now I think is to fill ears, but what the news is capable of is quite different,” he offered.43 Mr. Tilly explained that he feels it is the job of schools and educators to mobilize young people’s concerns into social action.

The boys and girls, if they read an article that upsets them, and you say to them, “Well, what can we do to make it better?” they're gonna come up with solutions. And I guess, in a way, you wanna be a forum for that, because I do believe very strongly that what's required, and what's needed is producing students -- or, or helping individuals become problem solvers. And becoming problem solvers means knowing what the issues are, in detail, and then looking back and seeing what's worked and what hasn't, and then taking strides forward. (Jonathan Tilly, 33, Teacher Interview)

What sense can be made of this discourse then? Are students merely mimicking the altruistic outlook of their teacher, with whom they have built a close and important relationship around news? This could be, but I would argue their emphasis on mobilizing news as a tool for social action can also be attributed to larger forces, such as the discourse of active citizenship (Kennelly & Llewellyn, 2011) that they have grown up with as urban, middle-class Canadians. In my thematic analysis of the interview data, I noticed that several students seemed to connect news engagement to their identity as socially involved

43 However, Mr. Tilly also acknowledged that encouraging news users to take specific social action is often outside the boundaries of what news practitioners can achieve while still maintaining their objectivity.
students. This was perhaps most evident in the second group interview. This group, by
coincidence, included three friends who had taken on a fundraising project for the World
Wildlife Federation (WWF) together in grade five. As Malia, Faith, and Joanna described
their project, they stressed that this was their own initiative -- it had not been handed down to
them from a teacher.

These students have grown up in an era where such socially involved identities have
become “cool”. They live and attend school in the city that houses one of the world’s largest
youth action organizations -- Free the Children, and some of their parents work for major
Canadian non-profit organizations such as Plan Canada. In addition, their generation has
become known as a socially conscious marketing demographic. For example, Free the
Children’s sister organization, Me to We, recently launched a line of eco-friendly school
supplies for fall 2014 meant to appeal directly to this age group (and other school-aged kids).
With the purchase of every item in this line of products, Me to We will send a gift to a child
in the developing world (Staples Canada, 2014). This kind of campaign is likely to attract
many young people like the participants in my study, who have grown up surrounded by
encouragement to “be the change they wish to see in the world”.

The fact that participants emphasized this discourse around social action and
inclusion in our conversations about news can also be linked to their desire to be involved
and acknowledged in their society. As Eva explained, the very fact that kids are “in the
world” alongside adults should be reason enough for the inclusion of their voices and views
in matters of public importance, such as those that are covered by mainstream news media.
For example, this desire for social inclusion on a broader, societal level may be one reason
why she and her classmates showed such an obsession with news coverage about a prominent
municipal politician and his admitted substance abuse while in office.
Uhm, well I think a lot of the kids think it's a big deal because, you know, (he’s an), uhm, (a leader), and uhm, like, I guess they kind of feel involved in it. Like, we kind of feel involved in it, because it's kind of like our first, ... thing that we, I dunno, kind of feel, like, feel involved in and feel, like, grown up. (Eva’s emphasis, 11, Pairs Interview 4)

This desire to feel involved in what is going on in one’s society was also expressed by children and teens interviewed as part of a study on the BBC kid’s news program *Newsround* (Carter et al, 2009). In their research report, the authors emphasize that children and young people begin developing an interest in important social issues at an early age, and thus, age alone should not be considered a useful indicator of whether one is capable of self-determination (Carter et al, 2009, p. 27). This conclusion reflects my own theoretical assertion, outlined in chapter three, that children are social beings and that childhood is part of, not prior to, society. Like many researchers working in childhood studies, I consider the right to communicate one’s thoughts and opinions and to have them taken seriously to be an essential right of the child (e.g. Hamelink, 2008).

However, not all participants touched on this discourse of social involvement and inclusion at a broad, societal level. Instead, many participants referred to news as a tool for social inclusion on an everyday relational level among friends and close family-members. As Hugo, Owen, and Brendon explained, news is especially useful for keeping up with friends.

Hugo: I think you might be.. felt left out if, one day you went to school and your friends were talking about something that happened in the news, and then you wouldn't know what they were talking about.

Owen: Or yah if there was like a hockey game, like if there's a hockey game [mumbles]

Brendon: Yah, you would feel left out 'cuz everybody watched the hockey game and if you didn't know what the score was or you didn't know what happened in that game -- who won and who lost -- you, you'd feel left out. (Hugo, 11, Owen, 12, and Brendon, 12, Group Interview 1)

Words like “lonely” and “left out” suggest how important it is for these school-aged to feel included among their peers. The following quote from Malia emphasizes this
importance participants placed on “belonging”. She describes news as a tool that could help someone enter a “group”.

Like, let's just say we're a group, and we're talking about something that happened on the news, and you, are just like there watching us, and you don't know what happened because you think news isn't cool. So, you're, like, left out, and, we're like all, like, we're talking about it, and poor you are just, like, standing there, not knowing anything. And then you decide -- and then you come up to us, and we're like, “News actually is cool,” and then, and then, “Cuz you learn, like, a lot of stuff, and then you can be incorporated in this group.” (Malia, 11, Group Interview 2)

This and other similar statements show how the discourse of news as a tool for social inclusion also operated at a more interactional level in participants’ dialogue. It seems to be tied to social mobility and young people’s anxieties around “fitting in”. At this level, news is something that gets swapped in the schoolyard and giggled about in groups. Friends keep one another up-to-date, but also expect each other to stay current on news pertaining to their common interests.\(^{44}\) Whereas the previously discussed emphasis on news as a tool for social action helped participants to highlight their individual identities as socially aware students, this latter emphasis from participants on news and social inclusion situates participants more collectively and highlights their shared concerns about “belonging” and “fitting in” at school. Thus, my data show that news is a valuable tool for participants at both the broader, societal level and the more interactional, everyday level.

Here, it is important to note that researchers often overlook the latter sphere. As Costera Meijer writes, “a society in which communication has an overriding significance needs to reflect on the dominance of its autonomous view of human identity.” This view, she argues, has lead news practitioners to automatically subordinate news coverage of matters of

\(^{44}\) As has previously been discussed, news also facilitates social inclusion within families. Several participants described news as useful for starting conversations with parents and other family members, perhaps as a tool for entering “adult” conversations they may not have been included in otherwise.
the so-called ‘private sphere’ such as relationships, friendship, and respect. Ultimately, the data examined above suggest that this subordination of news as a personal, relational phenomenon is becoming increasingly less appropriate (Costera Meijer, 2007, p. 113), especially if news organizations mean to engage and serve today’s utterly “connected” children and youth. Participants in my study perceived news as a primarily social relational phenomenon, which is captured elegantly by Eva’s personal definition of news as a “social way to share new ideas” (Eva, 11). As I will discuss further at the end of this chapter, further research is needed to examine how young people actively utilize news in this everyday, relational manner.

“Kid-Friendly” News and the Need for Room to Grow

A major finding of this project is that the pre-teen years are a particularly difficult period for young people’s relationships with news. In this period, young people struggle between many competing forces: their curiosity and desire to access and engage with more “mature” news, their parents’ restrictions around what news is ‘appropriate’, social norms about what “kid’s interests” are, age-restrictions on the use of various media (such as Facebook’s policy of prohibiting users under 13) and their own fears about the unknown, ‘adult’ world. These complications became apparent during my first round of interviews with participants in pairs. Specifically, there arose an interesting contradiction between (and within) interviews about the merits of “kid-friendly” news coverage.

Participants could easily point out categories of news that they considered kid-friendly; news that they felt kids like them would be interested in. These included news stories about movies, video games, sports, and funny or viral videos such as Ylvis’ popular “What Does the Fox Say?” Conversely, participants also offered strong statements about the kind of news that was not interesting to them or their friends, such as economics and business
news. Political news was also often placed in this category, unless participants felt the story had a direct impact on them. However, as participants went into more detail about specific news stories and explained their personal news preferences further, the distinctions between “kids” topics and other news content became increasingly blurred.

For instance, at one point in our hour-long conversation, Milo offered the following unprovoked statement: “Well, I just thought of this on the top of my head; if Teaching Kids News is like a "kids news" (website) why do they have, like, so many politics topics?” This sparked a conversation between Milo and his partner Wes in which Wes suggested that TKN should strive to be more in touch with what kinds of news kids actually care about, to avoid their content going over kids’ heads. This conversation was surprising because it contradicted the pair’s characterization of kids’ news interests throughout their conversation as a whole. For example, earlier in the conversation, Milo had actually explained how kids his age and just a bit older were becoming more interested in politics and less interested in “silly” stories. In addition, near the end of the interview, Milo asserted that, for him personally, all news is important.

I still listen, I still, like, uhm, listen to all news, and uh, 'cuz I think it's -- any, anything's important. 'Cuz, in, in, let's say for the Ukrainian -- the Ukraine's president resigns. Let's say (in) Canada, 2,000 people react. But in Ukraine, 2,000,000 people are going to react to that. (Milo, 11, Pairs Interview 3)

As I’ve stated above, these kinds of contradictions are to be expected when using interview methods. This is especially true when working with young people in the school setting, who may be more eager to position themselves in the “correct” way through their talk. However, I suggest that in this case, the contradiction between participants’ expressed desire for more kid-friendly content and their expressed growing interest in more “mature” news is evidence of the particular complexities pre-teens must navigate in their relationships with news. Perhaps because of these complexities, some participants felt that their news
interests were not being reflected on the existing Canadian media platforms that deliver content for kids.

Additionally, several participants emphasized the need for a space for interaction with news that would help them “get used to” more mature news content. Emilia was particularly emphatic about the need for kids her age to be exposed to more hard-hitting news. She explained that mainstream news practitioners should not soften their news agendas in order to attract younger audiences.

Because then, we're not hearing most of the news. We're just hearing, like, things that would be, like, appropriate, and "kid-friendly" and nothing about people getting hurt and then we wouldn't know that (stuff). And then, when we're older, and we hear different news, then it will feel really strange! (Emilia, 11, Pairs Interview 4)

In addition, Wes discussed how TKN could become a space that facilitated pre-teens’ habituation to more mature news as he discussed his redesigned TKN homepage for the Grade Six audience.

Wes: Two of (my stories) are about, like, someone getting.. like, alcohol and stuff like that, and there's one that's about, like ... sports.

Averie: Okay, yah. So yours are a bit more--

Wes: --*mature*. It's a bit more mature.

Milo: Well, mine are kind of, mature and not, because I have two sports ones, but most kids tend to play sports, nowadays, and can relate to sports like that..

Wes: But like, for the grade -- like, [to Averie] as you said, try to make it for, like, how you think Grade Sixes would, kinda, take it. And, like, since we're getting more mature going into grade seven, I think, like, it would be nice if I added those so that you start to get more mature over the years.

Averie: Right.

Wes: And then you get used to it. (Wes, 11, and Milo, 11, Wes’s emphasis, Pairs Interview 3)

Carter and her colleagues received similar responses in a recent study on the BBC children’s news program Newsround in the UK (2009). In their study, participants between 12 and 15
years old described how they had outgrown *Newsround*, but weren’t quite ready to consume “adult” news exclusively (Carter et al, 2009, p. 25). This led the study’s authors to suggest the need for teen news programming in the UK:

> If they are not provided with a news service that focuses exclusively on their needs, interests and political development, there is a sizeable, important demographic group unaccounted for. (Carter et al, 2009, p. 34)

What all of this material points to is the difficulty of producing news “for kids”. In fact, one of the major questions this project has brought to my attention is “What is a kid?” My project provides evidence that young people experience their “age group” in very distinct, sometimes contradictory ways. As Faith explained, even when a product is aimed directly at one age group, young people will often reject it as being for another group. “If there was a newspaper that said ‘kids’, kids wouldn't really wanna read it, because they might think it's for younger kids, and uhm, not for them, and like, older kids” (Faith, 11, Group Interview 2). Overall, my interviews with participants suggest that more exploration is warranted around how children and young people experience their “age groups”, especially in relation to the media they consume.

**“Kid Friendly” News and Protectionism**

In her comparative study with kindergarten students in the United States and in Israel, Lemish found that parents in the two contexts had very different influences on their children’s relationships with news (1998). She concluded that, whereas the U.S. norm was for “good, enlightened parents” to concern themselves with the potential harm that watching news could have on a child, in Israel, the norm seemed to be the opposite. “If you are a 'good, enlightened' parent in Israel, you seem to make an effort to raise (children’s) social-consciousness, partly through exposure to news,” (Lemish, 1998, 502). The evidence from my study seems to suggest that, at least by age 11 and 12, participants’ parents were leaning
much more toward the latter (Israeli) approach -- encouraging their children’s engagement with news, often by including their children in their own engagement. However, during my interviews with participants I noticed the emergence of an overtly protectionist discourse in the participants’ own comments about news and age-appropriateness. This suggested to me that perhaps we in Canada are not altogether free from the U.S. norm described by Lemish above.

This norm was especially apparent in the way participants used the term “kid-friendly”, mentioned above, in discussing news content they felt was appropriate for kids their age, and younger. In my analysis of these discussions, I observed the emergence of a discursive theme of protectionism. Protectionism can be defined in many ways, but I use it in this thesis to refer to the idea that children are particularly vulnerable to media’s influences and thus need to be protected against corrupt content and its potentially negative effects (Buckingham, 1998, p. 36).

This discourse of protectionism was perhaps especially apparent due to our situation within the elementary school setting, an extremely regulated space in terms of what media content is permitted. I felt the influence of this protectionist impulse from the very beginning of my activities with students. For instance, I carefully examined the materials I brought in for our brainstorming collage activity and removed certain stories from the newspapers I collected in keeping with the school’s policy around violent or disturbing content. Later, in our group interview, Meghan explained the purpose of such policies at school, explicitly invoking a discourse of protectionism.

Meghan: Like, it depends on the kid, which is why we can't show that kind of stuff in school. Because you can't just take a -- you can't split up a class, take a group and show them the stuff--

Averie: yah, like, "anyone who's cool with this..."
Meghan: Yah, so, like, that's why we probably don't talk about it in school, but it really depends on the kid. And if you're scared of, like, blood and stuff, don't -- you probably shouldn't think about that kind of stuff. (Meghan, 11, Group Interview 3)

When participants discussed the need for regulation around kids’ news exposure, they usually talked about the need to protect “other” kids, but not themselves. This is a similar distancing tactic to the one explored in an earlier section, where participants described “kids” as disengaged from news, but said this characterization did not apply to them. For instance, Owen discussed the need for boundaries around how drugs are covered in television news to protect other kids from being frightened.

Averie: Is it because it's, like, scary for someone your age?

Owen: Well, I mean, it wouldn't be scary for me, 'cuz, I have older brothers, --they don't do heroin--[laughs] but I mean, like, it wouldn't be scary for me, but if someone saw somebody, like, sticking a needle into their arm, into their vein.. like I mean, if I didn't know better, I'd be scared out of my mind. I'd be like ‘woaahh!’ (Owen, 11, Group Interview 1)

Buckingham argues that a focus on talk and conversation not only allows a researcher to learn about participants’ interpretations and judgments of media content, but also about how they define themselves and claim “particular social identities” (2000, p. 63). Thus, one might ask, what kind of social identities are these children claiming as they discuss the need for protection and restrictions when it comes to kids’ exposure to news? There could be multiple, equally acceptable answers to this question. However, due to the fact that this discourse of protectionism usually arose in reference to the need to protect other, more sensitive, kids, I suggest that participants employed this protectionist discourse as a strategy to maintain the appearance of maturity. The participants relying on this protectionist discourse offered pragmatic, yet sophisticated statements about news and its role in society, which had the effect of making them appear wiser than their years. This strategy could be linked back to these participants’ desire to be taken seriously and included in matters of
social importance. This response, which displays an awareness of the potential harm that news can do to sensitive children, allows these pre-teens a sense of power, distance and/or superiority in relation to the “mass audience” of other children.

Yet, as I have done above, I must here re-emphasize that such ‘distancing’ discursive strategies are not merely the crafty work of participants who want to seem mature. Here, it is useful to return to the idea of protectionism as a social norm, as Lemish identifies above regarding the U.S. context. Though the individual parents of participants in my study may have leaned more toward the approach of Lemish’s Israeli parents, I would argue that our overall cultural attitude toward children in Canada is much more affected by the protectionist discourse Lemish identified in the responses of the kindergarten students in the U.S. context about their parents. The pre-teen participants in my study are rooted in this culture. They have grown up in a society where children’s safety and protection is a significant (if at times, hyperbolic) matter of public concern. Thus, the protectionist discourse I have noted in their comments above should be seen not only as part of their own efforts to position themselves socially as ‘mature’ individuals, but also as evidence of a cultural discourse that greatly impacts the way we all view children, and how our culture emphasizes the need for their protection in relation to media.

In the above sections, I explored my third research objective by examining how -- through what knowledge and language -- participants described their relationships with news in our interviews. Using Buckingham’s ideas about “talk” as a form of social action, and James, Jenks & Prout’s model of the social structural child (1998), I offered suggestions as to what those descriptions reflect about the way our society understands news and young people as a news audience. Discursive themes like “media literate criticism” and “protectionism” seemed to allow participants to separate themselves from the larger “kid audience” and
demonstrate their own understandings and interest in news. Meanwhile, the discourse that emerged around news and social inclusion highlighted how news is much more readily understood as a tool for citizen engagement even though it also plays an important part in maintaining interpersonal relationships. In addition, the discourse around the need for room to grow with news reflects the particularities of being a pre-teen and the difficulty in determining what is appropriate and interesting for kids of this age group.

**Emerging Objective: A Call for Further Examination and Research into the Operation of News In Young People’s Everyday Lives**

In this final, brief section, I will introduce an idea that I was not able to fully explore in this project, but that suggests an important avenue for future research. My methodology was structured with a focus on how young people think and talk about news, but my data also revealed the need for further research into how they use news. In other words, what do young people do with news, and what does news help young people accomplish? In the section below, I highlight just one example of participants’ use of news in the interactional setting to provide an initial framework for further research in this area.

**News in the group setting: Scaremongering**

It was not until my very last interview with students that I realized the potential benefits of further study into how young people utilize news in their cultural interactions with peers. I reflected on this element of participants’ relationships with news again after re-watching a particularly charged moment in this final group interview, which included five girls. This moment followed our discussion of what news might be inappropriate for kids. As
the conversation turned to what news could be “scary”, Rebeca brought up a rumour she had heard recently about a popular mobile app, “Talking Angela”.

Rebeca: Sometimes the way that news is given to us, it scares us, like, a few -- on Tuesday, (a friend) told me something really scary..

[Girls make excited inquiries about the friend, a former classmate who goes to another school.]

Rebeca: I was talking to her on the phone and she was talking to me about something like, Talking Angela, this app, or something, and it really freaked me out.

Daniella: Oh yah!! It's, it's scary.

Meghan: What happened?

Daniella: It's like, so, [to Averie] so this app, uhm, I've -- I don't know anyone who has it -- but I heard of it, it's like, so, this person made it.

Meghan: I know it, I have it.

Rebeca: You do?! Delete it!!

Meghan: Why?

Daniella: So that like -- [to Averie] So there's, it's like this cat, I think, that talks back to you, and but, in the eye, like, there's a guy, and they can see you. And it's--

Meghan: Holy crap! [motions for the door] Can I delete it?! [girls giggle nervously] I gotta go delete that now!!

Daniella: They, they know where you are and they can track down where you are--

Rebeca: And they also--

Meghan: God! Can I go delete that!?

45 This textual rendering of the passage does not allow one to appreciate the frenetic energy that circulated in the room during this segment of the interview. While I have tried to transcribe the conversation accurately, I have omitted some interjections and noises participants made that did not advance the main narrative of the conversation. There were a lot of excited “Yah!”’s uttered by the girls who are not quoted here and often these listeners would let out gasps or nervous mumbles. At one point, Stephany seemed frozen in excited fear, clasping her hands over her mouth as Daniella recounted the rumour. This passage points to the particular benefit of videotaping group interviews (Knight, 2002, p. 71), especially those that involve young participants. Working with video footage allowed me to go back and review the physical behaviour participants displayed throughout this “scaremongering” scenario.
Rebeca: They can also, like, uhm, they also like, uh, and they also ask in--really inappropriate questions sometimes, like..

Daniella: Like there's this --

Averie: [to Rebeca] So your friend told you about this?--

Rebeca: And she said delete it if you have it, and then she said--

Averie: So how did she say that she knew about it?

Rebeca: Well, she said like, on the news, there was like, a kidnap around her area that connected to it, she said. I didn't really believe her.. 'cuz.. [Girls all talk over each other]

Averie: So when something comes -- something like that comes up, are there ways of figuring out how true that is? Or, would you--

Rebeca: I looked it up, and, like

Daniella: yah, I, I looked it up--

Rebeca: Like, there was like, 30 different languages of all different newspapers that have had it --

Daniella: There's, like, many different stories of people who had it. Like one of them, it's like, they asked where she was and she, she didn't tell the exact place, and, but they said "I know that you're lying to me," like that, they, like -- it talked back. So like, they can track down where you are, and, and it's a bit scary.

Meghan: That's so scary -- I'm so scared now!(Meghan, 11, Rebeca, 11, and Daniella, 11, Group Interview 3)

What is fascinating about this conversation is how quickly it escalates. If one pays attention to the pattern of speakers in this narrative (some inaudible or irrelevant interjections have been omitted, see footnote 46), one will notice how Rebeca and Daniella essentially ‘pass the baton’ back and forth, confirming and then escalating each other’s statements. As they do so, Meghan occasionally interjects to confirm that it’s working -- they are scaring her. In my analysis I labeled this interaction as “scaremongering” -- the tactic of deliberately spreading information to make others feel worried or frightened. Despite the somewhat ominous connotation of this label, I use it here to describe a more playful process. Watching
this moment on video, there is a sense that these participants, including Meghan -- the “victim,” are enjoying this frightening conversation. It has a game-like quality for them. The game-like routine becomes more meaningful in relationship to Corsaro’s theory of interpretive reproduction (1992; 2011), which I discussed in my conceptual framework chapter.

With this theory, Corsaro emphasizes children’s active participation in both interpreting and reproducing culture. Corsaro argues that this interpretation and reproduction happens as children produce specific cultural routines that provide them with a shared understanding of belonging in their social group. These routines also supply children with frames within which sociocultural knowledge can be produced, displayed and interpreted (Christensen & Prout, 2005). According to Corsaro: “Appropriation enables cultural production, which contributes to reproduction and change” (2011, p. 43). First, children creatively appropriate information and knowledge from the wider “adult” culture.46 Next, children use this information and knowledge to produce and participate in a series of peer cultures. Finally, the repetition and exaggeration of these cultural routines, which make up children’s peer cultures, allow for the reproduction and extension of the wider culture.

Applying this model to the “scaremongering” scenario one can clearly identify the key elements of interpretive reproduction. First, these pre-teen students appropriate the rumour about Talking Angela being a front for pedophiles. With it, they also appropriate broader cultural information, such as the ongoing moral panic surrounding young people’s use of new digital technologies (see Mazzarella, 2007, p. 57) Next, participants used this

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46 Corsaro describes the dominant culture in society as “adult” culture, which positions children’s and adult’s cultural spheres more distinctly than I feel is warranted. This distinction seems especially problematic given the rising influence of new media technologies and the increasing extent to which they define and shape all of our cultural experiences, young and old. Thus, I have chosen the term “wider culture” though it offers a less precise description.
appropriated information to construct a cultural routine resembling “scaremongering” where one participant is chosen as a “victim” and the other participants collaborate on a ghost-story-like narrative in order to scare that participant. Through this cultural routine, the rumor about Talking Angela is reproduced, reinforced, and thereby extended, despite the fact that several mobile technology experts and the app developer have insisted it is not true. In addition, this shared cultural routine may have transformed the fear this group of young girls feels about predators and online or mobile technology into a sort of excitement or thrill. Through the cultural routine, the girls’ fears are exaggerated to a point where the expression of this fear seems closer to a form of play than a genuine display of concern.

It is difficult with such a small and isolated example to speculate further about how this scaremongering routine might extend the culture from which it began. However, what is useful about it for my purposes is that it shows how news can be taken up and acted upon by young people as they collectively produce cultural routines. In this sense, news can be seen as a tool that these pre-teens use to make sense of unknown, confusing or frightening information they encounter as they grow up together. I suggest that this focus on the operation of news as a tool for cultural (re)production among children and young people is an important avenue for future research. Such research would be a beneficial contribution to the current scholarship on young people’s relationships with news, as it would further contribute to a nuanced understanding of young people as active news users who are consistently involved with news in their roles as cultural consumers and producers.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I explored my third research objective by discussing four key discursive themes that represent the larger social and cultural influences that have shaped participants’ understandings of their own relationships with news. I highlighted a discourse
of media literate criticism and the discourses surrounding news as a tool for social inclusion at both the societal and interactional level. I also identified discourses around “kid-friendly” news, growing up, and protectionism, which suggested the complexities participants experienced as they navigated their evolving relationships with news as pre-teens. I ended the chapter with a look ahead to an important area for future exploration regarding young people’s relationships with news. Drawing on Corsaro’s theory of interpretive reproduction (1992; 2011), I argue more investigation is needed into how news is put to use by children in their collective processes of cultural production. Through the exploration of these four discursive themes and the introduction of the playful cultural routine of “scaremongering” produced by one group of participants, this chapter emphasizes childhood as a social structure that children themselves are involved in producing and shaping through their creative appropriation of the information and ideas that surround them in the larger cultural sphere. This emphasis positions children, collectively, as active cultural producers, who reproduce but also extend the cultures they inhabit.

In the following, and final chapter, I will recap the major contributions of my research and highlight the particular benefits of the methodological approach I used in this study. By engaging young people as co-ethnographers (Prasad, 2013) of their own lived experiences with media through the use of participatory and creative methods and follow up interviews, I was able to come to a more robust understanding of how participants conceived of and related to “news”. I argue that this complex understanding is crucial for transcending current scholarly debates about young people’s disengagement and disenfranchisement and accounting for their agency as active cultural producers and news users.
Chapter 8

Conclusion

It is the final day of class activities and the room is buzzing as students file in from their afternoon recess. The classroom looks much the same as it did when I first visited nearly two months ago. At the back, behind the desks, the small coatroom overflows with students’ winter gear. Across the room, at the front, the day’s notes are scrawled on the wall-to-wall green chalkboard above the comfy, colorful carpet. Only the desks have changed. As a reward for their good behaviour, the class has moved their desks into a smiley-face formation in the centre of the room, which is fitting, as today is meant to be a celebration of our time together.

This afternoon, students get the chance to share the work they’ve produced in the project. Before enjoying some drinks and snacks, they take turns walking around the classroom and looking at the mock-ups their classmates have created for a hypothetical “by Grade Six, for Grade Six” edition of the online news literacy resource TeachingKidsNews.com. I follow with my camera, capturing students’ comments about their designs.

Wes points to his live chat feature with pride. “That was my idea,” he says, “So like, (people) can chat about whatever the stories are.” Caroline, Jill, and Rebeca point out their voiceover feature -- the only one of its kind in the class. Caroline clarifies that the feature was designed to help kids who have trouble with reading. Emilia’s group has dedicated a large “breaking news” section on their homepage to a made up story about the collapse of San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge. “Everyone knows it, so if something happened to it, it would be, like, really important,” Mackenzie explains. Kieran is quick to point out the prominent photo gallery on his homepage and explains a story he made up
warning about the potentially damaging effects of the new Google Glass invention to users’ eyes.

The top story on everyone’s homepages, as in the real life news, is about a prominent municipal politician who has been involved in a substance abuse scandal for months. Several of the homepages feature made-up stories imagining the politician’s resignation from office. Stephany’s group, however, has come up with a slightly more bizarre punishment. Their top story features the politician being attacked by a toddler. “Well, we wanted some comedy!” Stephany explains. She and her groupmates giggle as the noise in the classroom swells.

In my interview with Mr. Tilly following my in-class activities with students, I asked him what he thought about the imaginative content on students’ TKN homepage redesigns. His answer was simple, yet powerful.

“If you let a child be creative, and you say, ‘You can be!’ they’re going to take every inch of that,” Mr. Tilly explained. “When you open it up to kids to play, then what you get back is much richer.”

In the chapters above, I have provided evidence of the rich narratives about news generated through this research project, which explored young people’s relationships with news through creation, rather than critique. My study shows that participants as young as 11 years old are capable of exploring the concept of news in sophisticated and meaningful ways when they are engaged in methods that allow them the space to reflect and activate their imaginations. As I have demonstrated in the chapters above, young people’s imaginings about news can reveal important information about the news ecologies they inhabit, what purpose(s) they attribute to news, and how they understand themselves and their peers as news users. These are all crucial lines of inquiry for scholars, educators, and news
practitioners who wish to better understand young people’s relationships with news in the current context.

Summary of Findings

In my conceptual framework, I drew from three bodies of theory to offer three major assertions, which have structured my approach to the research problem “How do Canadian young people relate to ‘news’ in the modern, rapidly evolving, media context?” Below, I will restate each of these major assertions and provide a summary of the findings from this project that support them. Taken together, these findings provide a sense of the important lines of inquiry that can be pursued in future research to create a new research paradigm surrounding young people as news users.

Assertion I: Audience members are active participants in the process of meaning-making. My first objective in this project was to explore young people’s own definitions of “news” and its relevancy and importance to them. This required a model that could explain how media messages are created and circulated in society and what role media audiences play in this process. For this, I drew from Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model. I found that the pre-teen participants in my study employed diverse “news vocabularies” (Edgerly, 2012) to describe and make sense of news. These vocabularies connect with the argument I have made throughout this thesis that news is not a fixed concept, although it is often presented as such in public discourse. Through creative and participatory research activities, participants in my study demonstrated that they were comfortable understanding news as a subjective, complex concept. I argue that their ability to accept news as an “open text” should be taken as evidence of participants’ situation in an increasingly personalized and diverse media landscape. In relation to Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980/2012), it is clear that young people are engaged in constructing this diverse news landscape as active
cultural consumers and producers, while at the same time, the understandings of news they have drawn from this media landscape (and the cultural structure and social influences that shape it) also influence how they engage with news.

**Assertion II: Children are social beings. Childhood is part of, not prior to, society.** In this project, I also aimed to examine how and where young people in Canada encounter news in comparison with participants in recent similar studies in other countries. For this exploration, I kept in mind James, Jenks and Prout’s model of the socially constructed child (1998), which is useful for stepping past biological determinism and looking at children’s experiences in a grounded and sensitive manner. The model acknowledges that children’s experiences are cut across by many factors, including their nationality and socio-economic context. I used the idea of “news ecologies” to understand the connections between participants’ media environments, social networks, and news engagement strategies. Importantly, the young Canadian participants in my study described being surrounded by news in their daily lives. In my analysis, I took these descriptions as evidence suggesting the need for a more critical examination of what we mean by *engagement*. As I explore in my review of the literature in this thesis, an ephemeral, sporadic, and social mode of news engagement seems to be on the rise among youth populations and my participants’ experiences confirm this observation.

Significantly, I found that the pre-teen participants’ parents played an important role in their news engagement and that many participants considered conversations about news with their parents to be a crucial source of news in their lives. This is an important finding, because this relational mode of news engagement is not currently well captured at the larger, quantitative level of study on young people’s relationships with news. Finally, participants’ descriptions of their news ecologies revealed the value of the website
TeachingKidsNews.com (TKN) as a tool for helping these young people clarify their understandings of major stories in “regular” news outlets. This finding contributes to the overall emphasis throughout this thesis on the pre-teen years as a particularly complicated period for young people’s relationships with news as they begin to understand and “get used to” more mature news content.

My third objective in this exploratory case study was to discover what types of knowledge and language young participants draw upon to describe their relationships with news. In this search, I focused on the discourses participants used that described childhood as a collective experience. I used James Jenks and Prout’s model of the social structural child (1998) as a guide, which positions childhood as an enduring feature of every society, although its nature is constantly changing. This model, as well as Buckingham’s (2008) ideas about the socio-cultural analysis of children’s talk, helped me to identify some of the larger social and cultural influences that may have shaped participants’ understandings of their own relationships with news.

With this approach, I identified four key discursive themes. Firstly, I observed the presence of a discourse of media literate criticism in participants’ responses. By exploring this discourse I found that some participants used a critical stance to construct an uninformed or apathetic “other” out of the mass audience of kids their own age in order to highlight their own engagement with news by comparison. This discursive strategy was taken as evidence that western societies still have a difficult time recognizing and understanding children as citizens and young people as news audiences (Mendes et al, 2010).

I also identified the emergence of a discursive theme about news as a tool for social inclusion and belonging in my conversations with participants. Though some participants drew on this discourse at a wider, societal level, discussing news as a tool for social action,
many more referred to news as a tool for social inclusion on an everyday, relational level, among their friends and close family-members. This is an important finding, because this latter phenomenon is often overlooked by scholars and by news practitioners (Costera Meijer, 2007).

In addition, my thematic analysis of the interview data revealed a discourse around “kid-friendly” content. Participants touched on this discourse to discuss their news content preferences and the news interests of their peers in a manner that underscored the finding mentioned above that the pre-teen years are a particularly complicated period for young people’s relationships with news. This discourse provided evidence that young people experience their “age group” in very distinct, sometimes contradictory ways, which should be explored further in future research. Finally, this discourse of “kid-friendly” news was also connected to a discourse of “protectionism” in our conversations. Participants suggested that, while they were fine with mature or disturbing news, other young people might be scared by it and thus regulations and restrictions around news consumption for them and their peers were a somewhat necessary evil. This was taken as evidence of the power that this somewhat traditional view of young people’s relationships with media still has in Canadian society.

Assertion II: Children are active participants in cultural production. In my thematic analysis of the interview data, I noticed the presence of an interesting interactional phenomenon that led me to an emerging research objective: to study the operation of news in young people’s everyday lives. It was here that Corsaro’s conceptual model of interpretive reproduction (1992; 2011) became most useful to my study, as it allowed me to observe the collective production of a cultural routine of “scaremongering” among one group of participants. This routine was like a game in which participants used a recent rumour that had gained significant coverage in the mainstream news to explore and transform certain fears
they had appropriated from the wider (“adult”) culture. This finding led to a recommendation for future research, which I will describe further below.

**Major Contributions**

My overall contribution in this study was to provide a nuanced and complex look at one group of Canadian pre-teens’ relationships with news. In an exploratory case study, I pursued important lines of inquiry that emerged from my review of the literature such as “What is news?” and “What does news engagement *look like* in the modern media context?” My findings in relation to these questions are offered as initial provocations that can be explored in future research. I suggest that scholars build on these provocations to develop a new research paradigm that can transcend the established scholarly narratives of young people as either “disengaged” or “disenfranchised” when it comes to news. In essence, my study concludes where this new paradigm begins.

Another important contribution of this study, as discussed above, was to provide a useful methodological framework that can be used to explore young people’s relationships with news in a more reflexive and contextually situated manner. This methodological approach fused creative visual methods and participatory group activities with follow up interviews to create a scaffolded structure (Farmer & Prasad, 2014). This structure allowed ample time and space for reflection and exploration, which enabled students to become “co-ethnographers” of their own experience (Prasad, 2013; Farmer & Prasad, 2014) as we worked together to develop a sense of what was important in relation to the project’s exploratory research objectives.

In addition, this case study, though small in scale and scope, contributes an updated Canadian perspective to the scholarly literature on “youth”, “news”, and “engagement”, which is currently dominated by perspectives from the United States, Europe, and the United
Kingdom. My study explored the relevance of findings from recent similar research in the U.S. and the Netherlands to the daily lives of Canadian young people. I found that the Canadian pre-teens’ experiences bore many similarities to the experiences of youth described in these other settings, though there were a few notable exceptions. This may be reflective of the increasingly globalized communication and media environment that youth in all three of these contexts inhabit, though further comparative study would be needed to establish such a correlation.

**Recommendations**

The outcomes of my study suggest several important directions for future scholarly research into young people’s relationships with news in the modern media context. Firstly, this study is contextually situated and explores the experiences of one group of middle-class, urban Canadian pre-teens. Therefore, I suggest the need for further comparative research involving participants in other socio-economic and geographic settings, and those who do not receive exposure to news in the classroom. Such research would be useful to provide a more comprehensive look at young people’s relationships with news in the Canadian context. Additionally, as I mention above, this project highlighted an emerging research objective of further investigation into how young people use news as part of their everyday collective cultural production. Such research would require more observational ethnographic methods. Furthermore, there is a need for further research with pre-teens regarding their relationships with news to fully understand the factors that contribute to the complexity of this relationship during this period, and the wider range of practices that pre-teens use to navigate their conflicting media interests at this age.

My data also suggests the need for further consideration of news as a social, relational force in young people’s lives in large-scale, quantitative research on young people’s news
engagement. I suggest that researchers working at such levels of analysis should carefully consider ways in which a wider diversity of lived experiences with news might be incorporated into their data collection instruments. For example, researchers conducting large-scale survey studies, such as those carried out by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, might consider how to better incorporate conversations with friends and family members as an option for respondents to choose from when describing their regular sources of news.

Finally, there is currently little information available about the number or range of outlets such as TKN that provide news content for children and young people in the Canadian context. I suggest the need for an updated review of this kind that would capture information about such sources throughout the North American context. This would be helpful for researchers looking to investigate the impact of such programming on young people’s understandings of or relationships with news in the future.

**Looking Back and Looking Forward**

There is a common phrase which is part of a poem by Spanish poet Antonio Machado: “we make the road by walking it.” This statement is an accurate one for describing my journey through this project. Throughout this journey, I was at times overwhelmed by what I had taken on. I struggled to find a focus and make sense of the large and diverse body of data generated during my time in the classroom. In these moments, I reflected on the phrase above, and re-visited my notes and memos. Creative thinking and continuous reflexivity were the keys to my research approach and helped me to stay in touch with my own subjective understanding of the research problem both as a researcher of young people’s experiences and as a young person myself. This thesis project has been an important learning experience for me and I hope to share my results as widely as possible, both in the
scholarly community, and more publicly, so that this research can be accessed by other young people.

The goal of this project was to provoke further critical, creative thinking about young people as news users and as members of Canadian society. While my results and discussion were aimed at contributing to the scholarly literature on this subject, this thesis might also spark important conversations among educators and news practitioners. For educators, the study may provide an opportunity for reflection and conversation on how news is currently incorporated into their classroom curricula, if at all, and the assumptions about children as news users that are reflected by such decisions. Likewise, this research might generate a conversation among Canadian media practitioners about the way young people are currently addressed (or not) as a news audience in this country. These are both conversations that must involve young people if they are to be meaningful. This thesis provides a foundation for improved cross-generational dialogue on how civic knowledge and media literacy should be addressed in schools, and how young people and their interests should be addressed by news media.
References


Appendix A: Information Letter/Consent Form for Parents/Guardians

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
OISE | ONTARIO INSTITUTE
FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Social Justice Education

January 6th, 2014
Dear Parents/Guardians:

I am a graduate student at the University of Toronto about to begin my thesis research. My background is in journalism and education. I am interested in how young people define “news” and where they get their news. I am also interested in how young people encounter and interact with news via online social media. I want my research to be useful to schools and teachers who are looking for relevant ways to integrate current events into classrooms.

The University of Toronto and the participating school board have approved this study, and your child’s principal and teacher have given me permission to do my research with your child’s class. I am particularly interested in the exciting news education going on in this class through the website Teaching Kids News (TKN). I will begin my study by visiting the class a few times to observe activities like TKN hour and to get to know the students.

This month, your child’s class will participate in a short unit about news as part of the regular classroom curriculum. I am writing to ask your permission to collect data from your child’s participation in the unit. The unit will inform students about what happens behind-the-scenes in newsrooms and allow students to explore questions like “what is news?” and “what news is important to me?” For example, students will be asked to share a news story they find interesting with their classmates and create a mock lineup for a TV newscast. This unit will take no more than one or two periods per day for up to 10 days. Following these activities, I will invite interested students to practice their journalism skills by interviewing one another about the unit and their relationships with the news. I will collaborate with students on questions to guide their interviews, such as ‘What do you think news is for?’ and I will collect data from up to six of these interview sessions. These sessions will take no more than 60 minutes. They will be scheduled during school hours and according to student and teacher preferences.

Participation in this study is voluntary and will not affect your son/daughter’s evaluation by his/her teacher in any way. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. You and your child can also choose for your child’s data to be removed from the study at any time.

Please indicate whether you allow your child to be included in the study by completing the form on the next page and return it to Mr. Tilly by January 14th. If you have any questions, please contact me (email: averiemac@gmail.com) or my supervisor, Dr. Diane Farmer (email: diane.farmer@utoronto.ca). I sincerely appreciate your co-operation.

Thank you, Averie MacDonald, M.A. Candidate, OISE (University of Toronto)
Appendix A: Information Letter/Consent Form for Parents/Guardians

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM
Please fill out and return the following form to your child’s teacher by January 14th.

A. CONSENT TO COLLECT DATA
1) From group activities: In small group activities, students with full parental permission will be grouped together and data will only be collected from those students. Some small-group discussions will be audio taped so they can be replayed later for analysis.

(Please check one) I give permission for my child’s responses and creations as part of the unit described on the first page of this letter to be included in this study.

YES ____  NO____

II) From student interviews: Data will also be collected from up to 12 young participants in student-to-student interviews.

(Please check one) I give permission for my child to participate in student-to-student interviews.

YES ____  NO____

B. VIDEO RECORDING
As part of this project, student-to-student interviews and some small group discussions may be videotaped. Many researchers suggest recording video when working with children because it allows the researcher to match responses to the correct child (i.e. if children talk over each other). It also allows for non-verbal communication, such as body language, to be taken into account (Knight, 2002). Recordings made for this project will be used for research purposes only and will only be seen by the researcher.

(Please check one) I give permission for my child to appear in video recordings of research activities in the classroom.

YES ____  NO____

Young Participant (please print child’s name)

__________________________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian             Date
Appendix B: Informed Assent Presentation Outline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section A) outlines the presentation to be given to the class before participatory group activities.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section B) is the blurb to be used before semi-structured interviews with students. This blurb is to be read aloud to the young participants and digitally recorded. Young Participants’ assent or dissent to participate must also be digitally recorded.</td>
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</table>

A) Outline for the Informed Assent Presentation -- to take place before participatory group activities.

1. Background

Name

Research Background

Info about OISE

Info about overall research project (objectives, length etc.)

Remember to clarify what a Master’s degree is, and what I am getting out of this project.

2. Purpose of Participatory Group Activities

Why was this method chosen?

What will happen? (outline activity schedule)

- give two examples of participatory activities

- explain how other things they’ve done in their classroom could qualify as participatory group activities. (i.e. group projects)

What is being observed/looked for?

3. Informed Assent

Data is being collected in a general way in big group activities, but in a more direct, identifiable way during small group activities.

Explain use of video recordings and data storage

Participation in the study is not linked to grading -- doesn’t affect marks.

Risks and benefits and withdrawal: (“We’re not going to talk about anything personal or sensitive, but you might feel embarrassed or shy at some point, and that is okay. If you have any questions or concerns you can let me know and we will work it out. Your teacher and I hope you will learn from these activities, and explore your own opinions and thoughts about the news. Even if you say yes to being in the study now, you can change your mind later. It’s up to you.”)

Ways to give feedback
4. Question and Comment opportunity

Does anyone have any questions about the activities? Does anyone have any questions about what I’m going to be doing as a researcher? Does anyone have any concerns about participating? Does anyone have any ground rules they think we should stick to when we run our activities?

B) Blurb to be Used Before Semi-Structured Interviews with Students

Statement of purpose

(Child’s name),

Remember, I’ve been working with your class for a project about social media, news, and young people. Today we’re going to do an interview because I want to know more about your thoughts on topics related to the activities about news we’ve been doing in class. We’ve all had a chance to learn about interviewing and think of possible interview topics, and now we’re going to put what we’ve learned into practice.

(Child’s name), I just want to tell you some important information that I think will help the conversation go well. After that, you can ask me any questions and tell me anything you want included in our ground rules before we start ok?

Confirming Informed Assent

(Child’s name), If you do not want to participate in this interview, please say so. We’re not going to talk about anything personal or sensitive, but you might feel embarrassed or shy at some point, and that is okay. Even if you say yes to participating now, you can change your mind later. It’s up to you.

This interview is part of a larger study. I’m hoping this study will help adults and kids understand each other better when it comes to the idea of news and what purpose news has in our society. I think participating in this interview might be a good opportunity for you and your classmate to talk about your media use and how your media behaviours are thought of and talked about by adults.

(Child’s name), when I write my report, I am not going to use your name, I’m going to use a fake name, so nothing you do or say in this interview can be traced back to you. This interview is private. Everything we say here is just between us. That means I can’t tell your teacher what you said, and I can’t tell your parents. This interview can’t affect your marks or your relationship with your teacher.

Even though this study isn’t about anything personal, I know that personal issues might come up when you talk with your classmate. I will only break my promise to keep your information private if something you say makes me think that you or someone else is in danger of being hurt.

(Child’s name), your parent/guardian gave you permission to participate in this interview when they signed the note we sent home with you. Do you still want to participate?

Do you have any ground rules you can think of that you want us to agree on? Do you have any questions for me before we start?
Appendix C: Classroom Observation Guide

**Classroom Observation Guide**

School:
Classroom/Grade:
Date:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1) Setting</th>
<th>2) Organization of the Activity</th>
<th>3) Evolution of the Activity</th>
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<th>4) Teacher Practices</th>
<th>5) Teacher-Student Interactions</th>
<th>6) Student-Student Interactions</th>
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<th>7) Outside-School Influences</th>
<th>8) References to News/Current Events</th>
<th>9) Reflections</th>
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Appendix D: Outline of Participatory Group Activities

Outline of Participatory Group Activities

Note: Activities were scheduled according to teacher preferences. Participatory Group Activities were preceded by an Informed Assent Presentation and Q&A period.

Session 1: Introduction

Activities: Created class brainstorming chart in response to “What is News?”

Began student mindmap collages in response to “When I hear the word “News” it makes me think of...”

Outcomes/Data Collected: observation/discussion notes, photo of brainstorming web on chalkboard, research memo 1.

Session 2: Mindmap Work Period

Activities: Continued work on mindmap (collage) about news

Outcomes/ Data Collected: observation notes, mindmaps (one per student), “Tweet Sheet” written reflections, pictures of students in creative process.

Session 3: Class Discussion and Human Poll

Activities: Discussed brainstorming mindmaps

Conducted human poll (grouping physically around the room) in response to the prompt “News or Not News?” with various fictional headlines.


Session 4: Group Discussion and Homework Assignment

Activities: Took up exit questions,

Discussed the homepage of CBC.ca and CNN.com: How do the stories get there? Who decides what stories go up? What would it look like if you chose the stories?,

Introduced “My Top Story” homework assignment: “What kind of news would you put on the front page?"

Outcomes/Data Collected: observation notes, research memo 3

Session 5: News Show and Tell Session

Activities: Discussed news stories students brought to class.

Conducted group ranking activity with stories in small groups in response to “Pick the CBC’s top story, Pick TKN’s top story, etc.”

Conducted “Press conference” for group decision sharing
Appendix D: Outline of Participatory Group Activities

Outcomes/Data Collected: observation notes, “My Top Story” worksheets, “Reporter’s Notepad” Sheets, “If I was an editor” written reflections, audio and written notes from “press conference”, research memo 4

Session 6: Intro to Culminating Activity -- TKN Homepage Redesign

Activities: Group discussion of news website features

- Split students into groups for culminating activity
- Brainstorming period for TKN Homepage Redesign

Outcomes/Data Collected: observation notes, research memo 5

Session 7: Work Period on TKN Homepage Redesign

Activities: Groups worked on TKN Homepage Redesign

Outcomes/Data Collected: observation notes, research memo 5 (continued)

Session 8: Sharing of TKN Homepage Redesign

Activities: Class party with juice and snacks

- Students rotated in groups to view others’ TKN Homepage Redesign projects
- Groups gave special presentation of redesigns to researcher

Outcomes/Data Collected: observation notes, video recordings of participants’ presentations of designs, research memo 5, TKN Redesign written reflections

**Works Consulted for Development of Activities**


Pair Interview Guide

*Interviews will be semi-structured, allowing young participants to shape the direction of the discussion. The following questions will serve as prompts if and when they are needed*

Interview to take place in the school in a mutually agreed upon location between child and interviewer. Location needs to be quiet, and relatively private. Informed assent must be confirmed and recorded before interview begins. The interview should be allowed to flow naturally, but should last no more than 60 minutes. Some young people may only be able to answer a small percentage of questions in that time. In front of each participant should be the work being discussed, in case they need to refer to it.

Demographics

Name:  
Age:  
Gender: (noted by interviewer)  
Grade: (noted by interviewer)  
School: (noted by interviewer)

Confirming Informed Assent

(Child’s name), You do not have to be in the study. If you do not want to participate, please say so. We’re not going to talk about anything personal or sensitive, but you might feel embarrassed or shy at some point, and that is okay. It’s up to you.

I’m hoping this study will help adults and kids understand each other better when it comes to the idea of news and what the purpose of news is. I think participating in this study might be a good opportunity for you and your classmates to talk about the kinds of media you use and how adults talk about the ways you use media.

(Child’s name), when I write my report, I am not going to use your name, I’m going to use a fake name, so nothing you do or say in this interview can be traced back to you. This interview is private. Everything we say here is just between us. That means I can’t tell your teacher what you said, and I can’t tell your parents. This interview can’t affect your marks or your relationship with your teacher.

Even though this study isn’t about anything personal, I know that personal issues might come up when I interview you and your classmates. I will only break my promise to keep your information private if something you tell me makes me think that you or someone else is in danger of being hurt.

(Child’s name), your parent/guardian has given you permission to participate in these activities/permission to be interviewed when they signed the note we sent home with you. Do you still want to participate? Do you have any questions for me before we start?
Appendix E: Pair Interview Guide

**Openings:** Give students time to look over what they’ve produced in the unit. “We’re going to talk about what we’ve done so far together in class. What I’m trying to get at in these interviews are your views and opinions about news and what you think “news” means. I want to hear what you personally think, so feel free to be totally honest, and you can always ask me if you don’t understand the question.

How do you usually see/hear about news in your daily life?

Do you ever go looking for news? Where do you look for it? What kind of news?

*(Have students compare TKN homepages, tell me about them)*

Do you guys have any questions for each other about your projects? (any questions for me?)

Overall, how does this version of TKN compare with the TKN we regularly see?

What else would you have added if you’d had more time?

*(More specific questions about their particular homepages)*

What do you think about the types of stories you see on TKN now?

*(Have students tell me about their brain maps on news)*

We began the unit by thinking about our personal definitions of news. Now that we’ve been through our activities about news, what would your personal definition of news be today?

What do you think news is for? (Why are people interested in news?)

Some people say kids don’t care about the news. What do you think about that?

*(Follow up prompts: do you think it’s true? why do you think people say that? How does that statement make you feel?)*

*(If participants discuss this)* If more adults believed that people your age were interested in the news, how do you think news (like what we see on cbc.ca) would be different?

Do you think the news will change over time? How so?

Do you think you’ll feel differently about the news as you get older? How so?

**Endings:** “OK, (child’s name) that’s about it for my questions. Do you have any questions for me about my project or about any of the stuff we’ve been talking about?

How did I do? Do you have any advice for me when I do this again with another participant?

When I’m finished my study, I’m going to send your teacher a summary video to watch that tells you about what I did with the information you gave me, and what my study helped me discover. If you need to reach me before that, you can always email me. Here is my email.”
Appendix F: Group Interview Guide

**Group Interview Guide**

*Interviews will be semi-structured, allowing young participants to shape the direction of the discussion. The following questions will serve as prompts if and when they are needed*

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<thead>
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<th>Interview to take place in the school in a mutually agreed upon location between children and interviewer. Location needs to be quiet, and relatively private. Informed assent must be confirmed and recorded before interview begins. The interview should be allowed to flow naturally, but should last no more than 60 minutes. Some young people may only be able to answer a small percentage of questions in that time. In front of each participant should be the work being talked about, in case they need to refer to it.</th>
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</thead>
</table>

**Demographics (to be noted for each participant)**

Name:
Age:
Gender: (noted by interviewer)
Grade: (noted by interviewer)
School: (noted by interviewer)

**Confirming Informed Assent**

(Children’s names), You do not have to be in the study. If you do not want to participate, please say so. We’re not going to talk about anything personal or sensitive, but you might feel embarrassed or shy at some point, and that is okay. It’s up to you.

I’m hoping this study will help adults and kids understand each other better when it comes to the idea of news and what the purpose of news is. I think participating in this study might be a good opportunity for you and your classmates to talk about the kinds of media you use and how adults talk about the ways you use media.

(Children’s names), when I write my report, I am not going to use your name, I’m going to use a fake name, so nothing you do or say in this interview can be traced back to you. This interview is private. Everything we say here is just between us. That means I can’t tell your teacher what you said, and I can’t tell your parents. This interview can’t affect your marks or your relationship with your teacher.

Even though this study isn’t about anything personal, I know that personal issues might come up when I interview you and your classmates. I will only break my promise to keep your information private if something you tell me makes me think that you or someone else is in danger of being hurt.

(Children’s names), your parent/guardian has given you permission to participate in these activities/permission to be interviewed when they signed the note we sent home with you. Do you still want to participate? Do you have any questions for me before we start?
Openings: “We’re going to talk about what we’ve done so far together in class. What I’m trying to get at in these interviews are your views and opinions about news and what you think “news” means. I want to hear what you personally think, and there really are no right or wrong answer, so don’t worry about saying what you think I want to hear. Feel free to be totally honest, and you can always ask me if you don’t understand the question.

How do you usually see/hear about news in your daily life?

Do you ever go looking for news? Where do you look for it? What kind of news?

(Have students look at their news collages, look at each other’s)

Tell me about what it was like when you were first working on these. What were you thinking about?

Now that we’ve finished all our activities together, if you did this collage again, how would it be different? What other words or images might be there?

We began the unit by thinking about our personal definitions of news. Now that we’ve done all these different activities together and thought about it some more, how would you describe what news means to you today?

-How do you think your definition of news might compare with someone your parents’ age? With a teenager’s? With a 7 year old’s?

What do you think news is for? (Why are people interested in news?)

Some people say kids don’t care about the news. What do you think about that?

(Follow up prompts: do you think it’s true? why do you think people say that? How does that statement make you feel?)

Is there some news that you’re still too young to know about?

IF TIME:

How do you think your relationship with news will change as you grow older?

I’ve researched kids and news for a while now. Do you guys have any questions for me?

Endings: “OK, (children’s names) that’s about it for my questions.

How did I do? Do you have any advice for me when I do this again with other participants?

When I’m finished my study, I’m going to send your teacher a summary video to watch that tells you about what I did with the information you gave me, and what my study helped me discover. If you need to reach me before that, you can always email me. Here is my email.”
Appendix G: Teacher Interview Guide

Teacher Interview Guide

*Interview will be semi-structured, allowing the teacher to shape the direction of the discussion. The following questions will serve as prompts if and when they are needed*

| Interview to take place in a mutually agreed upon location between teacher and interviewer. Location needs to be quiet, and relatively private. Teacher consent must be obtained in writing prior to the interview. Consent must be verbally confirmed before interview begins. The interview should be allowed to flow naturally but should take no more than 45 mins. |

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender: (noted by interviewer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School: (noted by interviewer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years at School:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Openings: | “I want to explore your take on your students’ relationships with news, and your use of news in your practice as a teacher. I’d also like to talk more about your individual views and opinions about news and what it means. Feel free to take the time you need, and ask for clarification if you need it.” |

Before TKN how did news enter your teaching practice?

How would you describe this particular class’s relationship with news, from what you can observe? How do they compare with previous classes?

(Hand him camera to look at pictures for a bit)

What early observations/reflections do you have about the students’ experience in our mini-unit? (Have you seen or heard anything from students that surprised you/Made you think?)

Emerging themes from interviews: obsession with politician scandal story

- How would you explain their fascination with this story? Do you recall much from your conversation with them about the story? What kinds of things emerged from it?

- Many kids preferred to imagine new stories instead of drawing on stories that already existed. Why might this be?

- Many kids’ redesigned homepages focused heavily on interactive features such as places for pitching stories, social media links, “Try this at home” sections, comment sections & live chat sections. Where do you think this focus on interactivity comes from?

Personal Relationship and Views

When you go looking for news, where do you look for it? What kind of news do you look for?
How would you define news?
How do you think your definition of news might match up with your students’?
What do you think is the teacher’s role when it comes to students’ relationships with news?
What does it mean to “news literate”?
What do you think of the statement “young people don’t care about the news”?
Why do you think that perception exists?
What do you think would change if that perception was done away with?
Is there anything you think I’ve missed? Anything else you want to elaborate on?

**Endings:** “Thank you so much for your time. The study results will be forwarded on to you when I’m nearing the end of the project in an audio-visual presentation that you can share with your class. Meanwhile, please email or call if you have any other questions or comments.”