

The Challenge of Children's TV

How to engage the YouTube generation with the wider world

CHILDREN'S FOCUS GROUPS

ibt

INTRODUCTION

We wanted to explore how children develop their awareness and understanding of the wider world and the role that media plays in that process. We interviewed 25 children aged 9 and 10 from a range of backgrounds. The interviews took place in December 2018 and January 2019 at three primary schools – Chase Bridge in Whitton, south west London, Kymin View in Monmouth, south east Wales and Carcroft in Doncaster, South Yorkshire.

We found that the children in all three schools largely formed their impressions of the world from television and YouTube, unless they had family connections to other countries. Several had travelled abroad but a few had only a vague understanding of the concept of ‘abroad.’

Although their television viewing was dominated by American content, a few UK programmes cut through, including big entertainment shows like *Strictly Come Dancing* and environmental programmes like *Blue Planet*. Some children watched the evening news with their parents and most had seen *Newsround* at school.

When we showed the children clips from a range of international content, they were particularly taken by an episode of CBBC’s *My Life* which made them revise their impressions of Africa, and they expressed an interest in seeing more on television that told them about the lives of children in other countries.

How do children develop their awareness of the wider world?

The children we spoke to acquire their awareness of the world from watching broadcast and non-broadcast television programmes (often made for adults), from YouTube content online and from their own personal experience, particularly if they have relatives with connections to other countries.

Some of the children from south west London, whose families had settled here from Sri Lanka, Syria, Afghanistan and India, had all travelled extensively, visiting relatives in many parts of Europe, America and Asia. These connections gave them a more realistic understanding of life in other countries.

This contrasted sharply with those children whose experience of abroad is mainly of package holidays in hotels and resorts constructed for mass tourism. A Chase Bridge pupil summed up his experience of foreign holidays: “They’re all the same. Just different surroundings basically. A beach, trees, hotel”.

There were a significant number of children who had not travelled abroad, and were reliant on school, television and the internet for their knowledge and impressions of other countries. For many of these, the very concept of ‘abroad’ is hard to grasp. When asked if they had been abroad or to another country they often cited trips to places *within* Britain.

All the children in our sample regularly watch CBBC’s *Newsround* in the classroom. At home, family viewing of television still takes place, mostly for big entertainment shows like *X Factor* or *I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here*. Some children watch the early evening news with their parents. Others watch wildlife programmes and can recall series such as *Blue Planet* and *Dynasties*. These children understand some of the issues around environmentalism and pollution of the oceans.

After school activity within the home, particularly for boys, is dominated by online games and YouTube. Girls tend to watch cartoons, Disney films such as *Beauty and the Beast* and CBBC drama series such as *Tracy Beaker*, *Dumping Ground* and *Millie Inbetween*.

Children in all three primaries are more aware of America, Africa and India than other parts of the world, having been shown specific items about each of these at school. Some have studied India at school. Their awareness of Africa is limited and most regard it as a single country. Several children mentioned charity ads including one from WaterAid which showed a child drinking dirty water. This appears to have had a powerful effect on the way they perceive Africa. The children had seen items on *Newsround* about America. Their knowledge of the rest of the world is quite limited.

What impressions do they have of other countries?

The children certainly have strong impressions of America. Sahara from Carcroft is aware that in America “people have guns” and “they try to get each other”. Lacey from Chase Bridge thinks America is “quite calm but in a way loud at the same time” and in California it “has a lot of people killing people”. She has gathered this impression from *Newsround*. Molly also from Chase Bridge remembers seeing an item, possibly from *Newsround*, about people trying to get into America “They had all this camping kit with them. They were camping outside the border to go in but it had been locked and Donald Trump was saying ‘No, they can’t come in because they’re invading my land’”.

When Kira from Chase Bridge watches *Newsround*, “sometimes wars are going on and then it will say some children’s schools are getting burnt down and people don’t have enough food. So sometimes it’s quite sad”. She thinks that children in other

countries “live in poor conditions basically, but only some”.

Elias, who came to the UK from Afghanistan, says Afghanistan is “very poor” so that “not many people can bring their children to school and they don’t have houses. But then in France there’s a lot of money and they build a lot of stuff. Belgium is just like medium. It has money, but not that much”. He has travelled to both countries.

Children at Chase Bridge learnt about India in year four. Shenaya was interested because “there are elephants there and it’s really colourful and has nice festivals”. She said she knows this because she has travelled to Norway, Canada, Spain, Greece, Sri Lanka and France. On hearing this list, Molly, who has never been abroad, reminds Shenaya, “Didn’t you go to Cornwall”? But Shenaya informs her that Cornwall is in fact in England.

What media content do the children consume?

After school both Lola and Chloe from Kymin View watch *Chaser’s Corner*. “It’s this little boy. He has his own family YouTube channel called Funnel Vision. Chaser is only about six or seven and he does all kinds of challenges”. The YouTube channel she’s referring to is FG TeeV, and features an American father voicing over various computer games with his young son.

Chloe enjoys watching adults and children playing pranks on YouTube. Lola says: “I only really watch YouTube. And I watch videos of Slime. It’s just like, satisfying Slime videos”. These appear to be adverts for a plasticine type of product called Slime, which emits sounds as it is being handled and is marketed as ‘satisfying’. However, when their teacher showed them *Newsround* they both enjoyed it. Lola recalls one item about “a kangaroo on the road and a car nearly ran over it. It was jumping in and out of the road. Remember Chloe? The car almost hit it. Luckily they saw it since it was a big one, and the car just swerved”.

Max, who has never travelled abroad, doesn’t like playing video games himself but enjoys watching

people who do. “I like watching Dan TDM and Ali A”. 27 year old British video gamer, Dan TDM, an ‘influencer’, has over 14 billion hits on his YouTube channel for his voice overs of *Minecraft* video games. 25 year old Ali-A has similar numbers for *Fortnite*.

Eva watches American studio dramas on Nickleodeon “I like *The Thundermans* – it’s like *Superheroes*, and *Henry Danger*”. Max and Eva also participate in a joint chat whilst playing Roblox video games after school with others in their class, each from their own homes. Roblox is an online platform that allows users to design their own games.

Both Eva and Max are aware of the News when it’s on in their homes. Max has seen flooding, volcanoes and tornadoes – all “bad tragedies”. Eva has seen flooding “wiping out half the houses in a place in America”. Max has watched *Blue Planet* and *Dynasties*, which are “really good”, but Eva hasn’t.

Jack also watched *Blue Planet*, with his dad. He is aware that “polar bears are sinking in the water”. Jack says he gets most of his information from the internet. He rarely watches the News, “because I am

usually on YouTube". Jack also watches *Snake City*, on Sky, a documentary series about snake catchers in South Africa.

Ruby likes watching cartoons, such as *Alvin and the Chipmunks*. She says her dad watches the News "and sometimes I see that". She too recalls seeing a variety of natural disasters: "Some countries have more chance of getting a disaster either because they're near to water or have really strong winds".

Charlie is aware of climate change and pollution from watching Blue Planet: "There's polar bears dying because all the ice and snow is melting and they're surrounded by water. It's stuff like that that just makes you sad. Somebody needs to stop it from happening. And pollution. In different countries like Japan they have to wear masks so they don't cough all the time".

Most of the boys seem to spend much of their free time playing computer games, either alone or interactively, or watching young adult male influencers play whilst most girls watch either American or occasionally British drama series, play computer games or watch young female (or occasionally male) American adult influencers voicing over games that are aimed at girls. They appear unaware that some of the adults they are watching are commercially promoting the product. The boundaries between adverts and editorial seem to be non-existent.

The children don't watch factual television about life in foreign countries. What's happening abroad is really not on their radar, apart from the odd item they watch when shown episodes of *Newsround* at school.

However, one continent seemed to unite all 25 children in holding equally simplistic impressions and opinions – Africa. Children in all three schools have very similar views about Africa. Several spoke about the charity ads mentioned previously. Virtually all regard Africa as a single country and are not aware of different countries or disparities of wealth.

Lacy feels sorry for "those who live in Africa. They don't have anywhere to live or play or anywhere to eat, or get any presents. They don't get anything on their birthday. They don't even have a good education in school. They just wake up, here we go, have a bad day again. I've seen that children are drinking dirty water from the river. They're wearing ragged clothes. Their houses are broken from all the storms and lightning. We watch films on ITV and we see adverts of children drinking dirty water and it has a number to ring to see if you can help in Africa".

Max, who has never travelled abroad, says "I get the impression that some countries are like England. There are some really nice houses and quite a lot of people have a house but there's some countries like Africa that there's literally no money or houses in sight".

However, out of all the children, Charlie from Carcroft, senses the deficit on offer to them: "Some of the stuff (what's happening in the world) you don't know about. Like, if there were a hurricane in, I don't know, Africa, you wouldn't know about it because they don't go that deep and you don't really know about what's happening in different countries".

What kind of international content would the children like to see?

In the final session in all three schools, each group came together to watch a range of clips of international content. The most telling reaction in all three schools was to a documentary about a black female teenage motorcross champion from Zimbabwe. This floored the children, on a number of levels: Firstly, after it was pointed out that Zimbabwe was an African country (only Charlie from Carcroft knew Zimbabwe was in Africa), they

were amazed by the green and pleasant, blossom-lined streets with high rise buildings that featured in the capital city, Harare. This shocked some of the children and challenged their preconceptions. Secondly they were surprised to discover that an African child could afford to indulge in the sport of motorcross.

As Max said: "It's a bit odd for someone to want

to drive a motorcycle if you live in a place where there aren't that many motorcycles". The short clip led Aiden to revise his impressions. He no longer thought of all of Africa as being poor because "she had a 450cc bike, which must cost £500". As Charlie reflected: "There's loads of adverts about Africa. We need to save Africa because of dirty water and all that. So I wouldn't have thought they (countries in Africa) were like Zimbabwe – nice and all".

When asked directly what programmes they would like to see about the rest of the world, the children said that they would like more about how children live and about animals.

Lola from Kymin View said "I would really like to see how people live in Spain for more than a week because I'm guessing that they've got to put tons of sun cream on every day if they live there".

But for some of the children in Carcroft, abroad is simply unattainable, and at times some of them seem to have closed off the possibility that they will ever be able to interact with the rest of the world. Aiden discussed with Kelsi the plight of poor people in Africa and America. Kelsi said she felt very sad for them "because they have to drink dirty water. I feel very sorry for them and I want to give them food but I don't know where they are". Aiden explained that "You have to pay £4,000 just to get there on a plane".

METHODOLOGY

The research was undertaken by Evans Woolfe Media on behalf of IBT. It consisted of oral interviews with year five primary school children from three schools. Schools were chosen to represent a variety of environments, including an urban part of outer London, a rural area close to the English/Welsh border and a former mining town in South Yorkshire. 25 children were interviewed from a mixture of working and middle class backgrounds, ethnically ranging from white British children to first generation immigrant children from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Mauritius, Syria and India.

The children were initially interviewed in groups of two or three. A final full group session was conducted in each school, in which all the children were shown four clips featuring international content from a TV documentary, an animated feature film and two factual television programmes.