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Journalist Reliance on Teens and Children

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This study considers the ethical implications of quoting children with particular emphasis on privacy and accuracy. A content analysis is used to examine how newspaper reporters quote children and teenagers. The study found that youths most likely are named when they are quoted in the newspaper. Teens who are 17 are the most likely to be quoted. Youths most frequently appear in feature stories, and they most frequently are treated as experts who provide the reporter with factual information. The researcher argues that journalists should consider the vulnerabilities of youths before quoting them.

As sobbing children met the cameras' eye and the reporter's pen, America was swept into the April 1999 saga of the Columbine High School shootings. Readers and listeners heard from Jefferson County's sheriff and the local school superintendent, but the most heart-wrenching tales came from the students who survived.

Students told readers of *The New York Times* their personal thoughts and details about shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Readers learned about the shooters and their friends' "devilish, half-dead, half-alive look" (Brooke, 1999) and heard descriptions of bloody walls and floors. The teenagers' full names often were listed along with direct quotes about the incident.

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Youths were some of the journalists' main sources of information, despite their ages and, most likely, inexperience with the media. During the interviews, many of the teens cried and sobbed when relating about what they experienced inside the high school. The reporting techniques captured reader attention but also raised concern about how journalists relied on youths. Were teens endangered when the news media aired real-time telephone discussions from students trapped inside the school (Steele, 2000)?

The use of youths as news sources raises a host of ethical questions. Privacy concerns abound with questions about naming children who have been involved in serious crimes. Elliott (1990) said the media should not decide for themselves whether a crime is serious enough to merit naming a child suspect. Accuracy also is an ethical issue. Are children and teenagers the most accurate sources for news stories? Child development research has shown that children have different reasoning capabilities from their older counterparts (Piaget, 1958).

While there are ethical concerns about how youths are used as news sources, little research has examined how children and teenagers are quoted in the newspaper. This study is designed to create a framework for additional research into the use of youths as news sources. Both children up to the age of 12 and teenagers 13 or older will be examined. This study should provide descriptive data such as the most common age of youths who are quoted in the newspaper, whether they typically are named when quoted, and how they are used as news sources. In addition, this study will consider the ethical ramifications of the use of children and adolescents as news sources. An emphasis will be placed on the privacy and accuracy issues surrounding youth sources.

BACKGROUND

Children have important stories to tell. The only way to get those stories is to let children and teenagers tell stories in their own words (McBride, 2003). Tompkins (1999) argued that juveniles are important to news stories because their voices are sometimes the only way for reporters to understand how children view the world.

Limited research has examined how youths are used as newspaper sources. Most articles make qualitative, prescriptive arguments about when or how youths should be interviewed. There is no body of research to guide reporters as to how, when, or where they should draw the line between interviewing a child and leaving him or her out of the story (Stone, 1999). In addition, ethics codes, which normally offer journalists some guidance in dealing with moral issues, frequently do not address the use of children (Fullerton, 2004). Fullerton suggested that journalists use social science methodology when dealing with children. She

notes that traditional journalism training does not prepare reporters to handle interviews with children.

Privacy

Youths constitute a vulnerable population. Journalists struggle with balancing the rights of children against putting together a strong news story. Some journalists argue that the story must come first, while others argue that it is more important to shield a child's privacy (Stone, 1999). Tompkins (1999) said there is some concern, however, that children may not understand the ramifications of what they say. Tompkins states that journalists should consider why they need interviews with children and evaluate the quality of the information they expect to get. For instance, the reporter should question what might motivate a youth to talk to him or her. The journalists should ask how he or she would feel about the interview as that child's parent. Tompkins also suggested that the journalist should consider the alternatives to interviewing the child. That advice relates to Rawls' (1971) theory of just societies. Rawls said that society should strive to improve the wellbeing of the weakest people in society. Society should give the "greatest benefit" to those who are the most disadvantaged (p. 83).

One of the biggest potential problems with interviewing youths is the journalist's ability to draw out information from news sources. For example, Parson (1990) discussed what happened to *The Des Moines Register* in the case of a youth charged with involuntary manslaughter. Jody Collins, 14, was accused of killing a 13-year-old by punching him in the back. Collins answered the door when a reporter visited his home and answered several questions without the presence of a guardian. The teen articulately answered the questions and the paper decided to use the information. Before Collins was charged, the newspaper withheld his name. After he was charged with manslaughter, the newspaper named the teenager. Newspaper staff argued that the teen should be named because of the intense public interest in the case. In the end, the judge halted the manslaughter case and put the adolescent on probation for a year. Some questions existed as to whether Collins should have been named in the newspaper or if a previous sexual abuse case for which he testified should have been raised.

Newspaper editors and reporters often must weigh the newsworthiness of a child in their decision about naming him or her. Peyser (1989) recounted her experience at *The Tampa Tribune* when she was told by her superiors to name a developmentally disabled child, even though the paper previously had agreed not to do so. The child's mother had gone to the newspaper with her battle to get special education services. In exchange, the paper agreed to withhold the child's name. After not having any success with the school board, the mother decided to take her case before a state hearing officer, where the

discussion occurred publicly. At that point, the newspaper decided to release the child's name. The reporter said she was bothered by the decision because the story involved a disabled child. Nonetheless, Peyser was bound by her editor's decision.

While few studies have specifically considered the use of children as news sources or the privacy issues surrounding the use of children as sources, much research has emphasized more general ethical obligations of journalists for privacy. The journalistic right to publish private information often is weighed against the public's right to information (Meyers, 1993). Frederickson (2002) said that journalists often weigh "the good provided by revealing certain truths against the harm caused to the people involved" (p. 36). The concern for privacy in relation to public interest prevents the journalist from being "fully accountable to the public" (Wilkinson, 2005, p. 109). Allen (2003) considered the obligations that journalists have toward "at-risk" sources (p. 10). She said that some journalists feel it is important be honest with sources and are willing to abandon a story for the sake of a source.

Halstuk and Chamberlain (2006) argued that the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was designed to create a balance between the society's right to information and personal privacy. That balance comes from FOIA exemptions that protect individual privacy. The exemptions give government personnel the right to deny releasing private information. At the same time, the FOIA allows those who have been denied information the right to seek a court order requiring the government to release the withheld information. Husselbee (1994) said that privacy legislation is not effective, and that journalists should not allow privacy claims to stand in the way of stories that have public interest.

While the courts can help journalists to gain access to information, the courts also have punished journalists for publishing private information. Voakes (1998) studied journalists who have been sued for invasion of privacy. He found that the journalists typically did not anticipate legal issues when privacy violations occurred.

Some scholars have offered guidelines to help journalists determine whether to publish private information. Brislin (1992) recommended that journalists use a framework based on the Just War Doctrine. Among other things, the guide says journalists should have "just cause" before they publish information (p. 212). The journalist asks whether the shared information would "save the community from a general harm, or individuals from an unwarranted harm?" (p. 213). The journalist also must consider his or her intention for publishing the information: "Would the pursuit have the same vigor if the cast of characters changed or if no prizes existed?" (p. 214). The journalist also needs to evaluate "comparative justice" by weighting society's right to information against individual privacy. Brislin also advised that private information should be published only after the journalist attempted every other possible method for telling the story.

Wilkins (1994) stressed the importance of justifying a reason to publish private information.

Youth Newspaper Readership

There is some concern as to whether youths recognize "the ramifications of what they say to themselves or to others" (Tompkins, 1999). If a child is quoted saying something negative about a friend or a teacher, he or she might be subjected to criticism by peers. His or her privacy potentially is at risk simply because of the youth's inability to anticipate the consequences of talking with the media.

For children and teenagers to understand how they might be quoted in newspapers, they need to be familiar with newspaper content. Research shows that while some adolescents read the paper, many do not. Those who read the paper may be more familiar with the comics section or articles about celebrities rather than the local news stories in which they may be quoted.

A study by the Newspaper Association of America found that slightly more than half of the teens surveyed had read a newspaper in the past seven days. The study found that teens most likely read the comics and the sports sections. Local news, national news, and grocery ads are the least frequently read sections (Targeting Teens, 2005). Research from Barnhurst and Wartella (1991) argued that youths need more background information in news stories in order to comprehend the content. To complicate matters, Stone (1987) said newspaper content is too complex for the general public to read.

Pardun and Scott (2004) found that white adolescents reported reading the newspaper more frequently than black youths. They also found that the comics section was the most frequently read by teens, and the sports and entertainment sections were popular as well. Black and white teens tended to prefer different sections of the paper. Blacks tended to read local news, while white youths read international news. The two groups also preferred different parts of the entertainment section, with whites preferring to read horoscopes and advice columns while blacks read more celebrity news as well as lifestyle and entertainment stories. More than half of the adolescents sampled said that they could "live without reading newspapers" (p. 80).

Accuracy

Accuracy often is cited as one of the tenets of newspaper credibility. Thorton (2000) found that readers are concerned about the truth. Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) found that journalists have a system of beliefs that highlight truth. Hart (2003) believes that journalists are not quick to admit mistakes. Errors often occur because reporters misinterpret information. Hart found, however, that most articles contain errors on more basic information such as dates or misspelled

names. News directors said that they frequently struggle with accuracy problems (Hanson, 2002).

Child Reasoning

The journalist's ability to be accurate when quoting children is called into question by the reasoning skills of youths. Piaget (1952) said children younger than eight struggle to understand the difference between "fabulation and truth" (p. 202). Children assume things are true without trying to find the truth for themselves. Communication between the child and adult is convoluted because the child is "under the delusion that the adult understands everything he says" (p. 205). The child does not clearly explain him or herself. The child also feels inferior to the adult, and "he remembers only as much as he chooses of what is said by adults, because of his inability to enter into the world of 'grown-ups'" (p. 205). Children are unable to explain how they arrive at their conclusions. They cannot explain the deductive processes that they use. As stated by DeVries and Kohlberg (1987), who analyzed Piaget's research, "no matter what the content domain, young children think in qualitatively different ways from older children and adults" (p. 18).

According to Piaget (1958), an adolescent's reasoning abilities are more advanced than that of a child. A baby can only comprehend the objects he or she sees. From the ages of two to seven, the child is in what Piaget calls the preoperational period. The child can understand some relationships between objects, but his or her comprehension of those relationships is limited. From around age 7 up to 11 years old, the child can make some logical judgments. For example, the child can understand that a piece of clay contains the same amount of clay even if someone changes its shape. Between the ages of 12 and 15, the child begins to use hypothetical reasoning.

Research also shows that children are unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Rapaczynski, Singer, & Singer, 1982). The ability to understand the two concepts develops over time. This research area often emphasizes media effects, which considers how children are affected by fantasy material that they see in the media (Singer & Singer, 2001). For example, children's fear toward fantasy programming tends to decrease with age, whereas the fear inspired by television news increases with age (Valkenburg, Cantor, & Peters, 2000).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to obtain descriptive data as to how children are used as sources in newspaper stories. Privacy and accuracy were the two major ethical issues of interest.

Privacy concerns the child's right to control information about him or herself. Frederickson (2002) showed that journalists often weigh the societal good that will come from sharing private information in comparison to the harm that might follow. Privacy rights are called into question when children are named in a news story. Some scholars have said that children should be given more privacy protection than adults (Tompkins, 1999). Nonetheless, in many cases, children are named in news stories which could paint the child in a negative light. Once he or she has been named, the child may find him or herself permanently connected to mistakes or occurrences from his or her youth.

In relation to these privacy issues, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: Are youths usually named in newspaper stories?

The limited reasoning capabilities of children raises the issue as to how they are used as news sources. For instance, is the child providing the reporter with some sort of factual, expert information, or is the child providing more general information?

RQ2: How old are children when they are quoted in newspaper stories?

To study these issues, another research question was raised:

RQ3: How are youths used as sources?

To gain a better understanding of how children more generally are used as news sources, an additional research questions was asked:

RQ4: What type of stories are youths most frequently quoted in?

METHOD

A content analysis was conducted to assess the frequency with which youths are used as sources in newspaper stories. To select newspapers for the study, the United States was divided into six geographic regions: New England, Middle Atlantic, South, Midwest, Southwest, and West. The largest circulating newspaper from each region was selected for the sample: *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Chicago Tribune,* the *Houston Chronicle*, and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Once the newspapers were selected, a Lexis-Nexis search was conducted to find youths who were quoted in newspaper stories. Because Lexis-Nexis did not provide access to articles from the *Chicago Tribune*, the second-largest

newspaper in that region, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, was selected. The research was limited to January 2003 to December 2003, and the terms "child said," "children said," "teen said," and "teenager said" were used to narrow the search. The sample was collected for an entire year to help ensure a large sample of news stories. The researcher feared that a smaller sample, based on a single week or two, would not have provided significant numbers of child-sourced articles.

Once articles were collected, the researcher defined the categories for the study. Each quote from a youth was coded.

Age

The specific age of each child was coded from the youngest child to 18 year olds. Eighteen year olds who were in college were not coded because that student might have had different experiences or ideas that might not accurately reflect the experiences that a younger teen might encounter. Because many teens turn 18 before they graduate high school, the remaining 18 year olds were coded.

The youth's exact age was coded unless it was not available. If the child's specific age was not available, but some other identifying information such as year in school made it clear that the child was under 12, he or she was given a specific code.

Story Type

The type of news story was assigned into one of eight categories. One category was used for all stories that reflected *school news*, whether it was a feature about a classroom event or breaking news story that developed during a school board meeting. *Sports* stories were placed into a separate category, and included anything related to sports.

All *crime* stories that had not reached the court system were placed in another category. These typically were stories that focused on the police investigation into a crime or interviews with witnesses. Stories that focused on an investigation that had reached the court system were placed in the *court* category. Those stories reflected testimony in court, or a child's reaction to a case that was being tried in court.

Stories that focused on *military* families looked at what life was like for the families of soldiers who already may be fighting in a military conflict, or people who were expecting to be sent into active duty. Articles that focused on wars or other military conflicts were coded separately in the *war/military conflict* category. These stories included children talking about their experiences in war-torn countries.

Two more general categories were utilized for stories that did not fall into the other subject areas. The *feature* category included soft news stories that did

not fall into one of the other categories. It might have been a story about a pet or an article about a new business. The *hard news* category primarily was for breaking news stories. It could include an article about a government issue or an investigative piece.

Source

Each quote was coded as to whether the youth was the *primary* or secondary source for the story. A youth was considered a *primary* source if either the story was about the child, such as a profile of a youth who had won an award, or if the story was on another topic, but the child was quoted more than other speakers. Youths were considered secondary if they were not the main focus of the story.

Named Sources

Each quote also was coded as to whether the youth was *named*. A child was only considered named if both the first and last names were given.

Primary Use

The use of the youth was coded for each quote. He or she could have been considered a witness in one quote and a victim in another case.

The *peer-reaction* category was used for youths who reacted to what someone else said or did. It was only used if the youth did not know the peer well. The *expert* category was used when the youth gave a testimonial about a close friend or parent. This category also was used for youths who were authorities on some other type of information, such as a club that the youth started or some type of issue that he or she studied substantially. This category also was used for quotes when a youth talked about his or her experiences, such as life at summer camp.

A youth was coded as a *witness* if the quote focused on what he or she saw when a crime or accident occurred. The *victim* category was reserved for comments from a youth speaking about his experiences of suffering. It could be a youth who endured sexual assault or a child who was in a car accident.

The *opinion* category focused on youths who spoke about their attitudes toward a product or an event. If a youth went beyond an opinion and made some sort of a suggestion for action, it was placed in a *recommendation* category. The youth might share what he or she thinks someone else or some agency should do, such as a child talking about how the president should handle the war in Iraq.

When a youth provided an explanation of the world or a description of what someone else said, the quote was classified in the *interpretation of reality*

category. This was reserved for a youth interpreting what a parent said or could be an inexperienced youth describing what he or she believes happens during war.

The final category was for *questions*. Any kind of question fell into this category.

Intercoder-reliability

Two coders evaluated 12% of the articles to test for intercoder-reliability. The coders agreed 80–100% of the time (Cohen's Kappa = .80 to 1.00). This range means that on a single category, such as *primary use*, the coders might have agreed 80% of the time whereas on other categories, such as *named*, the coders agreed 100% of the time.

RESULTS

A total of 465 quotes were coded from 184 stories. The highest percentage of the quotes (24.9%) came from the *Houston Chronicle*. The fewest number of quotes (3.7%) came from the *Chicago Sun-Times.* The other newspapers fell somewhere in the middle, *Los Angeles Times*, 21.7%; *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* 18.5%; *The New York Times*, 15.9%; and *Boston Globe*, 15.3%.

RQ1: Are youths usually named in newspaper stories?

Youths most frequently were named in stories (66.5%), whereas they were unnamed sources in 33.5% of the cases. Children under the age of 13 were evenly split between named (50%) and unnamed (50%) categories. Youths over the age of 13 were more likely to be named (71%) than they were to be unnamed (29%).

RQ2: How old are children when they are quoted in newspaper stories?

The most commonly reported age of the youths was 17 years old (20.2%). The other quoted youths ranged in age from 4 to 18. The next highest age was the category of teens whose age was not obvious (14%). The majority of the youths were 13 or older (79%). The remaining 21% were children under the age of 13. The age of two of the news sources could not be determined.

RQ3: How are youths used as sources?

The children and adolescents (13 years or older) were evenly used as main sources as compared to a minor sources. They were classified as main sources in 232 instances and as minor sources in 233 cases.

The majority of youths were coded as experts for their primary use (70.3%). The fewest were coded as peer reference (0.2%) or questions (1.3%). Children under the age of 13 most frequently were coded as experts (63.5%) or as giving an opinion (13.5%). They were never used in the peer reaction category and rarely were coded in the witness (2.1%) or victim (3.1%) categories. Teens who were 13 or older most frequently were used as experts (70.2%). They gave opinions in 11% of the cases. Adolescents rarely were classified as giving a peer reaction (0.3%) or asking a question (0.8%).

RQ4: What type of stories are youths most frequently quoted in?

The majority of the stories (50.8%) were coded as feature stories. The next highest classification was the school-news category (20.2%). The remaining stories were distributed widely across the other categories. Fewer stories fell into the hard news categories, such as crime, court, or hard news.

Children more frequently were quoted in features stories than in any other category. The most notable distinction between categories is that most stories fell into the softer news categories. Children younger than 13 were never quoted in crime or court stories. They most frequently were quoted in feature stories (39%) or in school news stories (27%). Teens ages 13 or older were used in all of the story types but most frequently were quoted in features (54%) and school news (21%). The next highest number of adolescents were quoted in crime stories (9.5%), sports news (7.4%), and court (7.1%). The other categories were used less frequently.

DISCUSSION

As a vulnerable population, youths may be entitled to a different treatment than more traditional news sources (Stone, 1999). Reporters compromise the privacy of children by naming them in the media. Once they appear in the media, youths could be stigmatized by what they said to the media, or they could be discovered by predators or estranged parents.

Despite those potential problems, this study found that the youths in this sample more likely were to be named than not named. To gain a better understanding as to why young sources are named, the researcher interviewed journalists at the newspapers that were studied. Although attempts were made to interview reporters at all of the papers, only three reporters were willing to cooperate.

All three reporters said their papers had some sort of a policy against not naming sources. A journalist from the *Los Angeles Times* said there are potential legal problems associated with naming youths in the media. The same journalist said it is to the reporter's advantage to get permission from a parent or the school before quoting a child. That permission helps the journalist to ensure that the child will not be harmed if his or her name appears in the paper.

When asked why youths were quoted, two journalists indicated that a young person's comments can add color to stories. The third reporter stated that it's important to include everyone's voice in the media. By including youths, journalists can ascertain how children and adolescents feel about issues that are important to them.

The youths in this sample were more likely to be quoted if they were 13 or older. A journalist from the *Houston Chronicle* stated that she frequently quotes children as young as four, but that those younger children often fail to speak in complete sentences. A journalist from the *Los Angeles Times* said younger sources frequently were used for stylistic purposes but fail to add substantial information to the story.

The limited reasoning ability of some children (Piaget, 1951, 1958) also could create accuracy problems for the media. Children may be unable to accurately explain their thoughts. They may struggle with understanding an event they witnessed.

Despite those reasoning limitations, the youths used in this sample most likely were treated as experts. By the definitions used in this study, expert sources were youths who gave the journalist some type of factual information. The expert category included items such as "I can even set different ringers for each of my friends, so I know who's calling before I even answer it" (Eckstein, 2003). The category also included a youth's discussion of a personal experience: "I've taken a ton of pictures of my new puppy, but I haven't figured out how to send them to anyone yet" (Eckstein, 2003). This study also found that youths frequently are quoted when they share opinions, such as one teen's discussion of cell phones: "I think they're so cute" (Eckstein, 2003).

All of the journalists interviewed for this study said it is not in the journalist's best interest to trust factual information that comes from younger children. One journalist said younger children usually are being asked for opinions or observations rather than facts. Two of the journalists also said that reporters should verify the facts they gather from children. One journalist said he is more comfortable getting factual information from older youths rather than children.

The responses from these journalists make it difficult to understand why so many of the sources in this sample were coded as experts. It could be that most of the sources were sharing what journalists considered to be observations, since a journalist said it is acceptable to get observational information from young sources. Another explanation might be that this sample is not representative of

how journalists really use young sources. A third possibility is that the expert category was too broad to be coded properly. There is no clear explanation for this finding.

Because this study found differences in the frequency to which youths are used as news sources, the journalists also were asked whether their newsrooms have any formal guidelines regarding child sources. The journalists said they were not aware of any official policies. All three said the topic is discussed informally within the newsroom.

In the hopes of gaining an explanation for the differing frequencies to which child sources were used in this sample, the researcher consulted the ethics code for each paper. While the *Chicago Sun-Times* had the lowest use of child sources in this sample, an editor from the paper confirmed via e-mail that the paper does not have an ethics code. Multiple attempts to contact the editor or *Sun-Times* reporters for additional information were unsuccessful. The researcher was unable to view the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*'s ethics code, but an editor at the paper stated that the policy does not address child sources. Of the codes that were available, only the *Los Angeles Times* made any reference to children. That code offered guidelines for identifying children in crime cases. None of the viewed codes included any other discussion of children or unsophisticated sources. The researcher was unable to find any satisfactory explanation for the different frequencies of quotes from youths.

This study has some limitations, such as the nonrandom sample. The study also might be stronger if the expert category was split into a couple of carefully defined categories. Nonetheless, it provides some beginning information as to the usage of child sources.

Final Thoughts

There clearly are some privacy and accuracy issues that journalists must consider when they interview youths. Even when a youth merely is quoted to add color or to a story, there is some risk associated with publicizing the identity of a child source. There may be numerous safety concerns that a journalist cannot anticipate.

Also, if teens merely are reading the comics or sports sections of the paper as research shows (Targeting Teens, 2005), they may not be capable of anticipating the consequences of granting an interview. As the journalists questioned for this study also said, there are accuracy concerns in interviewing youths. Children struggle to understand truth (Piaget, 1952). They also fail to explain themselves clearly.

Someone needs to ensure that the child is protected and that accuracy is not compromised when youths are included in news stories. The journalist should accept those responsibilities each time that he or she interviews a child, after

all society should use special care when dealing with vulnerable populations (Rawls, 1971).

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