Covering Kids: are journalists guilty of exploiting children?

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ABSTRACT Because the social sciences have provided much of the intellectual base on which journalism rests, this paper calls for the application of social scientific protocols when journalists interview or interact with children. Working from several Canadian case studies, it argues that media professionals must adopt a systematized and rigorous approach for reporting young people that is akin to the strict guidelines set out by the social sciences to ensure the ethical treatment of human subjects in research situations. If news organizations in general and journalists specifically were to borrow these research protocols and adapt them to their interview situations, news people might better ensure that children's stories are told in a responsible, ethical manner.

KEY WORDS: Journalism, Ethics, Interviewing Children, Juvenile Media Coverage

Introduction

Children are a responsibility—not just for their parents, but for every adult with whom they come in contact. The news media do not cover children much. They do not interview or quote them often, and relative to other age groups, they do not focus many stories on them. The reasons for this are probably obvious and largely practical: most news is relevant to adults who comprise the vast majority of newspaper, online, television and radio news audiences. As Kelly McBride (2003) points out, many journalists have an aversion to covering children because they see such stories as “puff” pieces, or they fear that children are poor interview subjects. But occasionally, children do get coverage: perhaps the number of families living on welfare has increased and reporters want to profile how life is for children living in poverty. In Ontario, Canada, this was what Toronto Star reporters Laurie Monsebraaten and Trish Orwen did in the 1999 series, “Hard Times.” Or perhaps a child is waiting for medical treatment and his or her family cannot entirely fund the procedures. A friend of such a family contacted Wade Hemsworth at The Hamilton Spectator and he wrote a number of stories about the boy, including one that covered his funeral. Or perhaps The London Free Press has a terrific photograph of a hungry child eating cereal as part of a local “breakfast for kids” campaign run by concerned volunteers. Should they identify the child and run the photo?

In each of these Canadian cases, while there were large differences in reporters’ motivation, in treatment of children, in length of time spent with them, and in amount of coverage they received, all of the children were potentially at psychological risk. Deni Elliot in “Suffer the children” (1990) writes that “the more journalists value a piece of information, the less they value or protect the child.” Her position may seem extreme, but the truth of the situation is that few journalists or media outlets rigorously or systematically consider what coverage may mean for children and very few have detailed protocol about interacting with minors.

The issue is not entirely addressed by a consideration of current ethics codes, but some countries are better than others at pointing out the fact that children are a special group and deserve particular care and attention. In the United States, many media outlets have their own policies about journalists’ conduct; however, few individual organizations make any
specific reference to children. Taking the issue to a national level, both the Radio-Television News Directors’ Association and the Society of Professional Journalists have ethics codes that urge journalists to use “special care” when dealing with children and offer them more privacy than would be given to adults in similar situations. In Denmark, the National Code of Conduct that was accepted by the journalists’ union specifically addresses children in a section about the reporting of juvenile crime. This legal document asks that members of the press exercise restraint when they report about the misadventures of young people in order to protect their future. The Danish code also says that reporters must not abuse any person’s confidence and they should be aware that some people will not understand the “effects of their statements.” Similarly, Australia, Germany, and France have codes that suggest journalists should protect people who may not have the mental capacity to understand what coverage might mean—and these countries include children in this category.

In terms of individual countries, the most comprehensive guidelines dealing specifically with children are to be found in the UK. The Editor’s Code of Practice (policed by the Press Complaints Commission) devotes a great deal of space to discussing the need for an overriding public interest if there is to be disclosure of personal information about or identification of children. Going beyond national borders for a broader perspective, the UNICEF media team has compiled a series of principles for ethical reporting on children. This document is highly detailed and clearly foregrounds issues like child privacy and the need to keep first the interests of each individual young person. This implication is clear: children are not to be used in the service of news. UNICEF is encouraging feedback on this list of principles and is asking journalists everywhere to take their guidelines into account regardless of where they practise their craft.

Here in Canada, the Canadian Association of Journalists has recently written a new set of ethical guidelines, but suggestions about the ethical treatment of children are noticeably absent. And while reporters and editors virtually everywhere believe that children’s voices should be heard in the news, despite the codes there is no standard procedure in place for anticipating or predicting how children’s lives will, or might, change because journalists write stories about them. Codes do not help predict how becoming involved in young peoples’ daily lives to a greater or lesser extent can affect how they see themselves now or some years in the future. It is difficult to know how children feel about what they may say in an interview. The power dynamic is unequal and they may not feel able to decline comment. In addition, their parents may have made it clear that they expect their son or daughter to participate and children feel pressure to conform to parental wishes. In such situations, it is not always safe to assume that parents have the best interests of their offspring at heart, and these sorts of considerations are simply not addressed by any journalistic codes of conduct.

The Broader Context

I teach in a journalism department that is part of an interdisciplinary faculty at the University of Western Ontario in London, Canada. Some of my colleagues are not journalists but information experts who regularly conduct social research, sometimes involving children and adolescents. The boundaries for these researchers are much discussed in social science literature, and the university itself sets out clear guidelines about interacting with research subjects—including children. If a researcher wants to conduct interviews or even observe children for research purposes, there are lengthy forms to be completed, consent forms to be signed by parents, certain protocol to be followed, and ultimately, in order for the information-gathering to occur, approval must be granted by the Ethics Review Board appointed by the university.

My contention is that in some instances, the job of a good journalist is not unlike that of a social researcher: journalists interview people, amass information, try to interpret the results and ultimately make the findings and observations available—through print or broadcast—to
those who are interested. These assertions are not to gloss over the underlying differences in both the roles and goals of journalists and social researchers. The latter group generally function in an academic setting and their timetables offer a great deal more latitude, in most instances, than do those of the journalists. For researchers, the goal is to develop a better understanding of usually complex social interactions and situations. Their results are meaningful largely to a select group of others—mostly academics—and those results may be seen as a part of an ongoing process. Each experiment may be only one small step forward.

For journalists, the goal is to publish (or broadcast) new and vital information to the general public in order that citizens can educate themselves about their world and participate in making the informed decisions that are the cornerstone of Western democracy. Journalists do not necessarily have an ongoing commitment to the stories they cover, nor can they rely on an already interested audience (as academics can). Add to this the fact that most stories are produced in a relatively tight time frame and the results of the journalistic endeavor may be quite different from those of social science. But the good journalists, the ones who are committed to the idea of serving the public responsibly, of offering salient, compelling stories in a contextual manner, aspire to offer their audiences the same high-caliber information as a researcher and those journalists would not be afraid to make the process involved in gathering the material transparent—as researchers must do for their own communities.

Such a group of journalists are more than just keen observers and note-takers; they are “public intellectuals” and what they say, how they represent people, does have an impact on how others see these story subjects and how the subjects construct themselves—especially those in the process of growing up. So implicit in this inclusion of the intellectual dimension is the fact that journalists, like social researchers, have a responsibility to those whom they cover and this responsibility is even greater when the stories involve children. While most journalists do not take this task lightly, they also do not have the benefit of either an established protocol or a large body of literature (as social research does) to help them in this regard. While the tasks journalism tries to perform and the function it provides are similar in some ways to that of a social researcher, journalism itself does not have the framework to guide reporters in their interactions with youths. This is not to say such discussions never occur. On the Poynter Institute website, for example, Al Tompkins has a short piece offering practical advice to journalists who interview children. But the discussion is limited because the advice is confined to how to conduct the interview and the context does not allow Tompkins to consider the larger motivations or implications of unstructured interaction between journalists and children. I do recognize that even mentioning words like “structure,” “framework,” and “protocol” are anathema to most media folk; however, I also firmly believe that it is time to open the discussion that should be occurring. Media outlets need to develop valid, respectful, and specific procedures for covering children. Journalism schools need to educate students in a systematic way about the ethical implications of interviewing and covering children so that in the future, practicing journalists are better prepared. As McBride (2003) notes, media outlets tend to send out their least experienced and youngest journalists to report young people because they think, erroneously, that these stories are not important. I would argue that media outlets ought to send their most experienced journalists—those with special training and a keen sensitivity to the potential risks involved in interviewing young people—so that children, the most vulnerable segment of the population, are protected.

This paper will use several recent Canadian cases involving coverage of children to explore a wide range of ethical concerns that may confront a journalist interacting with and writing about minors. While the examples are drawn from the Canadian media scene, the observations from these cases are valid across many newsrooms and the implications for this discussion are universal.
Why the Concern?

Although journalists are expected to address sensitive social problems—child abuse, families living on welfare, or terminal illnesses to name but a few—the traditional tools of the trade do not really equip them to evaluate the potential psychological risks coverage of children in such circumstances may present to these young story subjects. There are three universities in the province of Ontario that offer journalism degrees: Ryerson University, The University of Western Ontario and Carleton University. None of the current ethics professors dedicates even one class to discussing how to cover children. Vince Carlin, program director and ethics professor at Ryerson, said that when he teaches the course in alternate years, he always tells students that they should request the permission of a parent or a teacher before interviewing those under 16 years of age. Ryerson’s ethics professor for 2003, Bill Cameron, said that he would be happy to include such a discussion, but he does not have one on the course outline at present. At Western, the ethics course is confined to six weeks and is taught in conjunction with media law. While issues related to covering children may arise in relation to privacy or informed consent, to date I have not focused discussion solely on the concerns I raise in this paper. Klaus Pohle, a journalism professor at Carleton, said that the situation at his university is similar. He pointed out that undergraduate journalism students do not encounter a formal ethics course until their third year of study and then it is only covered for a four-week period. Carleton’s Masters in Journalism has no specific course dealing only with ethics. While Pohle explained that discussions with ethical dimensions occur in conjunction with issues in journalism law as well as numerous other courses, he described the lack of time devoted solely to ethics and logic as “completely unsatisfactory.” Similarly, the reporters interviewed in the cases below all noted that discussions about protocol with juveniles were not a part of their formal education, nor part of their newsrooms, and several of them thought such talks ought to be happening on a regular basis.

Despite the lack of a formal approach or educational background, all of the reporters and editors with whom I spoke when researching this piece told me that they do treat children differently from adults. They generally seek parental permission and believe that the young people they interview want to speak to them. But none of these media professionals had a consistent policy or checklist to evaluate whether or not there was any risk of psychological harm to the child either through interviewing and observing them or through publication of details of their lives. They did not have any clear protocol in place—as social science researchers do—to ensure that the children could withdraw from the interview or ask them not to print what they had just seen, heard or witnessed. In social research, a great deal of debate has focused on when, if ever, it is ethical to conduct “nontherapeutic” research (research that does not affect physical well-being) on children. Paul Ramsey (1976) argues strongly that the use of non-consenting subjects like children is wrong whether or not there is any risk posed to the subject. Richard McCormick (1974) is more moderate and suggests that such research is acceptable if it involves no discernible risk to the child. In Canada, the Department of Health and Welfare governs behavioral research on children (in the United States, the equivalent bureau is the Department of Health and Human Services). It requires that an institutional review board approve proposed research and obtain both written consent from the parents and assent (an informal, verbal agreement) from the children. Canadian law (and most state law in the United States) requires permission from parents for any important decisions regarding minors until they reach the age of consent (18 years).

The very word “child” and its implicit status is somewhat problematic in Canada. From an adult perspective, the term clearly applies to anyone, of either gender, under the age of 12 years. I personally would consider someone under the age of 16 a child also, but I recognize that he or she might prefer “teenager” or even “adolescent.” Similarly, the Canadian Press Stylebook (1995; used by virtually all Canadian papers) suggests that persons under the age of 16 may be called either “boys” or “girls” (p. 20).
From a legal perspective in Canada, there is legislation called the Youth Criminal Justice Act. It prohibits release of the names and identifying details of anyone under the age of 18 who commits a crime and incurs a criminal record. News outlets may not disseminate such information because the intention is that people under 18 years of age may make foolish, childish mistakes—that they need to be treated differently from adults. These youngsters may be tried in an adult court if the charges are deemed serious enough by a judge. But generally speaking, the law makes the distinction between adults and children at the age of majority—18 years. Until then, children are children and are treated as such in the eyes of the court. But beyond this consideration, in North American society, young people are increasingly creating and maintaining their own culture and the members of this community may consider themselves to have the rights and privileges of adults. Stanley and Sieber (1992, p. 2) point out that young people’s “increasing capacity to decide for themselves and to keep parts of their life private from intrusion from others should be respected.” This raises questions for both researchers and journalists alike: while both are still obliged to obtain parental consent as well as the informed assent of the young people involved, how much autonomy do these children have and how should they be treated in light of this?

Social researchers address similar dilemmas when using children in studies, interviews or experiments. Stanley and Sieber (1992) observe that although minors cannot give legal consent to participate in research, their “assent” to participate ought to be obtained. This means that from a procedural perspective, one must first obtain a parent’s or guardian’s permission for the child’s participation in the research project; then, an appropriate consent procedure should be carried out with the young person. As Fine and Sandstrom (1988), Corsaro (1985), and Mandell (1988) point out, adult permission is never enough. Children are individuals and must act as gatekeepers of their own involvement. Researchers and journalists must decide what should be included in such consent or assent statements and they must determine how specific this consent needs to be in order to protect the most vulnerable.

Wade Hemsworth, former city columnist and now reporter for The Hamilton Spectator, wrote a number of columns over a three-year period about a 12-year-old boy named Joe who had cystic fibrosis. Hemsworth acknowledges that children can have different maturity levels and what may be difficult for some to comprehend comes fairly easily to others. His newspaper does not have a written policy for covering children. He always begins, however, with obtaining parental consent. A friend of a family in need telephoned Hemsworth to explain the plight of two boys (both suffering from cystic fibrosis) and their mother. She had had to quit her job at a French fry stand because both children now required extensive care. Her funding sources had run out and she had nowhere to turn. When Hemsworth called to ask if he could interview her family and write about their situation, she immediately said yes. He told them he wanted to raise community awareness about their situation and maybe get them some donations. She agreed.

When Hemsworth arrived at the house, Joe answered the door. “I was really impressed by him,” says Hemsworth. “He showed bravery and maturity and intelligence. At the time, he was 12 and his brother was 10. The younger boy had had a [lung] transplant and Joe was waiting for
one ... Joe knew at any time things could get a lot better or he could die.”

“So when I sat down with Joe, as I do with all [interviewees] who aren’t media pro’s, I said ‘I’m going to write a story about what’s happening to you and your family. Any time you don’t feel totally comfortable talking about it, you tell me.’”

“I said I didn’t know anything about cystic fibrosis, so he gave me a lesson—his maturity level was that of an adult. He clearly did understand what was going on. He knew exactly what coverage was. And I asked him if he had any questions before we started and he said ‘no.’”

In this instance, Hemsworth did obtain parental permission and he also asked for and received the assent of the child. While Joe’s age in years clearly makes him fit the category of “child,” his maturity level—perhaps raised because of the seriousness of his health issues—made Hemsworth believe that the boy did understand the nature of the commitment and hence his agreement to participate was valid. This was a judgment on Hemsworth’s part based on his interaction, observation and conversation with Joe. It is also worthy of note that Hemsworth did offer the boy a way out—he did say, “if you don’t feel totally comfortable, tell me.”

This idea of offering vulnerable interviewees a way to withdraw their participation is extremely important and ought to be offered by all journalists interacting with minors. Writing about the situations faced by social researchers, Fine and Sandstrom (1988) and Graue and Walsh (1998) point out that there are inherent differences in power between children and adults and they discuss the relationship in terms of “insiders” and “outsiders.” With respect to social research, this inequality of power precludes a researcher, and by extension, a journalist, as an “insider” in his or her relationship with children. It may be possible to establish an insider relationship with parents—say for example that both the reporter and the interview subject are mothers. They then might have some common ground to discuss their relationship with their children. They are both, in theory, “in on” similar experiences, are

“insiders” in the same group: mothers. However, because reporters are adults, they can never truly enter a child’s world on an equal footing; they remain “outsiders” in this respect. Since adults hold sway over children, it becomes imperative that reporters are extremely sensitive to any reluctance on the part of the child. It is unlikely that these young interviewees will feel comfortable asking a reporter to withhold some detail or information, or that he or she will request that a certain photograph not be taken. Such requests can only come from equals or from a child who has implicit trust and confidence in the powerful adult. This is not the situation in many interview cases and certainly when reporters speak with children, the youngsters may feel in awe of those who write their stories for the world to see.

Consent, Assent, and Motivation

These issues of consent, assent, and parental motivation surfaced in The Toronto Star’s 1999 series entitled “Hard Times.” This group of stories profiled in detail the lives of three families living on welfare in the inner city. All of the families had children and none of them was older than 11 years of age at the time of publication. In terms of general background about the newspaper, The Star is a very large metropolitan daily that has built its reputation on issues-based journalism. As Joe Hall, assistant deputy editor says, “We thrive on afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted.” In the “Hard Times” series, two reporters, Laurie Monsebraaten and Patricia Orwen, along with the city editor, Jonathan Ferguson, wrote a lengthy number of pieces about what it was like for three families living on welfare in downtown Toronto. In the face of then recently released government statistics and reports suggesting the standard of living was on the rise, the reporters generated this story idea because they wanted to illustrate that life is still difficult when your family survives on welfare. But more than this, because at the time one in five children in Canada were growing up in poverty, the news team wanted to show how these children lived.

“What we really wanted to do was to give
kids a voice and show what it was like to grow up in poverty, to shine the spotlight on one individual, one who was articulate and could speak for all children,” says Orwen.

Monsebraaten agrees, “We write about every other income group, but not poor children. The only pictures we have in the media are of young women with babies ... so we thought, ‘wouldn’t it be nice if these kids could say how hard it is in their own voices?’”

Because both reporters had a number of contacts in the social system, they asked for, and received the names of 11 families who would be eligible to profile. From this group, they interviewed the families and chose three that they thought best represented ethnic diversity, type of housing (subsidized versus unsubsidized), and photographic possibilities. Orwen also explains how their decision was affected by what they considered the audience reception might be: “In order for people to read it, it helps to have photogenic children and younger children.”

The paper’s desire for the younger, cuter, more appealing photo opportunities meant that these reporters would have to deal with these young children and their families on a daily basis for a number of months. The very youthfulness that they wanted to capture and utilize in order to draw attention to the plights of the youths and their mothers increased the need for reporters’ sensitivity and understanding. And the subjects’ youthfulness may increase the potential for psychological damage to the children. Thompson (1992, pp. 33–4) argues that risks vary with a child’s development in complex ways. Some decrease with the child’s increasing age, whereas others increase as the child matures. For example, one would not remove a young child from his or her parent’s care for an extended period of time; this would be of much less consideration for an older child. However, in terms of personal space, people might touch young children in intrusive ways whereas we would maintain distance with older children. For reporters, trying to interact with young children is definitely more complex and challenging than trying to explain your role to an older child. These children The Star wrote about were not mature like Joe who demonstrated his developmental level by explaining his cystic fibrosis. They were vulnerable in numerous ways.

Monsebraaten profiled a young mother, Tina, and her 11-year-old son, Michael. Tina, a woman of Greek heritage and strict upbringing, had become pregnant in high school with the child of a Black man. Because of her age and the color of the father’s skin, Tina’s family wanted nothing to do with her or the baby. A social worker rescued them from a shelter when Michael was only a few days old and found them a subsidized apartment where they had been living ever since. Tina was struggling to work and raise her child.

Some parts of Monsebraaten’s profile are difficult to read. She details seminal moments in Michael’s young life during the time she spent with him and his mother. In one instance, she writes of how Michael cries after losing a floor hockey game at school, how he “sits alone on the bleachers with his head buried in his hands. His eyes are red and huge tears slip down his cheeks” (The Toronto Star, May 23, 1999, p. A1). Monsebraaten speaks with some of the other members of the team and the coach, all of whom comment that this game is more important to Michael than to many others. They acknowledge, implicitly, his fragile nature. On another emotional day, Monsebraaten details the exchange between Michael and his mother when he brings home his report card:

Michael’s steps are slow and heavy.
“I didn’t do so good on my report card,” he croaks as he plods into the apartment, trying to hold back his tears.

“Why are you crying?” Tina rushes over to him, alarmed.

“Because I don’t like my marks”… Tina’s face drops. She begins to read out loud...

“Initiative—N. What does that mean? ... How long did you have to work on this project? Three weeks? When did I hear about it? Two days before you said it was due...

A tear drips down Michael’s cheek.

“Mom, why are you yelling at me?” ... Tina is crying now too. (The Toronto Star, May 23, 1999, p. A5)
These sorts of intimate details about the young boy’s life make the story a moving read. While it may make some uncomfortable to have such a close perspective on the inner lives of Michael and his mother, the emotional scenes depict the challenges these people face in their daily existence. This was what The Star set out to do. In essence, they do not challenge the act-Utilitarian perspective that the end justifies the means. Their intention was to highlight the difficulties of the many children living in poverty in Toronto and to use the specifics of several children’s lives to do this. While The Star was perfectly within its legal right to run the stories as such, one might argue against this perspective using Immanuel Kant’s (1959 [1785]) belief in a common respect for all persons and his Categorical Imperative of treating people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end. Such behavior, from a Kantian perspective, is disrespectful and ought to be avoided. It attacks the very dignity and sanctity of the individual.

That The Toronto Star knew it was on questionable ground is certain. The deputy managing editor, Joe Hall, and the city editor, Jonathan Ferguson, both mentioned that the paper has a written policy that states, “The Star generally does not run photographs that would serve to label individuals, especially children, as poor. Such portrayals can have a stigmatizing effect” (The Toronto Star Handbook (in-house publication), 1994, p. 13). But the editor and the reporters say that the story of poor children could not be told in generalities. In order for readers to be aware of the difficult situation of these young people, the paper needed to identify some of them, show what they looked like, and tell readers that these youngsters are real, not composites. In this regard, the issue gestured toward another ethical imperative: the paper’s need to demonstrate truth. As a result, the city editor and the reporters spoke to the paper’s management in order to gain special permission to identify children in this series.

“I didn’t want to sensationalize or turn these kids into something they were not,” says Ferguson. “Hard Times had an enormous impact on readers and I knew it would. I thought it was really important to drill down with those families and really spend time with them so that I was completely confident that we weren’t taking advantage of them and that we weren’t using them as superficial icons to get at a problem we all knew needed some attention. They’re poor kids and we’re not going to trot out poor kids and trumpet their plight to sell newspapers.”

Ferguson stresses that his newsroom took particular care in every part of the operation. “I was constantly monitoring it—there was due diligence.”

In terms of legalities, The Toronto Star was extremely careful. They asked all the parents involved in the series to sign a consent form drawn up by the Star’s lawyer, Bert Bruiser. The form was short and direct. It stated, “I [person’s name] agree to tell my story and allow The Toronto Star to take photographs of me and my children. I give them permission to publish details of our lives in their paper.” Monsebraaten notes that her understanding was that she and Orwen would have complete access to any and all information they chose to print. She also says that there was no additional material directing reporters about how to interact with or interview the children. In this respect, Monsebraaten and Orwen were on their own.

For social researchers, establishing trust between them and the children they interview means that they first must gain the trust of the parent or guardian. In this respect, Monsebraaten felt comfortable with Tina and Tina asked for Michael’s assent in what Monsebraaten notes was “a factual question, ‘Michael, you’re ok with this.’” Monsebraaten says that Tina gave the impression that she and Michael were “in this together, as a sort of team.”

Monsebraaten never had a conversation alone with Michael where she ascertained how he felt about the coverage. “I’m embarrassed to say that I don’t think I had that conversation with Michael. When the story was about to run, we went to MacDonald’s just the two of us. I do remember talking about the story being in the paper soon and mentioning [the problematic information about] his dad. He was like, ‘ok…’ He wasn’t very engaged.”

Monsebraaten never felt that she had estab-
lished much connection to Michael and she says that she regrets not being able to form that link. She says when she discusses the story now, she gets a lump in her throat and her stomach turns over. While she was instrumental in deciding to cover the story initially, now she feels differently.

“I don’t know if I’d do that story again,” she says quietly.

Patricia Orwen’s experience in writing the series and her reflections about her role in the lives of the children are different from that of her partner, Monsebraaten. Orwen detailed the life of a woman named Jennifer and her four children, Chantelle aged 10, Kyle 8, Andromeda 4, and Lysandra 10 months. The central figure in this section of the series is Chantelle. City editor Jonathan Ferguson says that they really wanted to show the inner life of one of the children. The news team chose Chantelle for this because “She was articulate and thoughtful and she could speak for all children.”

To this end, the paper bought Chantelle a diary and a pen and they published her interior thoughts, in the form of a journal, as the story progressed. As a side note, the paper did not mention to its readers that the reporters had purchased these tools for Chantelle. This could have suggested that the child was not as introspective as one might think from her writing habit, since the journal-keeping was created for and by The Star itself.

Because the reporters considered that Chantelle’s personal situation was so dire, Orwen did have some specific conversations with her about allowing her thoughts and details of her life to be published. After her mother signed the consent form, Orwen “basically hung out a lot, tried to get to know her. I’d take her shopping for stuff for school. I took her to the shopping center and bought her stuff for a science project. I knew I had to get her to trust me so that she’d talk to me and write the diary.

“We talked about [the coverage] and how did she think she’d feel about it. Her mom, Jennifer, felt that the payoffs were so big for them … that that was ok. And Chantelle was ok with that.”

While Orwen did have the assent conversation, it is worthwhile asking if Chantelle was truly an informed participant and if she had any real choice about her participation. She and her mother and siblings were evicted from an apartment while the stories were being written and details of this were printed in the paper. Chantelle herself describes in her journal how she felt having to leave a place she considered home. But because her family was so needy and because Chantelle was only 10 years of age, she was not in a position to say “no” to coverage. The paper had made clear to her mother that they expected to receive donations for the family while the series ran. So Chantelle might have been motivated by what she perceived to be her role in helping her mother and family. That is a difficult responsibility for an adult to shrug off, let alone a child. Knowing that one’s cooperation with the media can lead to financial betterment is a powerful incentive indeed. Orwen says, “Jennifer’s main reason for co-operating with The Star was her belief that publicity would lead to her getting housing and a lot of stuff—a lot of attention.” And it did.

To return, briefly, to the situation that Monsebraaten chronicles with respect to Michael and his mother Tina, Monsebraaten says she particularly wishes she had discussed the impact of coverage in more depth with Michael because of his relationship with his mother. While Monsebraaten says that consent was given by Tina for both her and her son, and the manner in which it was given was as if they were a “team,” Monsebraaten worries about Michael’s ability to express his own contrary desires.

“I worry, I really worry about, well, about the day Michael crosses his mother. The day when he says he doesn’t want to do something. I don’t think he’d ever have the courage…” she says in a halting, hesitating tone of voice.

The ethical considerations here are complex. Not only must the journalist assess the unequal power distribution between herself and the child, but she must also take into consideration the inherent inequity in the parent–child relationship. Parents do have the legal right to make decisions for their children, and journalists, as most codes suggest, must ask for their specific consent. All are morally obligated to protect the most vulnerable, and in these in-
stances, surely everyone must make sure that children are not pressured into participating in a media process out of fear, guilt, or desire to please parents. When discussing whether or not Michael would have felt comfortable asking Monsebraaten to omit details of his story or to not photograph a particular moment, Monsebraaten says she thinks Michael would not have felt comfortable doing this. She implies that his desire to please his mother outweighed all other considerations. Since Tina had made it plain that this coverage could benefit both of them, he, like Chantelle, had to do his part, regardless.

It is difficult to address the problematic issue of whether or not parents always act in the best interests of their children. Our social, legal and institutional reliance on parental permission suggests that we do, in general, believe that parents have the right to make decisions about their offspring and that they will always put the considerations of the children before anything else. However, Graue and Walsh (1998), Stanley and Sieber (1992), and Thompson (1992) all note that one cannot assume that parents are motivated only by what is in the best interest of the child. There are many possible, mitigating factors. For instance, Chantelle’s mother, Jennifer, is developmentally delayed. While Orwen did not specifically mention this in the stories she wrote about the family, she offered details that she thought would make it clear that Jennifer was not educated and made very bad decisions about money, places to live, her children’s educational and health needs, and so forth. There is a real possibility that Jennifer herself could not evaluate the risks versus benefits that in-depth coverage of her and her children would bring. In addition, all of the mothers in these stories were suffering severe financial hardship. When faced with the likelihood of not having enough food to feed your children, perhaps it is not a fair question to ask if these women had the best interests of the children at heart when deciding how much to allow the paper to print.

Equally problematic from an ethical perspective, however, was the fact that in one instance in the “Hard Times” series, The Star had to decide how much was appropriate to print about a mother’s occupation. The third family the paper profiled comprised a young stripper named Anna and her two children, Josh, 6, and Elise, 2. Monsebraaten points out that Anna was a wonderful mother in many respects, that she was a talented, charismatic and attractive person who spent a great deal of time playing with, and showing affection to, her son and daughter. But about her stripping, she was brutally honest and insisted that the paper be likewise in its treatment of her.

Monsebratten says she had some concerns about detailing Anna’s employment choice, “But Anna’s position was, ‘this is our life and this is what I do.’ The cast of characters that came and went from her house … well, Josh saw it all … And before I published these kinds of details, I asked Anna, ‘have you talked to the children about this? Told them about the stripping?’ I mean some of the children were going to call him names…” In the story, Monsebraaten relates how one evening, Anna picks up Josh lying on his friend’s front doorstep.

“‘Corey called you a jackass,’ he tells Anna. ‘I don’t want to be friends with him anymore.’ The boy’s mother doesn’t have a phone and she’s drunk” (The Toronto Star, May 18, 1999, p. Al).

In fact, the school that Josh attended was most upset by these sorts of details and called the newspaper to complain. Monsebraaten says that they said they did not want to have to discuss these sorts of situations with their students and they were concerned the paper was holding Josh up for the ridicule of his peers.

“But what can you do?” says Monsebraaten. “Anna wanted those details in there. She was fine with it. It was the truth and she said she wouldn’t hide the truth of their situation from her kids. She would deal with it.”

While the situation is not completely analogous, Peter Desbarats, well-known Canadian journalist and journalism educator, writes in his book Guide to Canadian News Media (1996), that we do not identify rape victims by name because to do so might make them feel victimized again. When they see their names in print or feel identified by the revelation of significant personal details, the feeling of a loss of control is similar to that experienced in the attack itself.
COVERING KIDS

(Desbarats, 1996). The implication is that the press must not identify those who are already victims and in this sense, identifying welfare children may make them feel that they have no control, and we may be guilty of re-victimizing them.

Former managing editor of The London Free Press, Richard Hoffman, says he was often confronted by the issue of whether or not to identify children living in poverty. He describes a scene in his newsroom in which a 30-year veteran photographer had taken an excellent picture of a young boy eating breakfast cereal at a school in an area of London, Ontario, that is well known for being poor.

Hoffman explains that he said to the photographer, “I’m not going to run it. Sorry. No.” And the photographer said, “Why? I have the parents’ permission. They said it’s ok.” Hoffman replied, “I don’t care. That’s not a good enough argument. If we really wanted to help these kids, we’d do something else.’”

Hoffman says that he can predict what happens to children who are identified in this manner. “It holds them up to shame and ridicule. I don’t know if people have stopped feeling uncomfortable about being poor. I’m assuming it still exists. And that discomfort rolling into a kid’s life in a schoolyard … I mean, discrimination exists. You shouldn’t victimize a victim. That’s kind of a rule.”

Risks and Benefits: who decides?

When social researchers submit an outline of their protocol and a draft of their questionnaires to an ethics review board, they must also offer an estimation of the risks versus the benefits of participation for the young research subjects involved. The need sensitively to estimate the risks and benefits of participation is well instituted in the ethical guidelines of behavioral researchers (American Psychological Association, 1990). As Thompson (1992) points out, any discussion of this type must include some consideration of who does the estimation, especially when this prediction is so probabilistic. It would be very difficult for journalists to form a risks versus benefits estimation since most interact only occasionally (if at all) with children and most journalists do not have a background in developmental psychology. But perhaps media professionals could start with an acknowledgment in the newsroom that these issues need to be discussed and evaluated. Implicit in such a discussion should be that there is some possibility of not covering a story, or not interviewing some children in certain situations, otherwise the discussion becomes centered on the “how to cover” rather than the “should we cover.” While researchers are ethically obliged to protect the most vulnerable, this protection is also regulated and enforced both internally and externally. In the case of journalism, however, most practitioners will agree only to the idea of a balance between minimizing harm and fulfilling their primary goal: disseminating information. Their primary consideration is not for the current or future well-being of their sources; it is for covering the news. That said, given that journalists rely on the public to purchase their work, and many analysts are suggesting that the level of public confidence in journalists’ ethical standards is at an all-time low, the models set up by the social science research community are worth considering and adapting for journalism’s purposes.

In the United States, the National Commission has recommended four guidelines for social researchers that include a common-sense estimation of risk, a statement of the researcher’s prior experience with children in similar situations, some statistical data concerning the effects of these procedures, and an evaluation of the emotional, social, and cognitive conditions of the research participants themselves (Thompson, 1992, p. 35). While this list may be a bit too academic for journalists to follow to the letter, it suggests a direction that would offer some framework in which a realistic estimation of potential harm and possible good might be offered.

It is important to consider, here, how subtle the influences can be that affect how children feel about themselves. Thompson, for example, discusses several research scenarios that seem, superficially, harmless: take a boy in Grade 3 and ask him to complete a math puzzle. The first time he does so, he is very fast. You offer him another puzzle. This one takes him longer.
You praise him and tell him the puzzles get progressively difficult. He returns to his class and wonders if you told him the truth—he worries that he is not as smart as the other children and thinks your interaction with him suggests this also. In another instance, you ask a young girl to sit in a room and read a book. You tell her she is not to open a door in the room, regardless of what she may hear behind it. Soon, the door opens, and a young boy emerges. He’s crying. The girl goes to the door and opens it. The room beyond is empty. You explain to her that you wanted to see under what conditions she might disobey your order. She says she understands, but she goes home feeling guilty and sad. She isn’t sure how her parents would feel if they knew she did not do as she was asked. She worries that she may not be a good, honest person.

It’s not a far stretch to see that the interactions that reporters have with children could have similar sorts of effects. In a few years, Michael might very well feel duped by the reporters and the paper and feel that he was exploited by his mother because he agreed to put intimate moments of his life on display on the front page of a large newspaper. His life is now a part of the public record; it will become an historical document that anyone can access whenever he or she wishes.

While it is impossible to say definitively how Chantelle felt about revealing personal facts and thoughts to The Toronto Star, and then receiving a lot of donations of money and supplies as well as a new place to live and a new bicycle, this outcome could suggest to Chantelle that when things are difficult, one does not have to work hard; instead, one hopes for the divine intervention of something magical, like the media. Orwen says that Chantelle’s life was greatly improved by the series not just in financial respects, but in social ones as well: “When I met Chantelle, she was hiding in the bathrooms at school. After her friends read her diary in the paper, they thought she was really fabulous. Instead of looking down on her, they admired her. She really came out in terms of her self-confidence.”

While this may have been the immediate effect of the coverage, and I do not wish to take anything away from this young girl, this type of admiration simply will not last. It has created an unreal situation from which she has drawn her feelings of self-worth. There is, I believe, cause for some concern about such benefits and the reporters, the editors, and the newspaper’s management must be certain that these kinds of psychological risks are worth the practical rewards. They may even need to continue their interactions with these children and their families after coverage has ended in order to ensure that these discussions take place and children truly understand, over time, how they have been affected by the media’s representation of them. It is simply not enough to expect that parents in these kinds of situations will shoulder the responsibility to explain to their children phenomena with which even they are not familiar.

And the Story Ends...

I raised some concerns amongst those with whom I spoke about the possibility that in order to gain the trust of these children, reporters had to “make friends.” Then, when the stories were over, the issue of friendship might remain unresolved. Children might view these reporters as “false friends” and this might seem dishonest and unethical. For Wade Hemsworth at The Hamilton Spectator, this was not a problem. During the time he had written about Joe, he became a close friend of both the boy and his family. After the stories ran, Hemsworth continued to help them out by doing odd jobs and keeping Joe company in the hospital. When Joe died, Hemsworth gave the eulogy. “I liked them. You can be professional and still be friendly. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive,” he says.

For Laurie Monsebraaten and Patricia Orwen, when the stories were over, they ended their relationships with the families. Orwen does not feel any remorse about this and says that Chantelle and her mother had other people to draw on for support by this time. Monsebraaten, however, is not as comfortable. When asked if she has remained friends with Tina or Anna, she says, “That’s one of the reasons I feel bad about this kind of journalism. I feel really
lousy about this. I was Anna’s best friend that year and now I’m not in her life. At the end of the day, I guess you have to pull away.” For Monsebraaten, this was difficult, but at the time, her own family had a crisis involving a child and her attention was suddenly drawn elsewhere. Still, she wonders now if The Star did the right thing in identifying these children and writing the kinds of stories they did. In terms of real financial benefits for the children and their families, all of them received money, clothing, support, and attention. Practically, they are better off. But as Monsebraaten says, “Some people might argue that nothing changed at all. We have to ask ourselves if we were doing this to tell a good story that just happens to be true, or is there a policy reason here? And we were doing it for a policy reason, and no policies changed...”

Conclusion

Within Western society, children merit special consideration because of a number of unique characteristics. On the one hand, they cannot enjoy all of the prerogatives and responsibilities of adults because they have more limited cognitive capacities and skills than adults have and this reality is reflected in such places as the legal system, which recognizes that children are entitled to limited rights of privacy and self-determination. On the other hand, children also receive special benefits and protections to ensure that their needs and interests are safeguarded. For journalism, the emphasis must fall on the latter considerations. One implication of this is that others—parents initially, but media practitioners as well—are implicitly entrusted with significant responsibility for the care and protection of all children with whom they come in contact. Thompson (1992) notes that it is this combination of limited prerogatives and beneficent paternalism, both deriving from a recognition of the child’s limitations, that the ethical analysis of research—including, as argued here, journalistic research—involving children requires careful scrutiny. But whereas social researchers are required to submit an outline of their proposals, offer an estimate of risks/benefits for children’s participation and agree to follow strict rules about interaction, journalists today embrace none of these protocols. While there are obvious difficulties in considering how the social science framework could realistically be adapted for and implemented in a newsroom, the challenges are not insurmountable.

For social researchers, the breadth of ethical principles along with the ambiguity of regulatory language that instantiates them means that there are no clear, specific guidelines to apply in the thorny dilemmas researchers face when designing their studies. However, their principles and regulatory language at least do provide some framework for thinking clearly and consistently about the ethical issues involved in initiating interaction with children.

When media outlets decide that coverage of children is newsworthy and necessary, they need to recognize the concerns raised in social research. These organizations ought to establish a rigorous and consistent framework that is akin to ones used in the social sciences from within which journalists, perhaps even in consultation with research specialists, could evaluate risks and benefits as well as estimate the impact of coverage on these developing, impressionable individuals. Leaving individual journalists responsible for responding to situations as they arise is clearly not enough. Changes need to be initiated in both journalism education generally and at the news management level in particular. Journalism schools could take on the project of adapting social research protocols to the field of journalism. Academia is an ideal place to begin the theorizing process that then can be tested in the newsrooms of the world. Ethics professors could make a commitment to educate students about the values of research protocols and the necessity of considering the impact of interaction between media people and juveniles. Beyond the educational sphere, news organizations need to recognize a number of facts about children that were illustrated by all the youngsters in the Toronto Star series: they are likely to have more difficulty than adults in understanding what coverage means; they are vulnerable because of both their social power or position and their ambiguous legal status as minors; and parents
and children do not always have identical interests in participating in interviews or being photographed. In order to protect them and write the stories that need to be written, reporters must ensure that they establish an autonomous relationship with the child and set up a mechanism by which children feel comfortable asking to withdraw or decline comment. Children do have wonderful, emotive, sad, happy, and entrancing stories to share; but as news professionals, we must be certain that we do not become villains or heroes in the stories they tell themselves about who they are.

Notes
1 All the codes discussed here (and many others) are available electronically through the Press Wise Trust at www.presswise.org.uk. The only exception is the Draft Statement of Principles of the Canadian Association of Journalists and it is available online at www.caj.ca/principles/principles-proposal.htm.
2 The phrase was used by Dr. Ted Magder, Associate Professor, New York University, speaking at The School of Journalism, The University of Western Ontario, London, February 15, 2002. The term “public intellectuals” is generally used to refer to people—usually academics—who philosophize about matters of great concern to the community at large. The commonly held belief is that the term can apply to some journalists and some academics. Richard Posner, in his book Public Intellectuals: a study of decline (2001), argues that the pool of public intellectuals is shrinking because universities require academics to become so specialized that their knowledge is not broad and general enough to either appeal or be of use to the public. While he does point out that some journalists—I would include Robert Fulford, Lewis Lapham, or Linda McQuaig, for instance—could also be considered public intellectuals because they are genuinely intellectual, Posner does not include journeyman reporters in this category. I quote Dr. Magder here because he was enlarging the concept of public intellectual to include this role as a goal for every upcoming journalist. He was speaking about journalism education at the Masters level and his implication was clear: graduate study ought to produce people with an intellectual outlook, an in-depth engagement with topics of civic concern, and these highly educated journalists will be publishing or broadcasting their findings in the public domain.
3 It is worth noting that social science research protocols are somewhat recent in origin and this community continues to grapple with its own ethical issues. For example, the University of Iowa offered a formal apology in June of 2001 for an experiment conducted in 1939 by its speech pathology department. The San Jose Mercury News published a report that orphans suffered psychological scars from being induced to stutter in an experiment. The university noted that strict policies now in place should ensure this situation would not recur.
4 The word “kid” is not considered a pejorative term in North America and is used interchangeably with words like “child” or “youth” in everyday conversations.
5 See Deni Elliot’s “Suffer the children: journalists are guilty of child misuse” (1990) where she argues that protection of children is at odds with covering stories and children will always be sacrificed.
6 These examples are adapted from Ross A. Thompson’s examples offered in “Developmental changes in research risk and benefit: a changing calculus of concern” (1992).

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