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Should News on Child Homicides Be Broadcast? Opinions of Parents, Teachers, and Children

Abstract
This survey was designed to investigate the opinions of news consumers about the broadcasting of one of the most devastating news events: parents who kill their own children (filicides). Data were collected in The Netherlands at a time when a sudden increase in filicides occurred. Three groups of news consumers were surveyed: parents (n = 255), teachers (n = 122), and children (n = 255). Results showed that the vast majority of parents (82%) and teachers (89%) agreed that news on filicides should be broadcast in news programs designed for adults. The majority of parents (62%), teachers (62%), and children (74%) also believed that the news on filicides should be broadcast in a news program designed for 10- to 12-year old children. Seventy-one percent of the children reported that they had heard about the filicide cases. Of these children, 63% said they had discussed this news with either their parents, teachers, or friends.

Introduction
Few crimes evoke such horror, indignation, and extensive publicity as the killing of children (Wilczynski, 1997). Research on journalist selection processes has shown that the amount of newsworthiness journalists assign to individual homicides is greatly enhanced if the victims are children (Johnstone, Hawkins & Michener, 1994). In addition, content analyses of crime news have demonstrated that news on child victims significantly increases average story length, number of news stories published, and proportion of items on the front page (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997).

Although the killing of children has been practiced since ancient times for reasons such as religious sacrifice, shame of illegitimacy, or psychiatric disorders, it is only relatively recently that child homicides have been considered a major problem in the Western world (Wilczynski, 1997). Since the 1960s, child abuse has received increasing professional and scientific attention, and, particularly since the 1990s, the media have begun to give frequent coverage to the killing of children. Cases such as the killing of two-year-old James Bulger by two boys in England or the abuse and killing of six-year-old...
Lisa Steinberg by her caretaker in the United States have received major media attention.

News stories about child homicides seem to attract most prominent media coverage if the victim had a close relationship with the offender. Filicide, the killing of children by their own parents or parent-substitutes, not only leads to sensational articles in popular magazines with titles such as 'When a Mother Kills' or 'She Shot her Little Girls' (see Wilczynski, 1997), but is equally prominently covered by the 'serious' press. Studies into the newsworthiness indicators of news events (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Shoemaker, Danielian & Brendlinger, 1991) have suggested that the highly deviant character of child homicides, and especially filicides, accounts for the increased media attention.

Studies on the concept of deviance have indicated that the more anomalous a crime story is, the more newsworthiness journalists will assign to it and, as a consequence, the higher the chance that the media will cover the crime (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Shoemaker et al., 1991; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Child homicides in general, and filicides in particular, do not occur very often and are considered, by society, as especially unhealthy or abnormal. The newsworthiness of child killings may thus be predicted by two forms of deviance, statistical deviance (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Shoemaker et al., 1991) and cultural (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997) or pathological deviance (Shoemaker et al., 1991).

Statistical deviance is defined as the extent to which an event is unusual; cultural or pathological deviance is defined as the extent to which an act is unhealthy or abnormal relative to dominant cultural norms. A content analysis of homicide reports by Pritchard and Hughes (1997) showed that the killing of victims at a vulnerable age was deviant to such an extent that it was significantly related to all coverage variables in their study: average story length, number of news items published, proportion of items on the front page, and publication of a photo. According to reporters, news stories about child homicides receive special attention because children are innocent, vulnerable, and defenseless (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997).

Although journalists in general agree that the media should cover news about the killing of children (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997), the question remains whether news consumers believe that such stories should be broadcast. News stories about child victims could arouse anxiety, especially among children and caretakers of children (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996). However, emotional reactions induced by disturbing news content do not necessarily imply that news consumers think the media should ignore such events. To our knowledge, previous research did not address this question. The main goal of the present study, therefore, was to investigate what different groups of news consumers think about the coverage of such deviant and possibly fear-arousing events as the killing of children by their own parents.

The study presented here was conducted in The Netherlands. Although the number of filicides in the Netherlands has been relatively stable for many
Child Homicides in News Programs

years, in January and February 1997, the Dutch were confronted with a
sudden peak of six incidents of filicide within a time span of six weeks. This
abrupt increase gave rise to numerous press and TV news stories depicting the
most dramatic details. The incidents and subsequent news coverage also set in
motion a heated national debate on whether news on filicides should be broad-
cast or not. Some critics recommended that the media should be cautious in
their coverage of the child homicides. A well-known Dutch psychiatrist, for
example, pleaded for complete ‘media silence’ on the topic (Wolters, 1997).
He argued that, apart from fear reactions, reports of the killings could trigger
more incidents of filicide among troubled and unbalanced parents. The Dutch
Association of Journalists, on the other hand, was strongly opposed to any
form of media silence. They argued that the public had a right to be informed
and pointed to the dangers of a forced media silence, which could be extended
to news that is perceived to jeopardize political agreements.

Although the various opinions offered by professionals received a lot of
media attention, the opinions of different groups of news consumers received
far less notice. Therefore, the present study’s main goal was to explore con-
sumers’ opinions about whether or not incidents of filicide should be covered
on television. The study focused on three groups of news consumers that were
assumed to feel most affected by the particular news content: parents, teachers,
and children.

Apart from investigating people’s opinions about the broadcasting of the
child killings by adult television news programs, our study also investigated
what different groups of news consumers thought about the coverage of these
events by a news program especially designed for children. In The Nether-
lands, a professional children’s news program (Jeugdjournaal) is broadcast
daily between 6.45 and 7.00 p.m. This news program is designed to make the
main news comprehensible to children between 10 and 12 years of age. The
producers of the children’s news often discuss whether they should cover
violent news events or not (Créton, 1994). On the one hand, their goal is to
select news topics solely on the basis of their perceived newsworthiness,
which does imply occasional coverage of distressing news events. On the
other hand, they try to ensure that their program is not too upsetting to their
child audience. After much debate, the children’s news program decided
to cover the incidents of filicide, providing us with the opportunity to explore
the reactions of different groups of news consumers to both the adult and
children’s news coverage.

Opinions of Parents
Many parents acknowledge that to children in middle childhood, violent news
may be more upsetting than violent fiction (Buckingham, 1996). In addition,
parents often indicate that it is harder to deal with children’s emotional
responses to violent news than with their reactions to violent entertainment
(Buckingham, 1996; Cantor, 1998). Although very little research has ad-
dressed the emotional effects of disturbing news stories, research has shown that parents consider 'harm against children' a major news content category that may cause television-produced fear reactions among children (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996). News stories about child murders present many parents with a dilemma (Buckingham, 1996). On the one hand, they feel the need to teach their children an awareness of the dangers in the world, while on the other hand they want to protect their children from harm.

In theory, a number of factors could influence parental opinions about the broadcasting of distressing news content, such as the killing of children. Empirical studies concerned with television mediation have shown that mothers and parents with higher education are more likely than fathers and parents with lower education to restrict their children's television viewing (Brown, Childers, Bauman & Koch, 1990; Bybee, Robinson & Turow, 1982). Other studies have shown that parents of younger children are likely to engage in more television mediation than parents of older children (Lin & Atkin, 1989). Finally, there is evidence that parents who are more concerned about the harmful effects of television are more restrictive about their children's television viewing than parents who are less concerned (Bybee et al., 1982; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters & Marseille, 1999).

In the present study, we explored whether the factors that affect parental television mediation are also related to parents' opinions about the broadcasting of news about filicides. Because, to our knowledge, no earlier research has investigated the opinions of parents, teachers, and children about the broadcasting of this type of news content, research questions rather than specific hypotheses were formulated. Our first research question was:

RQ1: What are parents' opinions about the broadcasting of the child killings and do these opinions differ for (a) adult news programs versus children's news programs, (b) mothers versus fathers, (c) parents with higher versus lower levels of education, (d) parents of younger versus older children, and (e) parents who are more versus parents who are less concerned about the harmful effects of violent television on their children.

Besides investigating parents' opinions about whether news on the child killings should be broadcast or not, we also explored how often and in what manner parents discussed the topic with their children. Research on children's television news consumption suggests that children do not regularly discuss television news with their parents (Drew & Reeves, 1980; van der Voort, van Lil & Vooijs, 1992). However, news on filicide is such an exceptional and severe type of news content that it may stimulate parents and children to discuss it more extensively. Therefore our second research question was:

RQ2: Do parents discuss this type of news content with their children and how do they explain the events to their children?
**Opinions of Teachers**

Teachers, like parents, are a major socialization force in children’s lives. We therefore also investigated what teachers thought about the broadcasting of the filicide cases. As in the case of parents, we investigated teachers’ opinions about the broadcasting by adult news programs as well as by the children’s news. In addition, we examined whether teachers of younger children were more careful in their opinions than teachers of older children. Finally, we investigated how often teachers discussed this type of news content with their pupils. Our third and fourth research questions were:

RQ3: What are teachers’ opinions about the broadcasting of the child killings and do these opinions differ for (a) adult news programs versus children’s news programs, (b) teachers of younger versus older children.

RQ4: Do teachers discuss this type of news content in their classroom?

**Opinions of Children**

Most research on children’s attitudes towards the news has been conducted within the concept of political socialization. As a consequence, studies on children and the news have usually focused on the cognitive aspects (e.g., recall and political learning) of political news. With some exceptions (Buckingham, 1996; Gunter, McAleer & Clifford, 1991), little research has focused on children’s views about nonpolitical news.

Children as an audience have special needs that are related to their developmental level as well as their emotional and social needs. In order to determine what types of programming will serve the needs of children, it is important to give children the opportunity to voice their views. Therefore, in the present study, we asked children between 7 and 12 years of age whether they believed that the news about the child homicides should be broadcast in a news program designed for children. In addition, we investigated whether and how children’s opinions differed between older and younger children, and between boys and girls. Finally, we asked children whether they had discussed the news and, if so, with whom. Our final two research questions were:

RQ5: What are children’s opinions about the broadcasting of the child killings and do these opinions differ for (a) boys versus girls, and (b) younger versus older children?

RQ6: Do children discuss this type of news content and, if so, with whom (parents, teachers, or friends)?

**Method**

**Sample**

In February 1997, the Audience Research Department of the Netherlands Broadcasting Corporation carried out telephone interviews among random samples of Dutch parents (n = 255), children (n = 255) and teachers (n = 122). All telephone interviews were computer-controlled. This meant that the
Valkenburg, Walma van der Molen & Peeters

computer randomly selected addresses from a representative database of families and schools, and, depending on the type of respondent, administered the appropriate questionnaire.

Parents and children. A sample of 255 families participated in the study. The non-response rate for the sample was 19%. This low percentage was due to the fact that the families in the present study had given their consent to participate in our survey during an earlier telephone survey among 314 families, conducted two weeks earlier. Of the original sample of 314 families, 272 families consented to be contacted again (87%). In 13 of these 272 families, the child could not be reached during the days on which the present telephone survey was scheduled, and in four families, the parent did not approve of a child interview because of the topic of the survey.

The interviews were conducted in the afternoon and evening hours. Because fewer fathers than mothers were at home at the time of the telephone contact, the sample contained more mothers (67.8%) than fathers (32.2%). During the parent interviews, it was determined which child would be interviewed. When a parent had more than one child in the age range of 7–12 years, s/he was asked to respond to the questions by thinking about only one of the children. Half of the parents with more than one child were asked to choose the child whose birthday occurred soonest after the interview; the other parents were asked to choose the child whose birthday had occurred most recently. The resulting sample of 255 children consisted of 51.4% males and 48.6% females. For purposes of analysis, the children were grouped into three age ranges: 7 to 8 (29.4%), 9 to 10 (34.9%), and 11 to 12 (35.7%). If the selected child was at home at the time that his or her parent was interviewed, the interview with the child took place immediately following the parent interview; if the child was not available, the interview with the child took place at a later time.

Teachers. Our sample of teachers was drawn from a large national sample of elementary schools that is available at the Audience Research Department of the Netherlands Broadcasting Corporation. For the present survey, 206 schools were contacted. Of these schools, 78 schools could not be reached within three trials, and six schools refused to participate. From each of the resulting 122 schools, one teacher was interviewed. Of these teachers, 54.1% taught grades 2 to 4, whereas 45.9% taught grades 5 to 6.

Parent Interviews
The parent interview included questions about background variables such as the parents’ age, gender, and education level. In addition, it included questions measuring parental concerns about the harmful effects of television on their children. Parents were asked: “How concerned are you that watching what you consider to be inappropriate programs would frighten your child,” “...cause troubled sleep,” and “...cause nightmares.” For each item, parents responded on a four-point scale, ranging from: (0) “not at all concerned” to (3) “very con-
Averaging the scores on the three concern-items created a scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .89. For purposes of analysis, parents were grouped into more versus less concerned parents, using the median of the concern scale as the cut-off point.

After a short introduction by the interviewer about the recent occurrences of children who were killed by their own parents, the interviewer asked the parents the following two questions: "Do you think that the children’s news should broadcast news about parents killing their own children?" and "Do you think that the news for adults should broadcast such news?" The parents were asked then whether their child had heard about the news about the child killings, and whether the news had frightened their child. Then, the parents were asked whether they had discussed the news with their child and to describe in what terms they had discussed the news.

Coding categories of parents’ open answers. To analyze parents’ open-ended responses about how they had discussed the news with their child, we set up a series of coding categories. The development of these categories was based on an overview of all the parents’ open-ended responses. Some of the coding categories that we identified turned out to overlap to a large extent with several deviance-indicators of newsworthiness that journalists employ. While discussing the news about the child killings with their children, a considerable number of parents said that they had referred to the statistical deviance, cultural deviance, and/or the pathological deviance of the crime.

Because some of the parents’ answers could fall into more than one content category, each coding category was coded as being present or absent in the parent’s response. The categories were therefore not mutually exclusive. Coding was done by two independent judges. Intercoder reliabilities, as measured by Cohen’s kappa, were satisfactory (all kappas > .80). Parents’ responses fell into the following five categories:

Pathological deviance: This category included all references to the sick or mad state of mind of the perpetrators. Examples of responses included in this category were: "We talked about the fact that such people are sick in their heads" or "...that such people are mentally ill."

Cultural deviance: This category included all references to the criminal or faulty behavior of the perpetrators. Examples of responses included in this category were: "We discussed the fact that these people have done very wrong things" or "...that these people have done things that are absolutely not allowed."

Statistical deviance: This category contained all references to the rare or uncommon nature of the act. For example: "I explained that this doesn’t happen very often" or "...that this is very exceptional."

Deviance of traditional family norms: This category contained explanations of the perpetrators’ behavior in terms of deviance of traditional family norms. For example, in an attempt to explain the perpetrators’ motives, some parents referred to the fact that the perpetrators “...came from wrecked fa-
milies,” “...were divorced and didn’t see their children very often,” or “... wanted to punish their ex-wives.”

Impersonalization: This category contained reassurances that such things could never happen in the child’s home or within the child’s family. For example: “I explained to her that, although my husband and I sometimes argue, we would of course never do anything like that.”

**Teacher Interviews**
The teacher interviews, like the interviews with the parents started with a short introduction by the interviewer about the recent occurrences of children being killed by their own parents. Subsequently, and similar to the parent interviews, the teachers were asked to give their opinion about whether the children’s news and the news for adults should broadcast this particular type of news content. Finally, teachers were asked whether they had discussed the news in their classroom, and whether the initiative to talk about the news came from the children or from the teachers themselves.

**Child Interviews**
Each child was first asked whether s/he had heard about the recent incidents of children being killed by their own parents. Because we did not want to cause any unnecessary fright reactions among those children who had not heard about the news topic, we continued the interview only with those children who already knew about the child killings. Of the total sample of children, 71%, or 181 children, answered that they knew about the child killings. These children were first asked whether they had discussed the news with their parents, their teacher, and/or their friends, and whether the news had frightened them. Finally, they were asked whether they thought the news was important and whether they believed that the children’s news should broadcast it.

**Results**
**Opinions of Parents**
Our first research question asked whether parents believed that the news on the filicide cases should be broadcast, and whether parents’ opinions differed for (a) adult news programs versus children’s news programs, (b) mothers versus fathers, (c) parents with higher versus lower levels of education, (d) parents of younger versus older children, and (e) parents who are more versus less concerned about the harmful effects of violent television on their children.

Table 1 shows that 81.6% of all parents thought the adult news should pay attention to the child killings. When asked whether the children’s news should cover the news content, 62.0% of all parents thought that this should be the case. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for two dependent samples revealed that these two percentages (81.6% vs. 62.0%) differed significantly ($z = 5.20$, $N = 255, p < .001$).
Table 1: Should News on Child Homicides Be Broadcast?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adult News</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Children's News</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Yes'</td>
<td>'No'</td>
<td>'Yes'</td>
<td>'No'</td>
<td>'Yes'</td>
<td>'No'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All parents (n = 255)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>62.0</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All teachers (n = 122)</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All children (n = 181)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8-year-olds (n = 38)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10-year-olds (n = 63)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12-year-olds (n = 80)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Answers could fall into the categories "Yes," "No," or "No opinion." The percentages listed for "Yes" and "No" answers therefore do not add up to 100%.

* Differences between younger and older children were significant at p < .05.

Eight separate chi-square analyses revealed that the distributions of parents’ responses were statistically the same for all background variables, both in case of the adult news and in case of the children’s news (all p values > .20). This means that there were no significant differences between (a) fathers and mothers, (b) parents with different educational backgrounds, (c) parents of younger versus older children, or (d) more versus less concerned parents. Therefore, Table 1 only lists the results for the entire sample of parents.

In addition to the above described background variables, we also asked parents whether they thought their child had heard about the filicide cases and whether their child had been frightened by the news content. Sixty-nine percent of the parents answered that their child had heard about the news, and 8.0% of the parents reported that their child had been frightened by it. Two separate chi-square analyses, however, indicated that neither of these two factors influenced parents’ opinions about whether this news content should be covered or not. The distributions of parents’ responses were statistically the same for parents with children who did or did not hear about the news content and for parents with children who did or did not become frightened (all p values > .10).

Our second research question asked whether parents and children talked about the incidents of filicide, and if so, how they had discussed the topic. Table 2 shows that 45.8% of all parents (n = 117) had discussed the news with their child. Parents of older children more frequently reported having discussed the news than parents of younger children $\chi^2 (2, N = 255) = 17.17, p < .001$.

Of the parents who had discussed the news with their child, 60.7% were able to describe the nature of that discussion. As Table 2 shows, most parents (52.1%) reported that they discussed the news in terms of the sick or mad state of mind of the perpetrators (labeled as pathological deviance). Many parents
(21.1%) also discussed the event by reassuring their child that such things would not happen in their own family (impersonalization). Many other parents (18.3%) put emphasis on the rare or uncommon nature of the act (statistical deviance), referred to the criminal or faulty behavior of the perpetrator (cultural deviance) (14.1%), or to the deviance of traditional family norms (15.5%). Parents of the oldest children referred to the statistically deviant nature of the act relatively more frequently than parents of the other children $\chi^2(2, N = 71) = 5.98, p = .05$.

Table 2: How Did Parents Discuss the News About the Child Homicides with Their Children?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents of Children Aged</th>
<th>7–8</th>
<th>9–10</th>
<th>11–12</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(n = 75)</td>
<td>(n = 89)</td>
<td>(n = 91)</td>
<td>(n = 255)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of parents who discussed the news</td>
<td>32.0&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>40.4&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>62.6&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion in terms of:*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathological deviance</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural deviance</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistical deviance</td>
<td>11.1&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>8.0&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>32.1&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviance of traditional family norms</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonalization</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: <sup>a</sup>,<sup>b</sup> Differences between parents of younger versus older children were significant at least at $p < .05$. *Scores represent percentages of parents who were able to describe the nature of the discussion. Parents’ responses could fall into more than one category

Opinions of Teachers

To investigate our third research question, we explored teachers’ opinions about the broadcasting of news about the child killings. We examined whether teachers’ opinions would differ between adult and children’s news programs and between teachers of younger versus older children. Table 1 shows that 88.5% of all teachers thought the adult news should pay attention to the child killings, whereas 62.3% thought the children’s news should broadcast such topics. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for two dependent samples showed that this difference (88.5% vs. 62.3%) was statistically significant ($z = 5.08, N = 122, p < .001$). Two chi-square analyses revealed no statistically significant differences in teachers’ opinions about the coverage of the filicides by the adult or children’s news programs between teachers of younger versus teachers of older children (both $p$ values $>.48$).
To investigate our fourth research question; whether teachers discussed the child killings in their classroom and who took the initiative to discuss it, we observed similar results to those found for parents. Table 3 shows that 56 teachers (45.9% of all teachers) had discussed the news in their classroom and that teachers of older children had discussed it more frequently than teachers of younger children \( \chi^2 \) \( (1, N = 122) = 11.49, p < .001 \). Of the teachers who had discussed the news with their pupils, the majority indicated that the children had initiated the discussion (62.5%). Despite the fact that fewer teachers of younger than of older children talked about the child killings, a chi-square analysis revealed that in both age groups, the initiative to talk about the subject predominantly came from the children \( \chi^2 \) \( (2, N = 56) = 0.63, p = .73 \).

Table 3: Percentages of Teachers who Discussed the News About the Child Homicides

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers of Grades</th>
<th>2–4 (n = 66)</th>
<th>5–6 (n = 56)</th>
<th>Total (n = 122)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of teachers who discussed the news</strong></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative taken by:*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>31.8(^a)</td>
<td>62.5(^b)</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't remember</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \(^a\), \(^b\) The difference between teachers of lower versus higher grades was significant at \( p < .001 \). *Scores represent percentages of teachers who discussed the news in their classroom.

Opinions of Children

The fifth research question investigated what children think about the broadcasting of news about child killings and whether the opinions of boys and girls and younger and older children are different. As outlined above, 71% \( (n = 181) \) of the children indicated that they had heard about the recent incidents of filicide. Table 1 shows that 73.5% of these children thought the children's news should pay attention to this topic. No statistically significant difference was found between boys and girls in their opinion about the broadcasting of the filicide cases \( (p = .50) \). However, a statistically significant difference did emerge for age group: the youngest children were more frequently opposed to the broadcasting of the news topic than the other children were \( \chi^2 \) \( (4, N = 181) = 11.02, p < .05 \).
In addition to the above described background variables, children were asked whether they thought the news content was important and whether they had been frightened by it. Of all children, 89.5% answered that they thought the news was important, while 16.6% said they had been frightened by it. There was a statistically significant difference between children who thought the news was important versus children who thought it was unimportant in their opinions about the broadcasting of the filicide cases $\chi^2 (4, N = 181) = 12.51, p < .05]$. Children who thought the news was unimportant were more frequently opposed to or had no opinion about the broadcasting of the news content than children who thought the news was important. In addition, an interesting significant difference arose between children who had been frightened by the news content versus children who had not been frightened $\chi^2 (4, N = 181) = 13.86, p < .01]$. Despite the fact that the news had affected them, the small group of frightened children was more in favor of the broadcasting of the filicide cases than the group of children who did not experience fear of the news content.

The final research question investigated whether children talked about the news content, and if so, with whom they had discussed it. Of all children, 114, or 63.0%, said they had discussed the filicide cases. Of these children, the majority indicated that they had discussed the news with more than two different people: 68.4% said they had discussed the news with their parents, 45.6% said they talked about it with their teacher, and 54.4% said they discussed it with friends. A chi-square analysis showed no significant difference in the children’s opinion about whether the children’s news should broadcast this type of news content between children who did versus children who did not talk about the news ($p = .20$).

**Parent-Child Consensus**

Because our study included data of parent-child dyads, we were able to compare parents’ and children’s responses. As our results showed, children were more positive about the broadcasting of news about child homicides than parents were. Of all (255) parents, 62.0% thought the children’s news should broadcast the news on child killings, whereas 73.5% of the children thought that this should be the case. However, the exclusion of parents whose children did not complete the interview, showed a different result. Of the remaining 181 parents, 75.8% thought the children’s news should pay attention to this type of news content; a result that did not differ significantly from the result found for their own children ($p > .20$).

We also compared parents’ and children’s responses to our questions whether they had talked about the news content. Although most parents and children showed consensus about whether they had discussed the news together, 42 children said they had not discussed it with their parents while their own parents said they did. In contrast, 11 parents said they had not discussed the news with their child while their own child claimed they did.
Finally, we compared parents’ and children’s responses to our question of whether the child had been frightened by the news on child homicides. As outlined above, 16.6% of the children indicated that the news had frightened them. Of the parents whose children completed the interview, only 7.6% thought the news had frightened their child. This difference was due to the fact that 20 children answered that they were frightened by the news, while their parents thought they were not.

Discussion
The main goal of the present study was to investigate what different groups of news consumers think about the broadcasting of violent and distressing crime news. Previous research on the newsworthiness of different types of crime news (e.g., Pritchard & Hughes, 1997) has focused primarily on journalists’ opinions about whether certain topics should be published or broadcast. Our study was the first exploratory investigation of the opinions of news consumers. We surveyed random samples of three news consumer groups: parents, teachers, and children. We focused on one of the most disturbing types of crime news, filicides (i.e., parents who kill their own children). Our study was conducted at a time when a sudden increase in incidents of filicide and a concomitant increase in media attention occurred in The Netherlands.

Should News About the Child Homicides Be Broadcast?
The findings showed that within all three consumer groups, the vast majority agreed that news on filicides should be broadcast. When asked about their opinions about the broadcasts by the adult news, more than 80% of the parents and teachers agreed that a television news program intended for an adult audience should pay attention to such a topic. In addition, although parents and teachers were more careful in their opinions in the case of children’s news, the majority still believed that a news program intended for children should cover such events.

The results also showed that people’s opinions about broadcasting news on child homicides were independent of background variables such as gender of the parent, level of education, and age of the child. Remarkably, even the majority of parents who reported being concerned about the negative effects of television as well as the parents whose children had been frightened by the news on child homicides believed that such news should be broadcast in both the adult and children’s news. Although television mediation research has shown that background variables, such as gender of the parent, level of education, or age of the child, influence the frequency with which parents restrict their children’s television viewing (Brown, et al., 1990; Valkenburg et al., 1999), we found no indications that these factors affect parental beliefs about the newsworthiness of distressing news events.

Although further research is necessary, our results may imply that parents of children between 7 and 12 years of age see it as their own responsibility to
protect their children from the harmful consequences of distressing news events (for example, by restricting their child’s television news consumption), and less as the responsibility of the broadcasters. However, we want to emphasize that our results pertain to parents of children in middle childhood, and that they should not be generalized to parents of younger children. It is possible that parents of younger children are more protective in their views about broadcasting disturbing news content than parents of older children. In addition, we want to stress that our results are limited to parents’ opinions about disturbing news content. They should not be mixed up with parental views about the broadcasting of disturbing entertainment. After all, it is only in the case of news (and not in the case of entertainment) that parents are faced with the tension between their need to inform their children and their need to protect them from harm.

Although all three news consumer groups in general agreed that the news about the filicide cases should be broadcast, some differences were found. First, children, and especially older children, were more positive about the broadcasting of the news about filicides in the children’s news than parents or teachers were. An explanation for this finding could be that adults see the children’s news primarily as a children’s program rather than a news program, whereas older elementary school children consider the children’s news to be a serious news program designed for their own age group. Further research into adults’ and children’s opinions about the coverage of different news topics by the adult and children’s news should test this assumption.

Our observation that children were more positive about the coverage of the filicide cases by the children’s news than were their parents or teachers did not apply to the youngest children in our sample. Although the age of the child did not influence parents’ and teachers’ opinions about the broadcasts, it was related to the opinions of children. The youngest age group of 7- to 8-year-olds was less positive about the broadcasting by the children’s news than the two older age groups were. A possible explanation is that older elementary school children are in general more interested in news, including violent news, than younger elementary school children are (Peeters & Valkenburg, 1998). Another explanation might be that older children are in general more interested in sensationalist media content than younger children. Children’s need for sensation rapidly increases during childhood, and reaches a peak during adolescence (Zuckerman, 1979). This might induce older children to be more interested in such shocking news topics as filicides than younger children.

Discussions About the Child Homicides

Earlier research (Drew & Reeves, 1980) has found that only 10% of the children regularly discuss television news with parents, teachers, or friends. In the case of high impact news, however, this percentage might be higher. A study by van der Voort, van Lil & Vooijs (1992) found that news about the Gulf War was ‘discussed with others’ by 26% of the children. Our study shows that news
about child killings, which has been found to be one of the most disturbing types of news content for children (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996), is very high on the agenda of both families and schools. Of our original sample of 255 children, 71% reported that they had heard about the filicide cases. Of these children, the majority (63%) said they had discussed the news with either their parents, teachers, or friends. When the news was discussed in the classroom, the majority of the discussions was initiated by the children. These results underscore how the news about the filicide cases occupied the thoughts of children as well as those of their parents and teachers.

In addition to our questions about the frequency with which the news on filicides was discussed, we asked parents to describe how they had discussed the topic with their child. Because of the exploratory nature of our study, we used an open-ended question to investigate the nature of those discussions. However, while coding parental responses, we found that parents’ descriptions overlapped largely with journalists’ criteria of newsworthiness. Like journalists, parents emphasized the pathological deviance, cultural deviance, and statistical deviance of the crime in their discussions with their children. In addition, parents discussed the news on filicides in terms of deviance of traditional family norms. They sometimes referred to the fact that the perpetrators "...came from wrecked families," or "...were divorced." Finally, parents regularly discussed the news through impersonalization, that is, they reassured their children that such things could never happen in the child’s home or family.

**Conclusion**

Our survey was conducted in the midst of a peak in incidents of filicide in The Netherlands and a subsequent national debate on whether such news should be covered or not. One could argue that the results of our survey are limited to this unique situation in The Netherlands. However, we believe that our results are not confined to the time of our study, nor to the Dutch situation. Arguments about whether and how the media should pay attention to violent news events seem to reappear time after time in many countries, especially when child victims are concerned. However, how news consumers feel about the subject has never been investigated.

The present study showed a broad consensus between different groups of news consumers that even a deviant and distressing news topic as the killing of children by their own parents should be covered by the news media. The news about the filicide cases was far more extensively discussed within families and classrooms than news regularly is. Despite concerns for the harmful effects of the topic to children, the large majority of parents and teachers thought that television news programs should pay attention to this type of news content. Future research should elaborate on our findings by investigating how parents, children, and teachers think that violent crime news should be covered. In our view, there is only one way to find out whether news
broadcasters make the right decisions. This is by taking into account the opinions of different groups of news consumers.

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References

