Consolation Strategies in Children’s Television News: A Longitudinal Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT
Engaging children in news is important for their participation in the public sphere. However, producers of children’s news face a trade-off between fully informing children and not causing distress. Against the background of technological, economic, and ideological changes in the media landscape, this study examined the use of consolation strategies in the Dutch children’s news, and whether these have shifted between 2000 and 2016. A manual content analysis was conducted, focusing on strategies used within the entire newscast (N = 408 programs), within items (N = 2,304 items), and within camera shots (N = 41,338 shots). Results showed that, on the one hand, the Dutch children’s news seems to become less inclined to protect children, by showing a decrease in expert sources and distant shots, and an increase in the repetition of sensational images and the prevalence of frightening sounds. On the other hand, the attention for sensational topics is relatively low and has not changed over time. Also, the use of the sandwich formula, animations and reassuring comments by the host or reporter did not change over the years. Yet, the use of children as a source has risen, which might signal a greater focus on stories of children themselves.

KEYWORDS
Children; television news; content analysis; consolation strategies; sources; sensationalism

Introduction
If children are seen as citizens, then they should undeniably be given access to the mediated public domain of television news (cf. Buckingham 2000; Carter 2017). News consumption contributes to the development of attitudes and behaviors that are valuable for democracy, such as increased political knowledge, civic participation, and prosocial intentions (De Leeuw et al. 2015; Livingstone and Markham 2008; York and Scholl 2015). In addition, news consumption during childhood predicts future news consumption (cf. Mindich 2005). It is thus important that children are informed about what is going on in the world (cf. Carter 2017; Van Deth, Abendschön, and Vollmar 2011). To contribute to this, several countries (e.g., Germany, the UK, and The Netherlands) broadcast special television newscasts for children (Alon-Tirosh and Lemish 2014; Messenger Davies 2007). In the current study, we investigate how this specific type of television news presents stories.
Producing news for children is not an easy task. The coverage of particularly negative events is a challenge that producers of news for children face daily (cf. Alon-Tirosh and Lemish 2014; Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007; Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). As shown in past research, negative news content can have detrimental effects on children’s emotions and anxiety-related behaviors (e.g., Riddle et al. 2012; Walma van der Molen, Valkenburg, and Peeters 2002). On the one hand, children’s news producers do not want to upset children by watching their programs. On the other hand, they want to cover relevant news based on news value, which also includes reporting about heavy topics such as violence and crime (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). Insight is warranted into how children’s news programs act on this trade-off, in order to enlarge scientific understanding of how news for children can be produced and to provide a solid basis for future research on the effects of news for children.

In the current study, we take a longitudinal perspective by focusing on the past decennia. Therewith, the study offers not only a comprehensive overview of the production of children’s television news but also provides insights into the influences the rapid developments in the media landscape may have had over the years. In particular, ideological views on childhood, technological developments such as digitalization, and economic developments such as greater competition for audience attention have affected the production of news for children. The latter two have also changed adult television news (cf. Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017).

Between 2000 and now, views on childhood have fluctuated, ranging from the stance that children need to be protected to the need for support in their autonomy (cf. Valkenburg and Piotrowski 2017). Moreover, digitalization has led to better possibilities for interactions with the audience, active audience participation in the production of news, and more access to footage that can be used in news stories (e.g., Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017; Witschge 2013). This may have facilitated a better inclusion of children’s perspectives in the production of children’s news (Mendes, Carter, and Messenger Davies 2009). And finally, attracting children to television news has become more challenging over the years. Today’s children grow up in an era dominated by technology and social communication. Children do not only get their news from television, but also from the Internet and social media, and via their smartphones (Valkenburg and Piotrowski 2017). Therefore, television producers may have altered their strategies to get children’s attention.

All in all, the current study examines the decisions made in children’s news on the trade-off between fully informing children and not causing distress. In addition, we examine whether there are changes over time in this regard, because ideological, technological, and economic developments may have influenced the production of children’s television news. To answer these questions, we analyze the use of consolation strategies—“protection measures that can be employed when children are confronted with violent or otherwise emotionally arousing news information” (as defined by Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003, 7)—in daily evening newscasts of the Dutch children’s television news, the NOS Jeugdjournaal, by performing a manual content analysis of news broadcasted between 2000 and 2016. Prominent examples of strategies that are applied by producers to help children to deal with negative events in news are alternating light and heavy news topics or including expert explanations (cf. Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007).
Consolation in Children’s News

Children’s television news programs—most often targeting children between approximately 8 and 12 years old (cf. Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003)—are created with the goal to cater to children’s distinct cognitive and emotional needs (e.g., Mendes, Carter, and Messenger Davies 2009). They, for example, avoid complexities and provide more background compared to adult news programs (Buckingham 2000; Matthews 2003; Messenger Davies 2007). There are several precautions that can be taken to reduce the negative emotions stemming from exposure to (negative) news. These protection measures, or consolation strategies, were made more explicit by Walma van der Molen and De Vries (2003) and Nikken and Walma van der Molen (2007). Consoling children, or at least attempting to offer consolation when negative news is presented, can be done at three levels: the program level (e.g., avoiding negative news events in the newscast), the level of the news item (e.g., the use of experts to explain something), and the shot level (e.g., avoiding violent images). The current study will follow these levels and strategies to determine consolation in children’s news and changes in consolation over time.

Consolation at the Program Level

The kind of news that is covered in newscasts is likely the biggest decision in making children’s news programs. Children’s news programs deploy different strategies on what to cover, for varying reasons. For example, to maximize audiences, the UK’s BBC Newsround chooses to focus on stories that attract children instead of more serious stories (Matthews 2008). They believe that it is extremely difficult to make news intelligible to children, which is why BBC Newsround offers a “palatable” version of events, replacing the context to issues with simple reporting (Matthews 2008). Others, such as the Dutch NOS Jeugdjournaal and the German Logo! do focus on more serious, and thereby also more negative, events (Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007).

Concerning what kind of news to present and how to set up a newscast for children, Walma van der Molen and De Vries (2003) described two consolation strategies at the program level. A first strategy to avoid frightening children is to avoid very negative or violent topics. Because these negative topics—such as items depicting violence, world problems, and accidents—are shown to frighten children (cf. Kleemans et al. 2019; Walma van der Molen, Valkenburg, and Peeters 2002), news producers can decide to avoid covering them or to make sure negative topics do not dominate the news.

Although avoidance of negative news might sound as a good solution, it is impossible to completely avoid negative news coverage because of its high news value (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). Therefore, a second consolation strategy is the sandwich formula: trying to diminish the impact of the negative news by presenting items that, for example, cover positive or weird events about children or animals before and after the negative topic (Alon-Tirosh 2017; Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). With this formula, children do receive negative news, but the emotional impact of such news can be decreased because they get used to the “sandwich”-pattern, in which a light topic will follow (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). By alternating heavy
news with more light and fun news, the news program is more fun and easier to digest (Alon-Tirosh 2017).

Over time, changes in the media landscape and the changing views on childhood (cf. Valkenburg and Piotrowski 2017) may have influenced the use of these strategies. In particular, new forms of online news dissemination have made it easier to publish and access news—also about negative events—which may influence the coverage of children’s television news programs. For example, children nowadays are more easily exposed to harsh events via other news media, which might have led to less avoidance of these topics in children’s television news. However, it may also be that these developments reinforce the need for news that suits children’s cognitive and emotional needs, turning the children’s news into a “safe haven” for news, and thus being more reluctant in covering such events. To get more insight into this, we question:

RQ1: To what extent are negative topics covered in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

RQ2: To what extent is the sandwich formula used in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

Consolation at the Item Level

Within news items, producers can apply various strategies to soften the impact of the news item by deciding on who delivers the news. First, news producers can include experts as sources (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). These experts, such as psychologists or researchers, can provide context to the negative event and can explain that the child is not the only one feeling afraid or sad because of the negative news (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). By doing this they can, for example, emphasize the distance of the event or the (low) occurrence rates of such events. These explanations can contribute to making the news more comprehensible and to decrease worry (Alon-Tirosh 2017).

Besides experts, children’s news programs can present children as sources. Within this category, we can distinguish personal accounts of children and reactions of child viewers (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). Regarding the first, children that are involved in the event—for example as the hero, the victim, or an eyewitness—can be used as a source. Although identification and empathy with these personal accounts of children involved in the event may enhance worry, these accounts can also make events more tangible, because someone of their age provides a framework of thought, thereby preventing further fantasizing about the event (Walma van der Molen, Valkenburg, and Peeters 2002; Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003).

Another option is to ask children who are not involved in the event to react to it. These reactions can provide a framework of thought and an idea of how other children deal with the information, possibly even establishing “collective mourning” (Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007; Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). In journalism and journalism research, such sources are known as “vox pops”: randomly selected people who do not have any involvement or expertise on the topic and are only presented to illustrate the news story (cf. Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012; Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). In the case of the children’s news, they function as a source of personal and
emotional identification (Hopmann and Shehata 2011; Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005).

There has already been a lot of research on sources in the news, but mostly on sources in adult news. In adult news, there is an increase in the use of citizen sources, more specifically of vox pops (e.g., Beckers, Walgrave, and Van den Bulck 2018; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017). At the same time, some mention a decrease of expert sources (although only studied as part of the larger category “elite sources”, Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017), while others found that the prevalence of expert sources is more stable (Beckers and Van Aelst 2018).

Possible explanations for changes in the kind of sources can be found in technological, economic, and ideological developments (cf. Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017). Regarding technological developments, digital technology and the digitalization of news production have enabled the audience to participate in news production (e.g., Gillmor 2004; O’Sullivan and Heinonen 2008). Economically, increased competition has enlarged a focus on what the public wants. This has led to an increase in citizen sources, because this kind of source is known to make stories more attractive, concrete, vivid, and authentic (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, and Beentjes 2005; Hopmann and Shehata 2011; Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012). Ideologically, the public has shifted from a passive consumer to an active participant (cf. Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017).

In children’s news, the study by Walma van der Molen and De Vries (2003) showed that the NOS Jeugdjournaal relied heavily on expert explanation when reporting about the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This might be indicative of this program’s tendency to rely on expert sources in the case of negative events. However, the aforementioned developments that have led to a shift in sources in adult news might also have had an influence on the children’s news. The combination of technological developments, competition with online news formats, and an ideological shift in views on childhood might have provoked a shift from expert sources to child sources in the children’s news. However, this has been not investigated yet. We therefore ask:

RQ3: To what extent are expert sources used in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

RQ4: To what extent are child sources used in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

RQ4a: To what extent are involved children used in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

RQ4b: To what extent are child vox pops used in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

Another strategy that producers can use at the item level is providing consolation by the people who bring the news: the news host and reporters (including voice-overs). Nikken and Walma van der Molen (2007) described that these people can speak directly to the child audience in a consoling manner. A news item could be made less frightening by, for example, directly emphasizing the distance of the event. It has previously been found that this strategy was used more often in the German children’s news than in the Dutch children’s news in one specific event (Nikken and Walma van der Molen
2007), but there is no research on the use of this strategy in general and over time. Therefore, we ask:

RQ5: To what extent is explicit consolation by hosts and reporters used in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

Consolation at the Shot Level

Lastly, the way the news and its consequences are (graphically) shown can be of great influence on children’s experience of a news item (Walma van der Molen, Valkenburg, and Peeters 2002). A first strategy to avoid upsetting children is by avoiding sensational images, such as images depicting dead bodies or blood (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). When children’s news programs do show this kind of content, they can try to make the impact as small as possible. Subsequent strategies include only presenting the sensational images from a distance and the avoidance of repetition of these kinds of images. Furthermore, frightening sounds that come along with sensational images (e.g., the sound of a siren) can be avoided to make news less emotionally harmful for children (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). Finally, news producers could also decide to show sensational topics in a more abstract way or to provide more context to a topic. This can be done by using animations or graphics in the children’s news (Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007).

There are several factors that may have influenced the visual presentation of news over the years. From research on adult news, it is known that sensational images attract the attention of viewers (cf. Grabe, Lang, and Zhao 2003). Because news producers face increasing competitive pressure (cf. McManus 2009)—for the NOS Jeugdjournaal most likely with sources on the Internet and with other TV programs—the children’s news might have started to use a more sensational style of presentation to attract viewers’ attention. Besides this economic influence, technological developments have increased the possibilities to access and incorporate images in news (cf. Allan and Peters 2015). To be more specific, news producers have more access to sensationalist images because everyone can now take pictures or make videos with their mobile phones at the moment a negative event happens. There is thus more material available that news producers can select from. At the same time, technological developments have created more opportunities for using animations. Ideologically, the Internet and social media have increased children’s access to all kinds of information and (heavy) graphics, which might have led to producers being less inclined to avoid graphical shots because they assume that children are more used to it, or just to an increasing awareness of the importance to use age-appropriate images. To shed light on the use of consolation strategies on the shot level in children’s news, we question:

RQ6: To what extent are sensational images used in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

RQ7: To what extent are distant shots of sensational events used in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

RQ8: To what extent are sensational images used repeatedly in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?
RQ9: To what extent are frightening sounds used in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

RQ10: To what extent are animations used in children’s television news, and has this changed between 2000 and 2016?

Materials and Methods

Sample

A longitudinal content analysis of the NOS Jeugdjournaal evening television newscast between 2000 and 2016 was conducted to investigate the use of consolation strategies in children’s news over time. Of each year, 24 newscasts were randomly selected—two per month —, which has been described as a representative sample (Riffe et al. 1996). This sample represents “normal” prime-time newscasts, excluding national holidays. Moreover, week overviews in which all important news topics of the past week were briefly discussed were excluded, because they are not representative of the normal newscasts.

The year 2000 was selected as a starting point, because this year signifies the start of various (further) technological, economic, and ideological developments in news, put in motion by the rise of the Internet (cf. Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017). The end point of this sample, 2016, was chosen because the NOS Jeugdjournaal underwent changes in format in August 2017. In that year, the total length of NOS Jeugdjournaal newscasts doubled (NOS 2017), making comparisons with previous years invalid. Following Walma van der Molen and De Vries (2003), newscasts were coded at three levels: the newscast level (N = 408 programs), the item level (N = 2,304 items) and camera shot level (N = 41,338 shots). All stories in the selected newscasts were coded, except for the bulletin previews and the weather forecast.

Measurements

The codebook designed for the current study was based on codebooks used in previous studies on either child (Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007; Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003) or adult news (Hendriks Vettehen et al. 2012; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017). Studies by Alon-Tirosh and Lemish (2014) and Riddle (2014) have inspired how to adapt definitions of certain categories to children’s news programs. Coders first coded general information about the newscast, including the date of the newscast and its length. Within each newscast, the length of each separate item was also coded. Subsequently, newscasts, items, and shots were coded on the presence of consolation strategies.

Program Level

To examine to what extent negative topics are covered in the children’s news, for each item the topic of the item was coded. After knowing what is shown in children’s news, it is possible to deduce how often these topics are negative in nature. Furthermore, this way of coding makes it possible to examine the changes in the presence of negative topics over time, and thus to see whether negative topics are more often avoided or not.
Although this does not strictly show how often negative topics were avoided, it does show what percentage of topics that were presented is negative and thus how often negative items were included in children’s news.

Based on Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2012) and Alon-Tirosh and Lemish (2014), coders could choose from a list of sixteen topics: (1) political news ($N = 158; 6.9\%$), (2) economic/financial news ($N = 36; 1.6\%$), (3) world problems ($N = 32; 1.4\%$), (4) violence ($N = 101; 4.4\%$), (5) criminality ($N = 93; 4.0\%$), (6) accident/disaster ($N = 267; 11.6\%$), (7) celebrities ($N = 114; 4.9\%$), (8) culture and media ($N = 283; 12.3\%$), (9) sports and recreation ($N = 389; 16.9\%$), (10) animals ($N = 245; 10.6\%$), (11) nature and environment ($N = 116; 5.0\%$), (12) education ($N = 78; 3.4\%$), (13) science and technology ($N = 86; 3.7\%$), (14) prosocial behavior ($N = 72; 3.1\%$), (15) funny/humoristic news ($N = 54; 2.3\%$), (16) other positive/good news ($N = 122; 5.3\%$), or (17) other ($N = 58; 2.5\%$). Of these categories, world problems, violence, criminality, and accident/disaster are regarded as negative topics (cf. Hendriks Vettehen et al. 2012). To study changes in the presence of negative topics over time, these categories were recoded to negative and the other categories to non-negative.

Based on the definition of Walma van der Molen and De Vries (2003), the use of the sandwich formula was counted in the entire newscast. This variable was coded based on the topics of all items in the newscast. The sandwich formula was coded when an item with a “light” topic was followed by an item with a “heavy” topic or the other way around. Light topics, such as positive or weird events about children or animals, are presented to contrast negative or heavy topics, such as war or violence, or serious news, such as politics (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). Because the sandwich formula describes the relation between two consecutive items, the maximum per newscast was the total amount of items in that newscast minus one ($M = 1.95, SD = 1.17$).

**Item Level**
Per item, the presence of experts as sources and the presence of children as sources were coded. Sources were coded as an expert source when this person was an adult and had the function to bring independent knowledge, based on their professional expertise (Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017). Expert sources were, for example, researchers from universities or research institutes. Child sources were coded as such when it was, based on the item, likely that they were younger than sixteen years old.

For child sources the child’s role was coded, distinguishing between victims, heroes, eyewitnesses, active citizens, experts, distantly involved children, and vox pops. For the analyses, these roles were reduced to two categories: the presence of involved children per item and vox pops. The involved children include the victims, heroes, eyewitnesses, active citizens, and child experts, because these child sources bring personal accounts based on their expertise and/or experience (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). Finally, the vox pops—presenting reactions of random children—include child sources that were not or only distantly involved (Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007; Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003).

Additionally, direct consolation by hosts and reporters (including voice-overs) in negative items was coded (Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007). Direct consolation was coded as such when the host of the children’s news directly spoke to the child audience in a consoling manner, for example by mentioning that the event happened far away or
what they can do to feel better. This variable was only coded for items with a negative story topic.1

**Shot Level**

For the shot level, the prevalence of *sensational images* was coded first, after which coders specified the kind and number of sensational images per item. Following Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2012), they could code images related to (1) violence, molestation, riots, war, vandalism \((M = 1.41, SD = 2.20)\), (2) accident, disaster \((M = 2.72, SD = 3.75)\), (3) physical trauma, famished, or ill people \((M = 0.33, SD = 0.94)\), or (4) death, objects related to death \((M = 0.58, SD = 1.70)\). As a reference for the amount of sensational shots, the total amount of camera shots per item was also coded \((M = 17.94, SD = 11.29)\).

For the shots including sensational images, it was coded how often these shots were *distant shots*, and to what extent there was a *repetition of sensational shots*. Distant shots were defined as “a shot filmed from a far distance with a wide angle, such as pictures taken from the air” (Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003, 14). In this kind of shot, the sensational image is barely visible, and/or the impact of the sensational image is reduced by the distant camera position. The shot is less concrete, less proximate, and less detailed, decreasing the impact of the shot (cf. Riddle 2014). Repetition of sensational shots was coded when several shots showed the exact or near-exact information.

Furthermore, it was coded how often *frightening sounds*, such as sirens or scary music, were added. For this variable, only additional sounds that were no integral part of the existing film footage were coded, in line with Walma van der Molen and De Vries (2003). This variable thus represents the extent to which artificial dramatic effect has been added to the children’s news.

Finally, it was coded to what extent *animations* and graphics were used in negative items in the children’s news1 (Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007). These animations particularly include graphical explanations of phenomena and showing on a map where an event happened.

**Coders and Reliability**

A total number of 23 coders were involved in the content analysis. Coders were extensively trained by the developer of the codebook, who also coded a part of the sample. After discussion of the codebook and training, each coder coded the same three complete newscasts to calculate intercoder reliability with the Hayes Macro (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). Most variables were accurately coded, resulting in sufficient to good Krippendorf’s alpha levels (lowest \(\alpha = .754\); see Table 1). Afterwards, the materials to be coded were randomly divided over the 22 coders.

The variables *distant shot*, *repetition of sensational images* and *frightening sounds* did, however, not have sufficient intercoder reliability levels. Therefore, two of the coders further discussed these variables and updated the codebook to make these more reliable to code, for instance by adding extra examples. These coders did more training for these variables and both coded ten extra items, which were added to determine intercoder reliability. After the extra training and discussion, the intercoder reliability for these variables was good (see Table 1). Subsequently, these two coders (re)coded these three variables in the entire sample. In a later stage, they also coded the variables direct consolation
by the host/reporter, and the use of animations. Before they did this, they did some training and double-coded 10% of the negative news items to determine intercoder reliabilities.

**Analysis Procedure**

Data were analyzed using RStudio (Version 1.0.136). To investigate changes over time, the newscasts were divided into three groups: 2000–2005 ($N = 790$ items), 2006–2010 ($N = 673$ items), and 2011–2016 ($N = 841$ items). Tests performed ranged from chi-square tests (RQ1, RQ10), to ANOVAs (RQ2, RQ5—but with a logistic transformation of the dependent variable), and nonparametric Kruskal–Wallis tests when data did not adhere to the assumptions for ANOVA (RQ3, RQ4, RQ4a, RQ4b, RQ5, RQ7, RQ8, RQ9).

**Results**

**Consolation at the Program Level**

To answer RQ1, on the presence of negative topics in children’s news over time, we first examined the topics that were presented in the children’s news. As can be seen in Figure 1, the top five topics discussed included sports and recreation, culture and media, accidents/disasters, animals, and political news. Over the last one and a half decade, the percentage of negative topics—world problems, criminality, violence, and accident/disaster—compared to all topics presented in the NOS Jeugdjournaal has remained relatively stable (2000–2005: 21.27%, 2006–2010: 21.69%, 2011–2016: 21.28%). A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between the presence of negative topics and the three time points, which showed a non-significant relation, $\chi^2(2) = 0.05$, $p = .975$. There are thus no differences in the presentation and avoidance of negative topics in these three periods of time.

To answer RQ2 about the use of the sandwich formula and potential changes over time (RQ2), we first analyzed the presence of the sandwich formula. Newscasts generally
contained 5.66 items (SD = 1.23), so the sandwich formula was used between approximately half of the items (M = 1.95, SD = 1.17). In the other instances, either two light or two heavy items followed each other. To control for differences in the total amount of items, the use of the sandwich formula per newscast was divided by the total amount of items in that newscast. The ANOVA on the use of the sandwich formula showed that although there were small fluctuations in the average use of the sandwich formula per newscast over time (2000–2005: M = 0.33, SD = 0.18; 2006–2010: M = 0.37, SD = 0.18; 2011–2016: M = 0.33, SD = 0.20), these differences were not significant, F(2,405) = 1.69, p = .186. Thus, the use of the sandwich formula did not change over time.

Consolation at the Item Level

RQ3 and RQ4 focused on the use of respectively expert sources and child sources in children’s television news. Overall, there were more child sources (M = 1.35, SD = 2.19) than expert adult sources (M = 0.14, SD = 0.37) in the analyzed newscasts (see Figure 2).

To further investigate RQ3, we examined the difference in presence of expert sources per news item between the three time periods. The Kruskal–Wallis test showed a significant correlation between time and the number of expert sources between 2000–2005 (M = 0.18, SD = 0.44), 2006–2010 (M = 0.12, SD = 0.36) and 2011–2016 (M = 0.11, SD = 0.35), \( \chi^2(2) = 11.552, \ p = .003, \ \epsilon^2 = .005 \). A Dunn test with Bonferroni correction showed that the difference between 2006–2010 and 2011–2016 was not significant (p = .765). However, there was a significant difference between 2000–2005 and 2006–2010 (p = .023), and between 2000–2005 and 2011–2016 (p = .002). Thus, we see a general decrease in expert sources per news item over time.

With regard to the presence of child sources (RQ4), there were significant differences between 2000–2005 (M = 1.05, SD = 1.97), 2006–2010 (M = 1.44, SD = 2.15), and 2011–
2016 \( (M = 1.56, SD = 2.39), \chi^2(2) = 25.36, p < .001, \rho^2 = .011 \). The difference between 2006–2010 and 2011–2016 is not significant, while the differences between 2000–2005 and 2006–2011, and between 2000–2005 and 2011–2016 were significant (both \( p < .001 \)). Compared to the presence of child sources in 2000–2005, there was thus an increase in child sources in the following years.

**Figure 2.** Amount of expert and child sources per item over time.

**Figure 3.** Amount of child sources by involvement per item over time.
To investigate whether the role of child sources has changed over time, separate analyses were performed. Vox pops ($M = 3.13, SD = 2.41$) were used most frequently in news for children, while the use of involved children is relatively low ($M = 0.35, SD = 0.91$). Although Figure 3 shows some fluctuations in the presence of involved sources over time (RQ4a), there were no significant differences between 2000–2005 ($M = 0.33, SD = 0.76$), 2006–2010 ($M = 0.29, SD = 0.69$), and 2011–2016 ($M = 0.42, SD = 1.14$), $\chi^2(2) = 0.496, p = .781$. For the difference in the presence of child vox pops (RQ4b), the differences between 2000–2005 ($M = 2.94, SD = 2.36$), 2006–2010 ($M = 2.99, SD = 2.30$), and 2011–2016 ($M = 3.38, SD = 2.53$) were not significant, $\chi^2(2) = 5.810, p = .055$. Thus, the presence of vox pops in the NOS Jeugdjournaal did not differ significantly over time.

Additionally, we examined to what extent hosts and reporters of the children’s news directly consoled children in negative news and whether that differed between the time periods. Direct consolation happened only rarely in the children’s news (2000–2005: 0.05%, 2006–2010: 0.03%, 2011–2016: 0.03%). When direct consolation did happen, this most often was to refer to the children’s news website to further discuss the topic, to chat with other children, or to refer to another source of help (76.47%). In the other occurrences (23.53%), direct consolation took place by emphasizing that an event is not (yet) happening in the Netherlands, or by giving tips to deal with a situation. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between the presence of direct consolation and the three time points, which showed a non-significant relation, $\chi^2(2) = 5.296, p = .071$. There were thus no differences in whether direct consolation is offered in these three periods of time.

Consolation at the Shot Level

Lastly, we examined consolation strategies used at the shot level, starting with sensational images (RQ6). In total, 18.92% of the items contained sensational images, and about 1% of all camera shots were sensational. A one-way ANOVA showed that there were no significant differences in the total amount of sensational images per item with at least one sensational image between 2000–2005 ($M = 4.64, SD = 3.63$), 2006–2010 ($M = 5.18, SD = 3.77$) and 2011–2016 ($M = 5.28, SD = 4.15$), $F(2, 439) = 1.42, p = .242$.

Regarding the amount of distant shots when sensational images were used (RQ7), some fluctuations over time were found. In total, there was on average a bit more than one distant shot per news item ($M = 0.69, SD = 1.18$). The Kruskal–Wallis test showed that the three time periods significantly differed from each other, $\chi^2(2) = 11.811, p = .003, \epsilon^2 = .005$. Dunn’s test with Bonferroni correction showed that only the difference between 2006–2010 ($M = 0.99, SD = 1.56$) and 2011–2016 ($M = 0.47, SD = 0.83$) was significant ($p < .001$). The differences between 2000–2005 ($M = 0.68, SD = 1.08$) and 2006–2010 and between 2000–2005 and 2011–2016 were not significant ($p = .108; p = .153$, respectively). From the second to the third time period, there was thus a decrease in the amount of distant shots.

To answer RQ8, on the amount of repetitions of sensational images, another Kruskal–Wallis test was performed. On average, there was more than one repetition of a sensational image per news item in which sensational images were present ($M = 1.06, SD = 1.65$). The differences between the three time periods were significant, $\chi^2(2) = 25.235, p < .001, \epsilon^2 = .011$. Dunn’s test with Bonferroni correction explained that the differences
between 2000–2005 ($M = 0.99$, $SD = 1.56$) and 2006–2011 ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.83$), and the difference between 2000–2005 and 2011–2016 ($M = 0.99$, $SD = 1.56$) were significant ($p = .017$; $p < .001$, respectively). The difference between 2006–2011 and 2011–2016 was not significant ($p = .040$, but not significant because of Bonferroni correction). The repetition of sensational images thus increased only from the first to the second time period, but not from the second to the third.

Furthermore, we investigated the extent to which the amount of frightening sounds in children’s news were present and whether this has changed between 2000 and 2016 (RQ9). On average, there was less than one frightening sound per negative news item ($M = 0.75$, $SD = 1.26$). Over time, there seemed to be a significant increase in the amount of frightening sounds per negative news item, $\chi^2(2) = 9.825$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .004$. However, only the difference between 2000–2005 ($M = 0.61$, $SD = 1.19$) and 2011–2016 ($M = 0.86$, $SD = 1.15$) was significant ($p = .003$). The difference between the first and second ($M = 0.79$, $SD = 1.44$) time period, and between the second and third time period were not significant ($p = .311$; $p = .113$, respectively). The amount of frightening sounds per negative news items thus increased, although only when comparing the first and the third time period.

Finally, it was investigated to what extent animations were used in children’s news and whether this has changed between 2000 and 2016 (RQ10). On average, half of the negative news items included an animation ($M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.64$). Animations were most often a map to show where the news event had happened (79.22%), followed by animations to further explain an event or phenomenon (16.08%). Other animations included illustrations of a topic, showing social media posts, and showing the results of a poll (4.70%). There were no significant differences in the use of animations per negative news item between the three time points, 2000–2005 ($M = 0.61$, $SD = 0.74$), 2006–2010 ($M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.62$), and 2011–2016 ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.58$), $\chi^2(2) = 2.466$, $p = .291$.

**Discussion**

The current study examined the use of consolation strategies in children’s news from 2000 to 2016. Therewith, we aimed to shed light on how children’s news programs act on the trade-off between fully informing children and not causing distress. Following previous research (Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007; Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003), consolation strategies were studied at the program-, item- and shot level. Results showed that although the topics in newscasts have not become more sensational and negative over time, the intensity of sensational images and frightening sounds in those stories seemed to have increased. Shots were less distant, frightening sounds and repetitions of sensational images were used more frequent, and expert sources were featured less to offer consolation by providing more context. Direct consolation by hosts or reporters was included very rarely. The overall presence of negative topics, however, remains relatively low, the sandwich formula was used between half of the items, and children were featured more often to share their thoughts on events. Finally, animations were used in half of the items with a negative content, particularly by showing a map of where the event happened.

To be more specific, we found a frequent and stable use of consolation strategies at the program level of the Dutch children’s television news. Only about 20% of all topics
discussed in the *NOS Jeugdjournaal* between 2000 and 2016 were negative, with no significant changes over time. This percentage is low compared to Dutch adult news, in which 30–50% of the topics are negative (e.g., Hendriks Vetteheen, Nuijten, and Beentjes 2005, 2012). This might be because some negative stories are considered irrelevant for children. However, it might also be that—in contrast to comments made by producers in Alon-Tirosh (2017)—it is deemed impossible to show children “anything”, pointing to a stronger urge to protect children than to inform them. This is in line with the use of the sandwich formula, which was stable over time and applied circa half of the time. Together with the low presence of negative topics, this could indeed be indicative of an on-going policy of consolation.

At the item level, a major shift in the way sources can offer consolation was shown, while consolation by news hosts remained low but stable. Over time, there was a decrease in expert sources and an increase in child sources, signaling a shift from rational explanation to more emotional personal accounts. Although there were no differences in the kind of child sources—distinguishing involved children and vox pops—over time, vox pops were most often featured at the cost of expert sources. This is in line with developments in the adult news (e.g., Beckers, Walgrave, and Van den Bulck 2018; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017). An explanation specific for children’s television news might be that it is hard to find experts who can comprehensibly explain events to children, especially in a way that also offers consolation. Furthermore, like in adult news, producers have to deal with strict deadlines (cf. Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017), making it even harder to find the right expert at the right time, while reactions of (random) children can easily be obtained.

Regardless of the challenges producers face, there is a clear shift away from expert sources offering consolation by rational explanation towards child sources that offer more emotional personal accounts. On the one hand, this offers children a framework for thought on an issue and provides them with an idea on how other children deal with it (cf. Walma van der Molen and De Vries 2003). Furthermore, it gives children a place to connect (Alon-Tirosh 2017), which might be exactly what they need in today’s news media landscape (cf. Mendes, Carter, and Messenger Davies 2009). On the other hand, this can also be worrysome. The presentation of vox pops might come at the cost of the news being informative (e.g., Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017), because these ordinary people do not have any involvement or expertise on the topic (cf. Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012; Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). Right now, the *NOS Jeugdjournaal* seems to choose consoling children by showing other children’s reactions over providing them with an expert explanation. Related to that, the inclusion of children’s reactions might serve as a replacement for consolation by hosts or reporters, although the direct consolation by news hosts was already low in previous studies (Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007). For future research, it would be interesting to investigate to what extent child sources provide relevant information and what the effects of these different forms of consolation via sources are on children’s emotions and cognitions.

Finally, there was less sensitivity on the shot level. While there is an increase in the availability of sensational images nowadays, the *NOS Jeugdjournaal* did not show more sensational images over time. There were, however, changes in the way these images were presented. The presentation of sensational images was less cautious, for example,
showing less distance from sensational events and more repetition of sensational images. Moreover, the prevalence of frightening sounds in negative news stories increased. The use of animations was stable over time, but animations were mostly used to indicate the geographical place of the event. As the producers mentioned in Alon-Tirosh (2017), the presentation of news should be fit for children. The trend towards presenting images and sounds with less sensitivity might be indicative of a feeling that producers have about what is appropriate for children today. Although they still do not present a lot of negative news, they seem to feel that children should be better able to deal with sensational images and sounds than before. Nevertheless, it should be investigated whether this is really the case in effect research on the influence of news visuals on children.

Taken together, the NOS Jeugdjournaal shows that there is a fine line between not wanting to frighten children and not fully informing them. It is apparently not possible to show children anything, because a lot of potentially frightening information is omitted from the children’s news. This makes sense, because negative news can have all kinds of negative consequences (cf. Alon-Tirosh and Lemish 2014; Riddle et al. 2012; Walma van der Molen, Valkenburg, and Peeters 2002). However, children might not be fully informed on important matters, because topics as “sports and recreation” and “culture and media” rank at the top of topics covered. Furthermore, the presence of expert sources is declining at the cost of randomly chosen children that are not involved or have expertise. Therefore, we might question whether children’s news programs fully inform children, which is what children need as (active) citizens. At the same time, the NOS Jeugdjournaal neither completely leans towards protecting children. Over time, the presentation of sensational images and sounds has even become harsher. It seems that the NOS Jeugdjournaal continually adapts its visual presentation to find its way in the current news media landscape and to optimally inform children. The most optimal way to inform children has yet to be found and is bound to change over time.

By providing an overview of how Dutch children’s television news presents news to children, this study, first and foremost, aimed to contribute to the understanding of how children’s news is produced and provides a basis for future research on news effects. In addition, it can be seen as input for the broader discussion on the extent to which producers of news for children across the world succeed in supporting children’s citizenship. As discussed, amongst others, by Carter (2017) and Kaziaj and Van Bauwel (2017), news producers have the responsibility to help children in this regard and to ensure that their voices are communicated and heard in the public debate. Results of the current study provide some indications that children’s voices are increasingly represented in children’s news, but it also raises new questions on the extent to which the application of consolation strategies in news either supports or hinders children’s growth into active citizens in society. It would be relevant to investigate this from a more qualitative perspective to provide broader insights into how news can help children to be critical and autonomous citizens.
Note

1. The codings for direct consolation (by host, reporter) and animations were added later. For unclear reasons, seven newscasts were excluded from the online archive and were thus no longer accessible. As a consequence, sixteen items reporting on negative events could not be retrieved. The codings for those two categories of consolation strategies are thus based on \( N = 477 \) (instead of \( N = 493 \)) negative news items.

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