

# EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

## Children, Media and Conflict

**Cynthia Carter and Stephanie Hemelryk Donald**

The theme for this special issue was initially inspired by a series of engaging and passionate discussions amongst children and media scholars calling attention to the fact that the media seldom address the ways in which war, protracted conflict, terrorism, and sexual and domestic violence impact on children (except as largely passive recipients of adult actions). Children's voices and stories are rarely heard in the media on such events and issues. This absence exists despite enormous advances in many parts of the world with a growing number of communicative spaces for ordinary citizens to have a greater say on what is happening and how public stories are told.

The mediated versions of conflict that tend to be the most arresting, and therefore likely to inspire debates, passions and outrage, are those which are open to visualisation. Often disturbing media images of children in situations of conflict remind us of the multiplicity of ways and means in which they are both incorporated and elided within the experiences and narratives of adult conflict. These events affect different people more or less directly depending on their proximity to what is happening, but it is clear that there is a continuing and worldwide pattern of violence in which children are implicated by adult actions or perspectives, or by the necessities of survival (see Wells, this issue).

For example, in October 2001, refugees on a sinking ship (the "children overboard affair") were falsely accused by the Australian government (which was seeking re-election at the time) of threatening to drown their own children in order to be accepted into the country. Evidence later given at a Senate enquiry showed that the photos of this event supplied to the media were cropped and distorted to support the government's claim.<sup>1</sup> In another Australian case in 2007, the *Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse* was used to entitle the Federal government to intervene in Indigenous families through welfare withholds and required testing for sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup> Although there is indeed endemic poverty and related situations of abuse in some communities, the willingness of the government to declare special circumstances for one racially determined sector of the population was horrifyingly reminiscent of child removal policies in the early to mid-twentieth century. However, media coverage emphasised the innocence of the victims and the need to act swiftly to save them over any considerations of racism in the targeting of the policy and its implementation.

Turning to the Middle East, it is notable that children were routinely deployed in the media on both sides during the conflict between Israel and the Hezbollah in southern Lebanon in 2006. Images of dead children were used in demonstrations in many parts of the world, often stirring up further hatred and violence. Another particularly shocking example of the portrayal of children was the incident in which Israeli children were photographed in July 2006 writing messages such as "From Israel, with Love" on missile shells at a heavy artillery position in northern Israel, next to the Lebanese border—missiles that were shortly to be launched into Lebanon. Responding to global public outcry

surrounding these news photos, Sheera Claire Frenkel of the *Jerusalem Post* noted that “An official close to Israel’s public relations campaign said that there was ‘no way’ to spin the incident in a positive light. ‘Some people are simply irresponsible,’ said the official.” Allegedly, some parents brought their children to see the missiles. Although an Israeli Defence Force officer was present, it was not clear if he condemned or condoned these actions.<sup>3</sup> The Human Rights Watch website has attempted to give a balanced account of the events in question, pointing out both Israel’s wide use of cluster bombs and Hezbollah’s practice of locating munitions in civilian areas, both practices contributing to the deaths of civilians, including many children in densely populated areas.<sup>4</sup>

It is not our intention here to give political analyses of the many wars in which children suffer, nor even to pursue the adult combatants on all sides whose fighting always implicates children’s well being and always serves to destroy human futures and potential. Likewise, the political wrangling and posturing of “interventions”, intra-national neuroses epitomised by the Elián González affair (see Allatson & Guzmán, this issue), and media moralising over the loss of childhood innocence—often the scapegoat for adult failure (Aldridge & Cook, this issue)—may be described and critiqued without claiming that one motivation of violent adult behaviours is better or worse than another. What we do want to suggest, however, is that the voices and experiences of children are severely under-represented in discussions of conflict, and that—given the enormous and deleterious impacts that any kind of violence wreaks on young people—this is a major issue for the world’s media, as well as media academics and activists, to redress. Such redress may be conceptualised through the notion of peace-work advocated here by Peter Lemish’s account of peace building through educational and televisual content, or through reportage that describes the contexts of conflict in which children are directly affected, sometimes as formal combatants (Brooten, this issue).

We have realised through the editorial process that, although the theme was prompted, in part, by impassioned academic discussion and debate, it must be written with care; there is so much at stake in the relationships between interlocutors even within the academy. So we trust that the resulting collection adequately captures the variety of voices which we read in the many fine submissions. Styles include politically inflected textual analyses, sociological comment, cultural critique and ethnography. Topics include the perception of young Muslims of their collective image in media post 9/11, how the media can involve children in peace building and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland, child soldiers and abduction in Asia and Africa and the ways in which such occurrences are reported in English language media and through NGO communications, the use of the idea of the “fragile child” in narratives of cultural nationalism, border-crossing and immigration, and the criminalisation of very young children in Britain. These case studies bring to light the continuing relevance of gender, class, and “race” politics, as well as the growing influence of religious discourses in the creation and circulation of codes of conflict in which children are written as combatant, icons of suffering, or mediated token of exchange and affect—but almost always as voiceless participants in an adult generated world of war and conflict.

This collection contributes to the growing field of children and media studies in general, but also to the body of work on children and violence, and to peace studies. It is also a further manifestation of this journal’s commitment to debating crucial issues in the contemporary world of media through the lens of children’s perceptions, experience and symbolic relevance. As editors we are grateful for the opportunity to bring excellent work to the attention of our colleagues in the field, and trust that it will inspire more debate and

dedication to using scholarship both to highlight injustice and to indicate possible avenues to critique and ameliorate the effects of conflict.

We finished writing this introduction on 1 June 2008, Children's Day in the People's Republic of China. It seems apposite therefore to dedicate this issue to the children who lost their lives in the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008, and to all those who loved them.

#### NOTES

1. For the full story, see: <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2004/s1261514.htm>
2. See: [http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquirysaac/pdf/bipacsa\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquirysaac/pdf/bipacsa_final_report.pdf)
3. For the full story, go to: <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1153291980307>
4. [http://hrw.org/reports/2007/lebanon0907/3.htm#\\_Toc175028479](http://hrw.org/reports/2007/lebanon0907/3.htm#_Toc175028479)

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