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EDITED BY

NICHOLAS W.
JANKOWSKI

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Dr. N.W. Jankowski
Department of Communication
University of Nijmegen
P.O. Box 9104
6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands
email: N.Jankowski@maw.kun.nl

SCHOLARSHIP

JULIETTE H. WALMA VAN DER MOLEN
CHILDREN'S RECALL OF TELEVISION AND PRINT NEWS

UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN, CENTER FOR CHILD AND MEDIA STUDIES, 1998

Contact information: Center for Child and Media Studies, Wassenaarseweg 52, 2333 AK Leiden, the Netherlands, Email: WALMA@fsw.LeidenUniv.nl

This dissertation consists of a collection of four articles, which were written by the author and co-author T. H. A. Van der Voort between 1994 and 1997. The recurring themes shared by these articles are the impact of television and print on children's recall of news information. Each article is self-contained, starting with an introduction of its own. Therefore, this introduction discusses only briefly the subject matter of each of the articles, henceforth referred to as chapters.

Children rely primarily on television as their source of news information. Most children in the highest grades of elementary school frequently watch news programs on television, but rarely read newspapers or listen to radio news, and seldom discuss the news with teachers, classmates, or parents. It has been argued that it is undesirable for children to be informed about the news primarily through television instead of newspapers, because media comparison studies conducted with adults suggested that print is a more effective medium to convey news information than television. However, until recently, very little research had been conducted into *children's* recall of the news presented via different media. The studies presented in this dissertation were designed to fill this void.

The first chapter reports on an experiment that was conducted (a) to compare children's recall of televised and printed versions of news stories that were taken from the program *Jeugdjournaal* (Children's News), and (b) to establish whether the relative effectiveness of television and print in conveying the news was dependent on children's reading proficiency and expectation of a memory test. The results of this study indicated that, unlike adults, children who had watched the news on television remembered considerably more than those who had received the same news in print. The observed recall advantage of television news did not depend on children's level of reading proficiency or their knowledge of an impending memory test. To examine what could explain the superior recall of television news, the contribution of verbal and pictorial information to children's story recall was analysed. It was found that the observed superior recall of television applied only to those information elements that had been presented both verbally and visually on television, a finding that agrees with the dual-coding hypothesis. This hypothesis argues that audio-visual information is stored in memory in two separate but associated codes, one verbal and one visual code. During recall, the visual memory code serves as an extra retrieval cue, which enhances recall, provided that the verbal and visual information is closely related.

The study reported in chapter 2 was designed as a partial replication of the study presented in the first chapter. Furthermore, it examined whether the inferior recall of the printed news might be due to an artificial underutilisation of the print medium. To that end, television news stories were compared not only with literal transcripts of the television narratives (as was done in the previous experiment), but also with two different "real" newspaper versions written by journalists. The results of this study again indicated that children remembered most from television. The television news

stories were remembered better than any of the three print versions and no recall differences were found between the various print conditions. Furthermore, as was found in the first study, the superior recall of television compared with print did not depend on children's level of reading ability. The recall advantage of television was most pronounced for those verbal information elements that were supplemented with redundant television pictures.

The study presented in the third chapter examined the validity of two other alternative explanations for children's superior recall of television news. One alternative explanation for the observed superior recall of television is that the studies described in chapters 1 and 2 still underutilised the print medium, because the television news stories were compared with bare text versions rather than texts supplemented with a newspaper photo. Another rival explanation is that children might process information more easily when they listen to it than when they have to read it themselves. Therefore, in this study, television news stories were compared not only with bare print versions, but also with print versions supplemented with photo material and with audio versions of the same news stories. The study again confirmed the dual-coding hypothesis, whereas no support was found for the alternative explanations tested in this study.

Although the studies reported on in chapters 1, 2, and 3 showed that children remembered more from television than from print news, the reverse was found in previous media comparison experiments conducted with adults. The study presented in chapter 4 addressed the question of how the opposite results obtained for adults and children may be explained. The study investigated two rival explanations. According to the *reading proficiency explanation*, printed news was remembered best by adults but not by children, because children are less able to profit from the opportunities print offers for efficient information processing. The *semantic overlap explanation*, on the other hand, ascribes the opposite outcomes obtained with adults and children to the use of different television news programs that differed in the degree to which the verbal and visual content of the television stories showed semantic overlap. Studies conducted with adults employed "adult" television news stories that are usually characterised by a small amount of semantic overlap between text and pictures, whereas the studies conducted with children used children's television news stories marked by high audio-visual redundancy.

To examine the validity of the two explanations, both children and adults were exposed to television and print stories in both children's and adult news formats. The results of the study were clearly in favour of the semantic overlap explanation, which was supported most strongly by the findings obtained with adults. Adults proved to learn most from print when print news was compared with adult television news (low audio-visual redundancy), whereas they learned most from television when print was compared with children's television news (high audio-visual redundancy). As was found in studies 1, 2, and 3, children learned most from television when text and pictures were closely related (the children's news). However, the superiority of television was no longer observable when children watched adult television news stories in which the semantic overlap between verbal and visual information was much smaller. For both children and adults, the superior recall of children's television news was most pronounced for verbal information elements that were supplemented with redundant pictures. Although no recall advantage of television was found with adult

news stories, television was the most effective medium for those scarce information elements that were adequately visualised in the adult news stories. These results indicate that print is not necessarily a better medium for conveying news information than television. Rather, the relative effectiveness of television and print depends on the degree of semantic overlap between verbal and pictorial television information.