COVID-19 Through the Eyes of Children: Consuming News Media During Unprecedented Times

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine how young children ages 9-12 receive their information about the COVID-19 pandemic. While most children in this age category often get their news from adults such as their parents, digital platforms are also a common source of information. Next, I examined how media might help manage children's fears about the pandemic. However, given the contemporary nature of the pandemic, there is limited research on how children consume COVID-19 related news. In addition to inquiring about this topic, I decided to create a podcast about COVID-19 for young children ages 9-12. My hope is that, in this fast-paced news cycle saturated with fake news, the podcast can provide accurate information to young listeners and encourage them to stay curious about the world around them. While the educational benefits a podcast might provide children have not been directly examined, there is still great potential in the genre.

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As I sit at my desk at my home in Connecticut, I scroll through my Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat one last time before my first online class of quarantine begins. Each platform is flooded with breaking COVID-19 news. There are images of the dead being piled into giant cooler trucks by workers dressed head-to-toe in protective equipment, panicked medical workers in overcrowded hospitals, and patients on ventilators struggling to survive. After viewing these images, I know I am fortunate to be in the safety of my own home.

Beginning in March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced Tufts University to send their students home to finish the spring semester online, I started every day by checking social media for the latest news. I watched international news coverage of the virus as it devastated countries like Italy. This spatial separation offered a false sense of security as cases began to spike in the United States. For weeks, I wiped down everything from the grocery store with disinfectant wipes, in fear that the virus could be living on my box of cereal. Although the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had determined that it is difficult to contract COVID-19 from contaminated surfaces, there was still heightened anxiety and concern during a typical grocery store run. Our daily lives were upended within a matter of days. This constant fear and concern will continue to be present as we try to adjust to a “new normal” in the midst of a pandemic.

At this writing, the COVID-19 crisis is still ongoing, and we must accept that even once a vaccine is developed, we will feel the effects for years to come. While we do not know exactly how COVID-19 will affect people’s health, social life, and the economy long-term, what is clear is that COVID-19 will continue to saturate the news as new developments arise every day. It is important to have reliable, accurate sources of information to stay informed about the pandemic. While daily media images and news coverage have proven to be overwhelming for myself, my

family, and my friends, I realize how the pandemic could be especially traumatic for young children. It is important to help support one of our most vulnerable populations with processing all of this complex and often disturbing information. I plan to use this thesis as an opportunity to identify, address, and mitigate children's fear responses to media depictions of the ongoing crisis.

Through my research, I hope to answer these questions: How do young children receive information of the COVID-19 pandemic? What role can media play in managing children's fears about the pandemic?

I started by identifying how children ages 9-12 are receiving their daily news. In a recent survey, Common Sense Media (2017) found that these children prefer to get their news from online sources, which includes social-networking sites. There is limited research on children's news consumption. Given how news about the pandemic has been saturating social media, I am looking to determine how children are receiving information about COVID-19 in the context of how they usually get their news.

Technology has made information sharing incredibly fast and efficient. However, it can be more difficult to ensure that the news these young children are viewing is age appropriate. COVID-19 news can be especially frightening due to the uncertainty of the situation. Fear is a common response when children are exposed to news stories. Based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children 7 and up find that media stories which appear to be more realistic and involve real dangers were more frightening (Cantor & Sparks, 1984). News coverage of COVID-19 can even be intense for the average adult, so it is especially important to find ways we can help these children process the information they are receiving.

Next, I examined ways in which media can support young children through this pandemic and the best practices to help mitigate children's fears about the news. There are some cognitive strategies that can help older children cope with frightening news. Cognitive strategies are defined as "verbal information that casts the threat in a different light" (Cantor, 2007). For dealing with realistic threats, older children can benefit from explanations that "minimize the perceived severity of the depicted danger" (Cantor, 2007). It is a difficult task to try and explain away children's fears induced by real events in the media. However, it is important that children feel comfortable and open to asking questions about what is happening around them (Swick & Jellinek, 2013). By providing verbal explanations during or after media consumption, we can encourage children to be more active members of their community and support their curiosity while also answering any questions they might have.

As the final step of my research, I developed an informational podcast for young children. While it is difficult to determine how many children's podcasts there currently are, Podtrac, a podcast analytics company, looked at thousands of podcasts through January 2020 and May 2020. They reported that there was a 31% increase in downloads of podcasts under the Kids and Family category (Podtrac, 2020). Other podcast companies, including Tinkercast, Gen-Z Media, and Tumble Media, all saw significant increases in their audience engagement throughout the month of March of 2020 (Quah, 2020). Additionally, there is little data collected on the listening habits of children under the age of 12 (Kids Listen, 2017). While Edison Research & Triton Digital (2020) reported that in 2019, the monthly podcast listening in the US was 32% of people 12 years and older, an increase from 26% in 2018, there is no data on children younger than 12. It is difficult to get a sense of how many children ages 9-12 make up the audience of

podcast listeners. Even with these limitations, the data mentioned above is still important to note as it indicates the rising popularity of children's podcasts.

The podcast consists of three 10 minute episodes and is targeted at preteen children ages 9-12. The content is guided by research as well as interviews with child development experts and media personnel. Within the podcast episodes, I included doctors, psychologists, and media experts. I also included voices of children to create a more immersive experience for the young children listening. Research has shown that this approach enhances viewers learning experiences. For instance, the preschool show *Blue's Clues* encourages audience participation by incorporating offscreen child voices in each episode (Anderson et al., 2000). These voices in the show benefit viewers by assisting them with their problem-solving skills (Crawley et al., 2006). When it comes to speaking with children about events like the pandemic, it is important to be honest with them and ensure they feel validated in their concerns (Lewis, 2020). My hope is that the podcast can be used as a starting point for children where they can receive accurate information about the pandemic and become empowered to seek out other sources of information and initiate conversations at home.

Introduction

COVID-19 has devastated the world in ways we could have only imagined happening in some apocalyptic-themed movie. As of April 23rd, 2021, there have been over 31.5 million cases reported in the United States and over 560,000 reported deaths (WHO Coronavirus Dashboard). There is often a mix of fear, anxiety, boredom, and restlessness, as we wait to see what happens next. The pandemic is still ongoing, and we must accept that even as the vaccine becomes more widely distributed, we will feel the effects for years to come.

Not only have we relied on the news for updates about the virus, but we have looked to these sources for any sense of reassurance in this quicky evolving pandemic landscape. However, the news has also been saturated with frightening images and information. The images of overcrowded hospitals, bodies in industrial coolers, and personnel in full personal protective equipment are especially jarring for young children. Not only did the previous president, Donald Trump, flood social media with misinformation, but he also encouraged viewers to distrust news outlets. One study found that Trump was responsible for about 38% of the COVID-19 misinformation that was circulated on social media platforms (Stolberg & Weiland, 2020). With such a toxic news environment, it is even more critical to provide reliable information to support these children as they seek to understand what is happening around them. By providing accurate information, we can encourage an open dialogue as they learn to navigate the misinformation and alarming images in this fast-paced news cycle.

Additionally, research has shown that the pandemic is disproportionally affecting communities of color and those of lower socioeconomic status (Getachew, Zephyrin, Abrams, Shah, Lewis & Doty, 2020). With the “digital divide” still very present and with many young people using the Internet and social media for their news, it is important to examine how such disparities might affect the COVID-19 information they are receiving. We can then research how the divide might relate to inequity during the pandemic.

Ultimately, many of the long-term effects of the pandemic remain largely unknown at this writing. Besides physical health concerns, there will also be implications for how young children cope with our new reality. We do not know when, or even if, we will officially be rid of this virus. Without any certainty, it is important support young children to prepare them for what lies ahead.

Discussion of Literature

The following discussion examines prior research that has addressed the impact news media has on children's fear development ages 9-12. This age range is especially important to examine due to these children's developing cognitive capabilities as well as their unique media habits. According to a study by Common Sense Media (2019), kids in this age group spend an average of a little less than five hours of screen media for entertainment purposes per day. While there is very limited research on how COVID-19 specific news affects children, this literature review can identify areas of children's media that will be important to address in the future. I have broken down the research into five categories: children's fear response to media, children's media usage, media as a news source, how to mitigate children's media fears, and prior research in the field. I conclude with suggestions for further research into the topic.

Children's Media Usage

As media and technology have developed over the years, media usage behaviors among children have evolved as well. Common Sense Media conducted their nationally representative survey of 8-18 year-old children about their media usage in their 2019 Common Sense Census (Rideout & Robb, 2019). Researchers surveyed children about what types of media they use and how frequently they use it. They found that kids in this age range are consuming media more than ever, but that the most common types of technology utilited has also shifted. While kids still consume a significant amount of television, social media and online usage has become the dominant source of media consumption. Children are getting their own devices at an earlier age, with nearly 19% of eight year olds having their own smartphone, an 11% increase from 2015. These findings indicate that children's media habits continue to change in regard to platforms as well as usage, which are predicted to continue to evolve as technology does.

Rideout & Robb (2019) also found there was a significant difference in the amount of screen media based on socioeconomic status. The "digital divide, which is often defined as "the digital exclusion of individuals or groups of individuals within a community or country," (Talaee & Norozi, 2019, p. 27) in the US is still very present, especially among school-age children. While this divide has lessened since 2015, higher income households are still more likely to have a computer at home than lower income households (Rideout & Robb, 2019). Rideout & Robb (2019) also found that children are more likely to have their own devices in a higher income household. Historically, the digital divide has referred to the "haves" and the "have-nots" in regard to computer and Internet access. Today, the definition has been expanded to include the inequalities within communities who do have access to them (Talaee & Noroozi, 2019). For example, "technological literacy" in households also needs to be addressed in order to help equip children with the knowledge to successfully engage with technology in more meaningful ways (Talaee & Noroozi, 2019). If children do not have someone close to them who can help guide them, then it will be more difficult for the child to become technologically savvy. Additionally, literature has started to include other devices such as mobile phones and social media, which is important as children's choices of devices also changes (Talaee & Noroozi, 2019).

Children's Fear Response to Media

Piaget's (1964) theory of cognitive development contributes to how children's fear responses develop through early and middle childhood. His theory outlines how children acquire and construct knowledge to make sense of the world around them (Cantor & Sparks, 1984). A child enters what is known as the concrete operational phase of development around age 7 and remains in this stage until around age 11 (Cantor & Sparks). The concrete operational phase is marked by a child's increased ability to use logical thinking, which includes understanding cause

and effect relationships as well as increased reality perception (Kandemir-Ozdinc & Erdur-Baker, 2013). Children also have an increased understanding of abstract concepts (Piaget), which might make them more frightened to themes in a movie such as the world ending (Cantor, 1994). While Piaget's (1964) theory originally focuses on comprehension and problem solving, Cantor & Sparks argue we can expect that there are developmental differences with emotional reactions as well.

Additionally, Rachman's (1977) pathway theory outlines how fear in children may be acquired. They list conditioning, modeling, and negative information as the three main methods, with negative information transmission being the most common (Rachman, 1977 in Kandemir-Ozdinc & Erdur-Baker, 2013). The media ultimately magnifies negative information transmission. It important to acknowledge the extent to which media is integrated in our lives in order to understand how it may affect children.

Based off of Piaget's (1964) reasoning, Cantor & Sparks (1984) determined that while younger children are scared by something that looks frightening, during the concrete operational phase, a child is able to distinguish between play and reality. These older children find that more realistic events in the media are more frightening due to the possibility of something similar happening to them. In many cases, the perceived danger will also depend on prior experience in the real world as well (Cantor, 1995). For instance, Kandemir-Ozdinc & Erdur-Baker (2013) found that the news stories that children were most afraid of included stories about children who got hurt, children who are kidnapped, animals who get hurt, and somebody who has been murdered. Natural disasters are also a common source of fear (Riddle, Cantor, Byrne & Moyer-Gusé, 2012). Even if there is a small likelihood of any of these events happening to a child, the *perceived* probability can affect the child's fear response.

The majority of the literature on children's fear response to the media focuses on how children respond to frightening fictional television and movies (Cantor & Hoffner, 1990; Cantor, 1995; Cantor, 2007; Cantor, Byrne, Moyer-Gusé & Riddle, 2010). Children may lose control over their feelings, experience negative physical and psychological health effects, and may experience nightmares incited by this content, which only enhances the fear response (Cantor, 1995). Additionally, studies have found that children who watch more frightening television are at a higher risk of experiencing anxiety and sleep problems (Cantor, 2007). Kandemir-Ozdinc, & Erdur-Baker (2013) list some consequences of viewing news, which include difficulty sleeping, nightmares, crying, aggression, irritability, and acting withdrawn.

There is limited research on the impact of the news on young children. A few studies examine events such as the September 11th terrorist attacks. Saylor, Cowart, Lipovsky, Jackson, & Finch (2003) studied the effects of media exposure to September 11 on elementary school children. They found that children who viewed images of the event on the Internet showed the highest incidence of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms. Saylor, et. al (2003) speculate that these findings indicate that images of September 11 posted on the Internet were more graphic than the coverage of the event on TV. Additionally, these researchers believe content on the Internet is less censored, exposing children to more graphic images when viewing it on their computer. For instance, children found it traumatizing to watch news reruns of the planes flying into the towers. Given the constant news coverage, the children thought the event was happening again (J. Dobrow, personal communication). While this study looked at the Internet as consumed on a personal computer, it will be important to consider other forms of technology, such as mobile phones and social media, as a way of receiving news.

Media as a News Source

There has also been a shift in children's preferred method of receiving news information. In addition to their annual census study, Common Sense Media recently conducted a large-scale study of how kids aged 8-18 "get their news, engage with it and feel about it" (Robb, 2017). This study is one of the first of its kind, with very limited data existing on children and their news habits. Robb (2017) found that many children said following the news is important to them. However, children are often scared by what they see on the news, feel depressed by the news, and are often fooled by fake news, making them more skeptical of news media (Robb, 2017). Children say that they use their family "often" as the primary source for news information (Robb, 2017). However, 20% of tweens prefer to receive their news from online sources, including social-networking sites and websites or apps (Robb, 2017). Even though children are getting most of their news information from family members, these findings indicate that children are still seeking out news information on their own. It is important to acknowledge this reality when considering some of the consequences of social-media and the Internet.

Sensationalism is especially prevalent today due to the expanded capabilities of technology and social media (Knorr, 2020). The Internet especially has made an impact on how people receive their news because these images can be viewed repeatedly at the individual's convenience. Broadcasting abilities are also continuously expanding as they crossover into social media platforms. Information can be distributed almost immediately, leaving younger audiences vulnerable to content not appropriate for their age (Saylor et al., 2003). Especially because tweens seem to prefer social-networking sites as their news source, one area of concern with regards to news consumption is the dangers of misinformation and fake news on media platforms. Misinformation can be defined as "incorrect or misleading information (Merriam-Webster, n/a) while fake news often refers to "an array of misleading news style stories that were

fabricated and promoted on social media to deceive the public" (Jang & Kim, 2018, p. 295). A recent study led by The Shorenstein Center at Harvard Kennedy School found that while adults are more likely to post and share fake news on Twitter, younger people are more likely to believe the tweets (Lazer, et al., 2020). Whether the false information is deliberately spread or not, both types of misleading information can be dangerous for a susceptible young audience.

According to Common Sense Media's survey about children's news habits, less than half of children admit they know how to tell fake news stories from real ones (Robb, 2017). This lack of media literacy results in these children often mistrusting online news content. Common Sense Media (2017) found that only about 25% of children who get their news online think that the content posted, whether by people they know well or by news organizations, is "very accurate," while only 7% think that news posted by people they do not know well is "very accurate."

The Stanford History Education Group released a study in 2016 and again in 2019 assessing young people's ability of civic online reasoning. They define civic online reasoning as the ability to determine the credibility of information on technology like smartphones, tablets, and computers (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016). Both studies found that young people could not distinguish between legitimate and altered articles and images in the media. Participants did not question the sources of these online messages. Instead, they often accepted what they were given at face value. These studies indicate how we urgently need to equip our students with skills to develop their critical thinking skills to try and diminish the adverse effects as they seek out information.

How to Mitigate Children's Media Fears

Due to the sometimes frightening nature of media, it is important for children to learn how to deal with emotions that come with it. Research has shown that there are some cognitive

strategies that children ages 9-11 can benefit from and help them cope with frightening news in the media. Because children in the concrete operational phase of cognitive development are frightened by media events that appear to be more realistic, they often benefit from verbal explanations that minimize the depicted danger (Cantor, 2007). This approach can be practice through joint media engagement (JME). Joint media engagement refers to the act of experiencing media together (Takeychi & Stevens, 2011). Takeychi & Stevens emphasize how the practice of joint media engagement (JME) has been suggested as a way to promote positive media experiences for young children. JME can encourage learning by providing support for the child as they try to process and understand what they are seeing.

This parent-child media engagement can also facilitate a child's media literacy skills. Media literacy refers to the ability to access, and analyze a variety of media forms while also learning the difference between what is real and what is not (Bolonga, 2020). It is important for children to develop critical thinking skills when consuming the news. Adults can help teach children how to distinguish fact from fiction and direct them towards developmentally appropriate content. We can empower these parents, teachers, and other trusted adults to prepare them to handling the news with their children. This approach could also make children feel more comfortable with asking questions and discussing what they are learning.

Prior Research

Due to the ongoing and contemporary nature of COVID-19, there is very limited research on the effects that pandemic-related news might have on young children. The last pandemic to devastate the world was the 1918 flu pandemic. Now with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is almost impossible to avoid images of dead bodies, overcrowded hospitals with people on ventilators,

and essential workers dressed head-to-toe in protective equipment as such content floods the Internet and social media.

As COVID-19 continues to impact our communities, there are a few preliminary studies that have begun to look into how the pandemic is impacting our young population. Common Sense Media & SurveyMonkey (2020) recently polled 849 teens aged 13-17 years old about how they are coping and connecting with others during the pandemic. They found that about 42% of teens feel “more lonely than usual” right now as we are forced to be apart.

Another key finding of the study addresses how teens have been getting information about COVID-19. While teens preferred to get the news from friends and family during pre-pandemic times, the survey found that teens are now going directly to news organizations for information about the pandemic. They found that 80% of teens say they are following the news about the pandemic closely with 47% of them using news organizations as their primary source of COVID-19 news. While the study only looks at teens and not tweens, this shift in news source preference is important to note, given it seems to be a pandemic-specific behavior.

There have been a few pandemic-related media specials targeted at children and their families to help them cope with the pandemic. For example, in partnership with CNN, *Sesame Street* has aired a Coronavirus Town Hall. This news special covered topics including COVID-19 health and safety measures, dealing with quarantine and the feelings that accompany it, dealing with loss of a loved one during the pandemic (Mabeus, 2020), and in their most recent episode, how to prepare for the holiday’s during COVID-19 (Murray, 2020). These hour and a half news specials featured characters from *Sesame Street* as well as doctors, school teachers, and news hosts. While we do not know what effect such COVID-19 programming has on

children, it could be an effective tool to combat misinformation and help keep young children informed. It will also be beneficial to develop content for all ages, not just preschool children.

Usually, parents can help comfort their children by reminding them about the low probability of experiencing something like a school shooting or a natural disaster is (Cantor & Sparks). However, given that the pandemic has affected everyone on some level, we can expect that children's fear of infection or other consequences of the pandemic could heighten their fear reaction to news about the pandemic. Based on Piaget's (1964) cognitive development theory and Cantor & Sparks (1984) research, this age rage is important to examine during times like COVID-19 because while these children might recognize the severity of the situation, they will still require adult assistance to support their cognitive processing of the pandemic information.

Additionally, there is limited research on fake news and COVID-19. There have been studies conducted in Nigeria (Apuke & Omar, 2020) and Italy (Moscadelli et al., 2020) examining some of the risks and consequences of fake news relating to COVID-19. Given the vastness of the Internet, it can be difficult to track misinformation. Additionally, different age groups of children have different media habits. The various media platforms might expose them to different kinds of information. While there is not much information about COVID-19 fake news in the U.S, what is clear is the overwhelming nature of pandemic news. Especially in the first few months of the pandemic, you could find hourly updates from news platforms speculating about where the virus came from, how it can spread, and how deadly it actually is. This rapid dissemination of information paired with the dangers of misinformation can only contribute to children's fear and confusion with the pandemic-related news.

While the pandemic has impacted everyone, communities of color have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Cases and deaths have been disproportionately higher

in communities with larger Black communities (Getachew et al., 2020). There is a greater chance that Black and Latino individuals reside in overcrowded households and neighborhoods with poorer living conditions (Getachew et al., 2020). Less access to adequate health care and lower socioeconomic status also contribute to this disparity (Betancourt, 2020). Additionally, age-adjusted the COVID-19 mortality rate for American Indians and Alaskan Natives (AIAN) is the highest than any other group (Akee & Reber, 18 February, 2021). Compared to white and Asian people, the death rate for AIAN communities is almost two and a half times larger. Access to health care is an ongoing struggle for these communities. Historically, AIAN communities are either left out of studies all together or are grouped in with other populations, making it difficult to track such data.

Hate incidences against Asian Americans have increased substantially during the pandemic. Driven by the news that COVID-19 originated in China, some blame Asian Americans for the virus in the U.S. The Stop AAPI Hate was created to respond to incidences of hate against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) in the U.S. during the pandemic. According to a Stop AAPI Hate report, between March 19, 2020 and February 28, 2021, there were 3,785 incidences of hate against Asian Americans reported to their center (Jeung, Yellow Horse, Popovic, & Lim, 2021). These acts include verbal harassment, physical assault, civil rights violations, and online harassment. Many also link this rise in violence to former President Trump's comments about the 'Chinese flu.' A University of California San Francisco study looked at tweets from March 9 and 23, 2020, which correlated with the week before and the week after Trump's tweet with the phrase 'Chinese Virus.' There was a significant increase of the use of the hashtag 'Chinese Virus' (Hswen et a., 2021). As anti-Asian sentiment flooded media outlets, acts of hate against AAPI communities also increased.

The Common Sense Media & SurveyMonkey (2020) survey additionally found that teens of color are more likely to say they are worried about family health concerns as well as economic implications on their family. 66% of Hispanic/Latino teens and 71% of Black teens said they are concerned the someone in their family will be exposed to the virus in comparison to 56% of White teens. In regards to economic effects on the family, 87% of Hispanic/Latino and 74% of Black teens cited this as a major concern. Only 53% of White teens said they are worried about their family's economic situation. As the pandemic continues, it is important to address the needs of some of these more vulnerable populations, which also includes helping to ensure they have access to accurate, reliable information.

Methodology

When I committed to creating my own podcast, I knew there would be a major learning curve. Before I began the 2020 school year, I wanted to start by connecting with some professionals to help me get started. My first step was setting up a call with Craig LeMoult. LeMoult is an award-winning reporter for GBH News in Boston and is often featured on NPR. With his help, I narrowed down my ideas, established realistic goals, and began to think about what I wanted to accomplish with my podcast. I realized I needed to scale back some of my ideas to fit within my limited time frame. For instance, LeMoult advised I stick to one episode. I was initially disappointed with the idea of only doing one episode of a podcast. I wanted to challenge myself with this project, so I really wanted to embrace the process. With LeMoult's recommendation in mind, I began to think about what topics to cover in my podcast and how I could format my project to include multiple episodes.

I began by reading articles about COVID-19 and how it is affecting young children. I also listened to some children's news podcasts to get a sense of how they were covering the

pandemic. I listened to episodes from *XYZA News, KidNuz,* and *The Ten News*. I also took notes on the structures of each podcast including the length of the episodes, what the writing style sounded like, and how they integrated interviews into the episodes.

After doing some research, I decided to work towards creating three episodes. Given the complexity of the pandemic, this format would ensure I could cover a range of important topics while still being realistic about my time frame. Each episode would also be around 10 minutes each. The three episodes cover information about the virus, safety measures, distanced learning, staying connected with loved ones, and the impact of the pandemic on our communities and communities of color.

I titled my podcast *The Kids Newsroom: COVID-19 Edition*. Throughout the interview process, I wanted the children I was interviewing to feel like they were an important part of this project. I wanted to capture this sentiment in the name of the podcast. From my perspective, a newsroom represents a place where reporters gather to collaborate on important stories. The children interviewees were an integral part of my project.

My next step was to find children to interview. I had intended the podcast to be targeted at 9-12 year olds, so I figured the best way to start was to go straight to the source. I was initially unsure about how I would source children to interview. Before I started any writing, I wanted to interview as many children as I could. My goal of the project was to have children's voices, questions, and experiences drive the conversation in the podcast. I would work my own writing around their interviews. Additionally, I knew connecting with the adult professionals to interview might be more challenging. Even if I had to wait on some responses for the adults, if I had interviews from the children to work with. I could start to think about how the children's responses could structure each episode.

I sourced almost all of the children by reaching out to friends and family because I knew parents would be more willing for me to talk to their kids if they somewhat knew who I was. While I wanted to interview children from as many areas and backgrounds as possible, I did not intend for my interview data to be generalizable to the greater US population. My goal was to get listeners to learn from other children and recognize how the impact of COVID-19 differs greatly for families across the country. I obtained written permission from the parents for the children to participate. Through the parents I attained the children's assent as well. I wrote up a permission slip for the interviewees from SquashBusters, a program in Lawrence, MA that helps young students develop academically as well as athletically, because I was not in direct contact with the parents. Instead, I coordinated with one of the program managers who set up the interviews for me.

I ultimately interviewed nineteen children. While I knew I would not be including them all in the final podcast, the interviews provided great insight that helped with my writing process. For instance, I could identify any commonalities between the children as well as any significant differences. While I initially was only going to interview children ages 9-12, there were a few children outside of the range. There were two 8 year olds, three 13 year olds, and a 14 year old.

I was overall surprised at how willing families were for me to interview their children. I initially thought sourcing the children would be difficult given possible privacy concerns. When I was communicating with the parents, I made my intentions clear and emphasized this was purely a school project. Most parents were comfortable with me using their children's names. Many told me how excited their children were to speak with me. Some children were even flattered that I wanted to hear what they had to say. It was clear that during the interviews, many

children enjoyed getting their voices out there. A few even mentioned at the end of the interview that they enjoyed to talk through their feelings and experiences.

I kept the structure of my interviews as consistent as possible across all meetings. I conducted the interviews over Zoom, which allowed me to speak with everyone face to face and record the audio. During the interviews, I first introduced myself and explained to the kids why I wanted to talk to them. I gave them a quick synopsis of my project and let them know there was absolutely no pressure to answer my questions a certain way. Additionally, if they did not want to answer a question, I made it clear they had that option. Given how young some of the children were, I wanted the interviews to feel conversational. Once I had established that the kids were comfortable and ready, I began the interviews.

I started out by having the interviewees introduce themselves and tell me either a fun fact about themselves or about an activity they like to do. After this initial question, it was easier to lead into pandemic-related questions such as, "Have you still been able to do those activities during the pandemic? Have you been able to safely seen any friends or family?" I created a small outline of guiding questions I gave to the families to prepare their children with. These questions included, "What have been some of your concerns during the pandemic? What have been some of the challenges of distanced learning this year? How are you staying connected with friends and family? How do you think we could help our communities during the pandemic?" Additionally, I wanted to get a sense of what the children knew about COVID-19. Another question I asked was, "Pretend I didn't know what COVID-19 was. How would you describe it to me?" To wrap up each interview, I gave the children a chance to ask any questions they might have about the pandemic. I told them I would be taking their questions to be answered by professionals such as doctors. I did not ask all of the children the same questions. I knew I would

not get to all of these questions during a 15 minute interview, so any follow up questions I asked were really determined on the course of the interview.

While I tried to ask a variety of questions during each interview, I found that the children had the most to say about their school situation and their social lives during the pandemic. When I asked them about their concerns, they would often relate their worries back to feeling disconnected from their friends and family. There were a few children who did cite infection and death as a concern but it was considerably less than I had anticipated. It is clear from the interviews that a priority for the children was getting back to school with their friends. For many of them, socially distanced hang-outs outside or Zoom calls were not enough to help with their loneliness. Even with all of the uncertainty and stress of the pandemic, the children were determined to find ways to be with their loved ones in-person.

Additionally, many of the children talked about ways they like to unwind. Most of these activities did not require a screen. They included getting outside, picking up a new hobby like crafting, and spending quality time with family. Most of the questions the children asked at the end of each interview were about the vaccine. At the time of these conversations, information about vaccine development was one of the primary COVID-19 stories in the news. It seemed the children were especially excited because for them, it meant they were one step closer to normalcy.

Shortly after each interview, I transferred the recordings to GarageBand. I organized and edited the audio into categories and isolated the moments I thought were important. This process was much easier with the interviews still fresh in my mind. The categories included topics such as online learning, worries and concerns about the pandemic, struggles in quarantine, and questions they have about COVID-19. I then transcribed these moments so I could begin

outlining the scripts of each episode. I began to outline the episode scripts while I was still interviewing children so I could refer back to previous interviews as I continued interviewing children. This method helped me identify any parts of an episode where I might need more content. For instance, I found that it was easy for kids to talk about their school experiences. However, they had less to say when I asked about any worries they had about the pandemic. I wanted to make sure the episodes had equal amount of interview content. I adjusted my interview questions to meet certain goals. At one point, I did not have enough interviews for the first episode where I address the children's concerns about the pandemic. So with the next few interviews, I made sure it was a topic I consistently asked questions about.

As I began to outline the episodes, I spoke with Jane Lindholm, host of the award-winning Vermont Public Radio podcast Vermont Edition and host and producer of But Why: A Podcast For Curious Kids. Lindholm offered some valuable advice about how I should approach producing, recording, and editing my podcast. I quickly realized how challenging it is writing for audio. Not only was this one of the first times I had written for children, but I also had to stop myself from writing too formally. I would check my work by reading the script out loud. Often, sentences would sound off and not conversational. Finding the right balance in my writing was another major learning curve.

Once I had conducted most of the interviews with the children, I began to research professionals, such as doctors and media experts, that could help answer the children's questions. I also wanted to speak with people who could help inform my writing. I interviewed Kristelle Lavallee, Content Strategist at the Center on Media and Child Health at Boston Children's Hospital, Dr. Shari Nethersole, pediatrician and Executive Director of Community Health at Boston Children's Hospital, Dr. Charles Hannum, pediatrician at Boston Children's Hospital, Dr.

Yael Kufert, child psychiatrist at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, and researcher Dr. Joanne Cantor, who specializes in children's psychology of media and communications.

With Dr. Nethersole, I focused on her work with the local communities. I do not have experience speaking with children about race and inequalities, so one of my main questions was, "How do I approach the topic of societal inequalities with these children?" Dr. Nethersole emphasized first determining what the children already knew. I wanted to avoid either confusing the children or asking leading questions. We also talked about empowering children to make a difference in their local communities. It is important to emphasize you do not need to change the world to make a difference.

I asked Dr. Hannum and Dr. Kufert questions about some of the mental health effects the pandemic has had on their young patients. I also asked about how they go about addressing these issues with the children and their families. Finally, I had both pediatricians answer some of the questions the kids asked during their interviews. Although the doctors were not infectious disease experts, I believed they would be able to frame the complexities of COVID-19 in an age-appropriate way for the children who would be listening.

Dr. Cantor's researched focused on children's fear reactions to visual media triggers. Given that covid is an 'invisible threat,' I asked whether she thought children's fright reactions might be similar or different to pandemic-related news. I also inquired about any advice she would give to children who might be struggling during the pandemic.

I sourced these professionals in a variety of ways. My adviser, Professor Julie Dobrow, connected me with Kristelle Lavallee. I found an article that featured Dr. Nethersole and reached out to her through the Boston Children's Hospital website. I connected with Dr. Hannum through his colleague at Boston Children's Hospital and I contacted Dr. Kufert through a family channel.

Dr. Cantor’s research has informed most of my project and literature review, so I reached out to her through her company website.

Before I started piecing the audio together, I met with my friend’s older brother, Harry Risoleo, an audio engineer from Los Angeles, CA. He walked me though some tips on how to use GarageBand. He also provided me a guide on how to use certain features of the app and offered advice on how to approach the audio. I decided to work on all three episodes at once. This approached helped ensure consistency across the episodes. I also did not want to run into the problem of wanting to add something to an episode that is already finished.

My adviser also recommended I source original music to use throughout the podcast. I reached out to multiple professors in our music department to inquire about students who could help me compose original music for the podcast. I ultimately collaborated with sophomore Rachel Shurland. As I began working with Shurland, I reached back out to Lindholm to ask about any music or sounds she might recommend. Lindholm mentioned given the journalistic nature of my podcast, the music should not be too cinematic or dramatic. She emphasized how “…you want music that will help hold the listener’s interest, and emphasize the work, but not TELL them how to feel” (J. Lindholm, personal communication, March 11, 2021). Most of this work was trial and error. Although I had never worked on a podcast before, I needed to trust myself to decide what sounded right and what needed to be changed.

As we began to collaborate, I sent Shurland the news podcasts I had been listening to for inspiration. I also researched some sounds and music I liked to give her an idea of what I think could work. It was initially a challenge to communicate what I wanted to Shurland. However, she sent me some rough drafts and we were able to communicate back and forth and refine the sounds that were ultimately used in the final podcast.

As I began to receive feedback on my scripts and edit each episode, I ended up removing a significant portion of my writing in the scripts and replaced it with more interview audio clips. By prioritizing the interviews in my writing, the children's interviews made up the bulk of the episodes. I wanted to keep any additional sounds in the podcast to a minimum. I initially had some background sounds to help break up each episode. However, I ultimately decided to layer background music with short interview audio clips as a transitional element to introduce the next topic within an episode. Deciding on which interviews I wanted to use took a lot of trial and error. I had to find snippets that were the right length and that ultimately sounded coherent with each other. I wanted to keep the sounds simple and ensure that they emphasized the interview audio.

The recording process was another major learning curve. Part of the reason I chose to do a podcast was to face my fear of listening to my voice over an audio recording. Additionally, not only is there a certain style of writing for podcasts, but the delivery of the script was also a technical, tedious process. I practiced my lines before recording and made sure to listen back to the audio. I was surprised at how odd much of my writing sounded once read out loud. I also became more conscious of how fast I usually speak. With practice, I slowed down my speech and ensured I spoke clearly.

Conclusion

There were many limitations I encountered as I was creating my podcast. Sourcing the interviews was one of the main challenges of my project. Almost all of the children I interviewed reside in the East Coast or Chicago, IL because I reached out to friends and family. Once I connected with a child to interview, their parents often offered to connect me with their children's friends in the area. This method made it easier to schedule these interviews because I

had someone to vouch for me. The professionals I interviewed came from an even more limited area. I connected with many of them through my adviser. As a Tufts student, I also reached out to Boston-based professionals hoping that they would be more willing to participate in my project and help a local student. I had hoped to expand my search for all interviews once I started looking, but given my limited timeline I ultimately stuck with what was the most convenient. If I had more time, I would have greatly expanded my population of interviewees.

Due to limited research, there is much unknown about how COVID-19 news impacts children. However, we do have some sense of how the news usually impacts children. Scary news stories can ultimately lead to behavior developments such as irritability, nightmares, and acting withdrawn. While the media is often a source of children's fear, technology can also be used to help mitigate those fears and behavioral problems. With regard to the information about current events, watching the news can help children be more engaged with their environment. This approach to children's media could be used in the future to develop content to help children cope with the pandemic. Some areas of future research might include, "How do children receive COVID-19 information?," "How do children react to COVID-19 specific news?" and, "How might these reactions be similar or different to other disaster-related events on the news?" Given how the virus is an "invisible" danger, children might respond differently to pandemic news. Additionally, research has shown how personal experiences can heighten a child's fear reaction to a news event. We might conclude that children are especially frightened by pandemic news given how it has affected everyone on some level. It will also be important to look further into how young children are receiving their COVID-19 information.

Dr. Cantor mentioned during our interview some concerns about how young children might be hearing about the news in a school setting. She worries about the children that

"catastrophize everything" and who "will make things up." (J. Cantor, personal communication, March 22, 2021). Dr. Cantor hopes that a teacher would try and intervene in the conversation. However, it can be difficult to monitor children's conversations when an adult is not watching them at all times. I think it could be interesting to look at how misinformation spreads at school and how we might navigate such a complex environment.

The impact of the digital divide on children's COVID-19 news habits is another possible area for future research. The research shows how Black and Latino teens are more worried about infection in their family as well as economic losses during the pandemic. With communities of color being disproportionally being affected by the virus, we can ask, "Are communities of color also disproportionally affected by COVID-19 news?"

Given the many online safety concerns parents have for their children, I believe podcasts will continue to increase in popularity. Based off of my research, the visual aspect of online media contributes to the severity of fake news. Rather than contributing to the problem, there are numerous podcasts that address how to fight disinformation. Children who might be frightened by visual aspects of media do not have to worry about it with podcasts. News stories on social media platforms are curated in a matter of minutes. Given the time it takes to write, record, and produce podcast episodes, the nature of this genre could be beneficial when producing news content. Podcasts are also convenient and are easily accessible. A child does not need their own account or device and parents can have greater control over what their children are listening to. While there has yet to be research examining the educational benefits of podcasts, what is promising is the potential for such uses given the rise of children's podcast's popularity.

My hope for the podcast is that it will encourage young children to become more curious about current events. I recognize the pandemic information in my podcast is limited. However,

while I wanted to to educate listeners about COVID-19, a key part of this goal was using children's voices to help relay the information. As data continues to come out about infection rates and death rates, the experiences the children provided can only be found by interviewing them directly. They are able to put into words their experiences in a way that can resonate with other children. I hope that listeners will realize that they are not alone when they listen to this podcast. What is clear from the interviews is that children have insightful questions about the pandemic. If children are more aware about what is going on around them, they could then turn that curiosity into action. Action could be in the form of asking more questions, seeking out information, or becoming more involved in their communities.

We hope to continue to take steps towards some level of normalcy as the vaccines continue to be distributed. Unfortunately, we do not know what the long-term psychological impacts are. The pandemic is confusing, frightening, especially for young children. As we begin to feel the aftereffects of the pandemic, it will be important to continue to develop children's media that addresses COVID-19. As I have learned from my experience, an effective, meaningful approach would be to continue to have children inform such media content. Hopefully, we can work towards integrating children's voices more in the creative process.

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