

Harry Potter and Children's Perceptions of the News Media

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This framing study examines how author J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series of children's books treats the news media and how that treatment could affect children. Researchers first studied quotes from the first six books regarding the media, and based on the overall categorization of those quotes, they determined the three main frames in which media is viewed: Government Control of Journalism, Misleading Journalism, and Unethical Means of Gathering Information. Based on these frames, researchers argue the Harry Potter series does not put the media in a positive light. Because of this, children could potentially perceive the news media in general as untrustworthy and controlled by the government. Given the prevalence of tabloid journalism and "entertainment" news, children's understanding of true journalistic integrity, journalism as a career, and even positive social behaviors could be negatively affected due to this depiction, in light of the overwhelming popularity of the series.

The popularity of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series of children's books is a phenomenon unlike any other. The worldwide best-selling books recount the adventures of Harry Potter, a young orphan who discovers at age 13 that he is really a wizard and has an archenemy named Lord Voldemort. In each book, Harry is met with different challenges that he must confront to save the Wizarding world from the actions of Lord Voldemort and his followers in the Dark Arts. In doing so, he must also deal with many of the problems associated with adolescence such as issues with family members, bullies at school, confrontations with teachers, and discovering his identity as both a teenager and a wizard.

While the books are valued for their ability to entertain and engage readers, the negative depiction of journalism in the series has the potential to greatly influence children's perceptions of the news media and the role of journalism in general. Throughout the books, children are exposed to a type of yellow journalism that is controlled by the Ministry of Magic, the governing body of the Wizarding world. The main source of news in the Wizarding world is from the *Daily Prophet*, the official newspaper that is manipulated by the government. There is also a tabloid journal titled *The Quibbler* that is prevalent in the series. While other media are mentioned, these two publications are the most dominant sources of news, and there is no Internet or television depicted in the Wizarding world.

The ideal goal of journalism is to ensure an informed citizenry in an objective and truthful manner. Due to the fact that the representation of journalism in the *Harry Potter* series is overwhelmingly negative, children who read the series could infer that all news media are slanted and deceptive. They could also come to believe that a career as a journalist is not an honorable profession. For this reason, parents and educators should be mindful of this possibility and expose children to a wide variety of literature that demonstrates the essential role of journalism in a free society.

Relevant Literature

Research indicates children's literature helps children learn about and even possibly empathize with the various situations experienced by the characters. The use of literature by both parents and educators has the potential to promote children's understanding of concepts such as gender roles, social skills, learning disabilities and communication disorders, and general classroom subjects.

When asked about their future careers, many children have ideas of what they want to be when they grow up. Their fantasies of entering into a particular profession often stem from the children's stories they have read. However, parents also seem to have great influence on their children's career perceptions. Seligman and Weinstock found most of their 10-year-old subjects to be knowledgeable about the careers of their parents as well as their parents' career aspirations for them, but that their parents' influence eventually wanes from ages 6 to 10 as children discover other career possibilities beyond their parents' occupations (Seligman & Weinstock, 1991: 178). Helwig found that as children matured, they felt more freedom to decide their careers for themselves (Helwig, 1998: 247). He also cautioned that young children should not be forced to make career decisions at such a young age, but should merely explore their career possibilities.

Bardick, Bernes, Magnusson and Witko studied parents' perceptions of their children's readiness in career planning (Bardick, Bernes, Magnusson & Witko, 2005: 152). Overall, they found that parents felt children would be more prepared to make career decisions as they grew older, which confirmed Helwig's findings (Helwig, 1998: 261).

Another influence is that of career development in schools. Younger children often learn about professions through exposure rather than actual career development studies, but still schools can shape students' concepts of occupations. A study in Australia found that schools enable students to learn about and gain interest in jobs as they spend the majority of their time in that environment (McMahon, Gillies, & Carroll, 2000: 12).

While many sources go into career formation, a great deal of career exposure comes through children's literature, as children hear and read about different kinds of jobs held by adults. As a result, children's literature can also help form children's understanding of gender roles.

One study examined children's perception of job titles based on the language used to describe them (Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2002: 810). Researchers developed two studies to test if job titles were gender-specific or gender-neutral. They concluded that their "studies provide evidence that although the workplace is becoming more balanced with respect to distributions of men and women, the psychological world of work remains strongly gendered" (Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2002: 810). An additional study examined the influence of children's literature on gender roles and found that the use of carefully selected books and activities can be useful in influencing children's perceptions of occupational roles (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999: 158). This, however, places the responsibility on teachers and parents to use books in such a way as to guide children through discussions about the portrayal of male and female roles (Diekman & Murnen, 2004: 382). While children's literature has made great strides in accurately portraying masculinity and femininity, some books still depict sexist stereotypes of gender. Adults can positively influence children's gender concepts through either validating or contesting the text (Wharton, 2005: 239).

Social behaviors are one of the primary skills that children learn through literature. Literature enables children to see the intentions, reasons, emotions, and inner-thoughts that surround a particular set of behaviors (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001: 40). As social skills are necessary in order for children to function well in society, literature is a valuable tool in leading them toward pro-social behavior. For the purpose of this paper, social skills are defined by McFall (1982) as: "specific strategies and tactics that individuals use to respond to daily social tasks such as making friends, communicating requests, and responding to social initiations by others" (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001: 42). Cartledge and Kiarie also note that literature can help children to develop empathy for others through the actions of the characters in books and to see things from another's perspective. The heightened empathy and compassion that children may feel as a result will likely lead them to engage in appropriate social behaviors. They argue that the attractiveness and messages of literature can and should be used to help augment social learning, which in turn can help increase reading literacy skills in children (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001: 42). In addition, Cartledge and Kiarie state the importance of using

literature that appeals to children from diverse backgrounds, as these children often feel left out of the larger social picture due to differences in language and culture.

Children's literature can also be used to promote appropriate social behaviors in children with behavioral and emotional problems. These children often require specialized instruction in a controlled environment in order to prosper. Ridgeway and Shaver (2006) discuss the multiple ways in which literature was used to augment social skills in a study conducted in the classrooms of both researchers. In their study, Ridgeway and Shaver had their students listen to stories read aloud to them with themes such as accepting individual differences, sharing, and bullying. The students were encouraged to share their perspectives on these issues with teachers and peers in a social setting and then participate in short writing activities related to the topics (Ridgeway & Shaver, 2006: 17). Ridgeway and Shaver found that they were able to engage their students in a discussion of social topics and that the students were able to make meaningful connections between the characters in the text and real-life situations. Children are able to see similarities between their own struggles and those of the characters in the books, allowing them to relate emotionally to the characters (Ridgeway & Shaver, 2006: 22). Ridgeway and Shaver argue that social interaction is one of the main methods by which children learn. Children are able to benefit cognitively and emotionally when they make a personal connection to the text and are able to discuss their perspectives with others (Ridgeway & Shaver, 2006: 22).

Susan Hepler and Janet Hickman discuss the concept of a community of readers in their article about the social aspects of response to literature. Their concept of a community of readers deals with the ways in which children work together to help each other learn to read (Hepler & Hickman, 2001: 278). They note how children use the classroom community to increase their own literacy, often using other's suggestions about books to decide what to read. Hepler and Hickman also note how the act of talking within a community greatly increases children's awareness and understanding of the books that they read, helping them to remember words and events. In addition, the community of readers enables children to pick up "reader behaviors" that tell them how readers act, i.e. that readers enjoy reading books and seek out more books to read (Hepler & Hickman, 2001: 278). Hepler and Hickman's concept involves children connecting in a social way through literature.

Another way literature influences children is by allowing them to learn about people whose lives and experiences differ from their own. One example would be the way in which literature can teach about children with learning disabilities. As noted by Sotto and Ball, literature can be used to provide positive role models and expose children to characters with learning disabilities, thus enabling them to identify with the characters (Sotto & Ball, 2006: 40). For the purpose of this paper, learning disabilities and communication impairments are considered as the following: dyslexia, Down syndrome (due to the language delays prevalent in children with the disorder), mutism, dysfluency, hearing loss, and general articulation disorders (Sotto & Ball, 2006:). The way that learning-disabled characters are portrayed in children's literature is integral to promoting awareness, understanding, and acceptance of individuals with learning disabilities (Prater, Dyches & Johnstun, 2006: 14).

Prater, et al. note that “children learn at a young age the great diversity within the human race, often through direct experiences with people who look different from themselves ... children’s literature can be used to provide readers with an awareness of diversity, particularly the diversity caused by various disabilities” (Prater, et al., 2006: 20-21). Prater analyzed 90 children’s books published prior to 2001 that portrayed at least one character with a learning disability to determine how such characters are portrayed overall. She found that most of the characters with learning disabilities were portrayed as dynamic, taking part in the story and changing over time (Prater, 2003: 47). In addition, most learning-disabled characters were the main character and the story was told from their point of view, allowing their various disabilities to be even more integral to the text (Prater, 2003: 47). Prater stresses the importance of including dynamic characters with learning disabilities in children’s literature. These types of characters will not only boost the self-esteem of children with learning disabilities, they are also more representative of real people (Prater, 2003: 61).

The development of children’s conceptualization of how they fit into and relate to society notwithstanding, children’s literature is also one of the most basic ways of reinforcing general academic concepts referred to in textbooks. Geography teachers can utilize children’s books to teach the five geographic themes of location, place, human-environment interaction, movement and region (Hannibal, Vasiliev, & Lin, 2002: 81). Math teachers can use literature to reinforce learned mathematical concepts or to remediate misconceptions of those ideas (Capraro & Capraro, 2006: 22).

Regardless of the subject matter, the use of literature allows children to be exposed to information, ideas, concepts, realities, truths, and even misconceptions. Bopry and Hedberg propose, “learners must be the centre of their own cognitive universes” (Bopry & Hedberg, 2005: 96). The ultimate goal in the use of children’s literature should be for students to learn from these stories about the world and their role in it.

Methodology

Two coders completed a framing analysis of the media references in the *Harry Potter* series of children’s books. We began with two research questions: 1) How is the media portrayed in the *Harry Potter* series? and 2) How are journalists portrayed in the series? The intention was to study how the series treats the media and what effect that treatment might have on the attitudes of child readers. The coders were provided with an exhaustive compendium of direct quotes from the first six books of the series that made any mention of media, including newspapers, magazines, radio, and textbooks. Mass media appear in both the magical and the mundane worlds. References are made most frequently to newspapers, but also to radio, television, comic books, magazines, advertising, posters, books, event programs, name badges and others.

After reading through the quotes, the coders determined that the magazine, radio, flyer and textbook references were different from the television and newspaper references in that they served a different function in the books. Generally, the media serve a number of functions in Rowling’s narratives. The presence of media in the magical world in some cases serves to enrich the setting. For example, Harry learns early in book one about

magical pictures in which the subjects of the pictures are able to move and in some cases interact with the viewers. This element of magic is used in everything from newspaper pictures to portraits found at Hogwarts to posters for an athletic team to trading cards.

The media also serve as a bridge between the magical and muggle worlds, a function Rowling noted in her interview with Entertainment Weekly (Jensen, 2000). They also bring news between the relatively isolated environment of Hogwarts and the rest of the wizarding world. In the first book, Harry, while at school, learns about a break-in at an important bank vault in the wizarding world. In the second book, Harry gets to school in a stolen, flying car, exploits that are reported in the newspaper even before Harry arrives at school. In the third, Harry learns about an escaped wizard convict from muggle television and follows the search and its implications via the wizard newspaper, *The Daily Prophet*, while at school. Finally, media are shown as a pastime via comic book reading for young wizards and television watching for young muggles.

Some of the most interesting use of the media comes from the newspapers – mainstream and alternative -- that populate the wizarding world. The coders started with 10 initial frames: Muggles' (non-wizards) journalism, Wizards' journalism, informative news, obstructive news, truthful journalism, deceptive journalism, credible news, sensational news, headlines, and photos. In attempting to place the quotes into these frames, it was discovered that there were not enough references to Muggles' journalism for it to be used as a frame. This in turn caused all of the quotes to fall under the heading of Wizards' journalism. The frame became far too broad to be included and was removed. Headlines and photos were also removed as frames because of the insignificant number of references that fell into these categories. After refining our initial frames, three final frames remained: government control of journalism, misleading journalism, and unethical means of gathering information.

Results

The depiction of journalism in the *Harry Potter* series was found to be predominantly negative. There were very few references to credible, non-obstructive news and these references were very minor when compared to the other journalism references in the series as a whole. Journalism as portrayed in the Potter world is heavily slanted and misleading. Information is often obtained through unethical and illegal means and is intended to damage the credibility of the subjects concerned. In addition, only one journalist of any consequence is mentioned by name in the series, and she is revealed to be the epitome of the corrupt, yellow journalist stereotype.

Frame 1: Government Control of Journalism

This frame was created as a heading under which to categorize all of the media references that either explicitly state or suggest some form of authoritarian control, usually by the Ministry of Magic. References to journalism as a means of seeking publicity were also included in this frame because publicity relates to the overall attempt by the authority figures to influence how subjects are perceived in print. As the governing body of the Wizarding world, the Ministry of Magic exerts an enormous amount of power and control over almost every aspect of the lives of the characters that inhabit this world, up to and including the information published by *The Daily Prophet*. Although *The Prophet* is often

depicted as slanted, it is the only real source of news in the Wizarding world depicted in the books. *The Prophet* appears to have no credible journalistic rival and is answerable to no one for what it prints, thus it is able to influence the characters' perceptions of events through what it chooses to print and how that information is presented. For example, in book five, one reads:

“Well they’re writing about you as though you’re this deluded attention-seeking person who thinks he’s a great tragic hero or something,” said Hermione, very fast, as though it would be less unpleasant for Harry to hear these facts quickly. “They keep slipping in snide comments about you. If some far-fetched story appears they say something like ‘a tale worthy of Harry Potter’ and if anyone has a funny accident or anything it’s ‘let’s hope he hasn’t got a scar on his forehead or we’ll be asked to worship him next —”

“I don’t want anyone to worship —” Harry began hotly.

“I know you don’t,” said Hermione quickly looking frightened. “I *know* Harry. But you see what they’re doing? They want to turn you into someone nobody will believe. Fudge is behind it, I’ll bet anything. They want wizards on the street to think you’re just some stupid boy who’s a bit of a joke, who tells ridiculous tall stories because he loves being famous and wants to keep it going.”

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Pages 73-74

Protagonistic characters surmise that the government attempts to control the media, but also assume that the attempts at control are effective.

“While the Ministry insists there is nothing to fear from Voldemort, it’s hard to convince people he’s back, especially as they really don’t want to believe it in the first place. What’s more, the Ministry’s leaning heavily on the *Daily Prophet* not to report any of what they’re calling Dumbledore’s rumor-mongering, so most of the Wizarding community are completely unaware anything’s happened, and that makes them easy targets for the Death Eaters if they’re using the Imperius Curse.” ***Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Page 94***

This affect is ameliorated by what is also portrayed as a two-way relationship, with the media also putting pressure on the government and going around official sources when needed, to get a story. This excerpt from book six illustrates that the media is not limited to government-provided information.

Rumors continue to fly about the mysterious recent disturbance at the Ministry of Magic, during which He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was sighted once more.

“We’re not allowed to talk about it, don’t ask me anything,” said one agitated Obliviator, who refused to give his name as he left the Ministry last night.

Nevertheless, highly placed sources within the Ministry have confirmed that the disturbance centered on the fabled Hall of Prophecy.

Though Ministry spokeswizards have hitherto refused even to confirm the existence of such a place, a growing number of the Wizarding community believe that the Death Eaters now serving sentences in Azkaban for trespass and attempted theft were attempting to steal a prophecy. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, Pages 38-41*

Individuals within the government are also shown acting as leaking information to the press, as this excerpt from book six indicates:

Newly appointed Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, spoke today of the tough new measures taken by his Ministry to ensure the safety of students returning to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this autumn.

“For obvious reasons, the Ministry will not be going into detail about its stringent new security plans,” said the Ministry, although an insider confirmed that measures include defensive spells and charms, a complex array of countercurses, and a small task force of Aurors dedicated solely to the protection of Hogwarts School. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, Pages 38-41*

Frame 2: Misleading Journalism

This frame displays examples of or references to journalism that are obviously misleading, inaccurate, or libelous. For the purpose of this paper, “misleading journalism” is considered to be journalism that leads readers to draw the wrong conclusions about events, even if the basic facts are accurate; “inaccurate journalism” is considered to be journalism that is wrong about facts such as dates, names, times, and events, and “libelous journalism” is journalism that attacks or abuses the characters of its subjects. Because all of these types are negative and are representative of a failure of journalism to accomplish its ideal goal, all examples of these types were grouped together.

In book three, the media are portrayed as attacking the character of a protagonist, who suffers as a result:

“In the meantime, life became even worse for Harry within the confines of the castle, for Rita Skeeter had published her piece about the Triwizard Tournament, and it had turned out to be not so much a report on the tournament as a highly colored life story of Harry. Much

of the front page had been given over to a picture of Harry; the article (continuing on pages two, six, and seven) had been all about Harry, the names of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang champions (misspelled) had been squashed into the last line of the article, and Cedric hadn't been mentioned at all.

The article had appeared 10 days ago, and Harry still got sick, burning feeling of shame in his stomach every time he thought about it. Rita Skeeter had reported him saying an awful lot of things he couldn't remember ever saying in his life, let alone in that broom cupboard.

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Page 314

In book four, characters speculate about the media's motivations, which are confirmed by a member of the media herself.

Rita gave Hermione a long, hard look. Then, leaning forward across the table toward her, she said in a businesslike tone, "All right, Fudge is leaning on the *Prophet*, but it comes to the same thing. They won't print a story that shows Harry in a good light. Nobody wants to read it. It's against the public mood. This last Azkaban breakout has got people quite worried enough. People just don't want to believe You-Know-Who's back." "So the *Daily Prophet* exists to tell people what they want to hear, does it?" said Hermione scathingly.

Rita sat up straight again, her eyebrows raised, and drained her glass of firewhisky.

"The *Prophet* exists to sell itself, you silly girl," she said coldly. ***Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Pages 564-569***

Frame 3: Unethical Means of Gathering Information

This final frame displays examples of information that is gathered through unethical and/or illegal means. To a journalist, "Unethical means" includes acts such as coercion, blackmail, invasion of privacy, and hearsay. "Illegal means" includes any means that would be considered illegal in a non-fictional, U.S. context, such as wiretapping, bugging, breaking and entering, and theft. As this frame centers on the gathering of information, a large number of the quotes that fall into this category relate to Rita Skeeter, a special correspondent for *The Daily Prophet*. Skeeter is the most prominent journalist in the *Harry Potter* series. She is an extreme example of a corrupt journalist who writes with a complete disregard for accuracy, truthfulness and objectivity. Skeeter often interviews her subjects with the aid of a Quick Notes Quill, a magical quill that writes automatically as the subject begins to speak. It does not, however, record verbatim what is spoken but instead creates sensational and inaccurate tales that bear little

resemblance to actual events, thus using it is considered unethical, as is illustrated in this quote:

‘You won’t mind Harry, if I use a Quick Quotes Quill? It leaves me free to talk to you normally....’

‘A what?’ Harry said.

Rita Skeeter’s smile widened. Harry counted three gold teeth. She reached again into her crocodile bag and drew out a long acid-green quill and a roll of parchment, which she stretched out between them on a crate of Mrs. Skower’s All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover. She put the tip of the green quill into her mouth. Sucked it for a moment with apparent relish, then placed it upright on the parchment, where it stood balanced on its point, quivering slightly...Now she leaned toward Harry and said, ‘So, Harry...what made you decide to enter the Triwizard Tournament?’

‘Er – ‘said Harry again, but he was distracted by the quill. Even though he wasn’t speaking, it was dashing across the parchment, and in its wake he could make out a fresh sentence:

An ugly scar, souvenir of a tragic past, disfigures the otherwise charming face of Harry Potter, whose eyes –

‘Ignore the quill, Harry,’ said Rita Skeeter firmly. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Pages 303-307*



Link here to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0A0Rh8M6Pq0&mode=related&search=> which is a video from the movie that shows this scene

Skeeter also has a knack for getting information from situations where those reported on do not know that they are being observed.

“Look at this!’ Harry snarled, and he shoved the *Daily Prophet* article under Hermione’s nose.

Hermione’s mouth fell open as she read. Her reaction was exactly the same as Ron’s.

‘How did that horrible Skeeter woman find out? You don’t think Hagrid *told* her?’

‘No,’ said Harry, leading the way over to the Gryffindor table and throwing himself into a chair, furious. ‘He never even told us, did he? I reckon she was so mad he wouldn’t give her loads of horrible stuff about me, she went ferreting around to get him back.’

‘Maybe she heard him telling Madame Maxine at the ball,’ said Hermione quietly.

‘We’d have seen her in the garden!’ said Ron. ‘Anyway, she’s not supposed to come into school anymore, Hagrid said Dumbledore banned her...’

‘Maybe she’s got an Invisibility Cloak,’ said Harry, ladling chicken casserole onto his plate and splashing it everywhere in his anger. ‘Sort of thing she’d do, isn’t it, hide in bushes listening to people.’” *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Pages 441-442*

It turns out that this is exactly what she does. The unethical reporter is able to transform herself into an insect – a real bug.

Discussion

While media in general are portrayed in a number of different ways, the results of this study show that corruption plays a major role within the context of news in the *Harry Potter* series. The only examples of news given are ones that portray it as manipulated, inaccurate and unethical. References to the Wizarding world’s only other newspaper, the tabloid *The Quibbler*, and references to other forms of media such as radio were minor and not of any particular significance when weighed against the references made to corrupt, underhanded journalism. In addition, references to any form of accurate, non-obstructive journalism were virtually non-existent. Thus the main focus of this study centered on *The Daily Prophet* and its influence in the Wizarding world.

The extremely negative depiction of journalism could have an adverse effect on child readers of the series as they may not have an understanding of journalism in a broader context. As a result of reading the series, they may infer that journalism is corrupt in general, deceptive, and would not make an attractive career choice. Defamation of character is also a concept that is widely present in the series. It would be important for child readers to understand the meaning behind acts such as libel and slander, and the ways in which these acts cause damage. Additionally, as there is no recourse for bad journalism in the series, child readers could mistakenly assume that such journalism always goes unpunished in the non-fictional world as well. The implications of this negative portrayal are actually quite broad when one considers the enormous popularity of the series and the fact that the books have been translated into multiple foreign languages, increasing their ability to attract an even greater number of readers.

Future researchers may benefit from combining a qualitative method such as a framing study with a quantitative method such as distributing a survey. Surveys could be distributed among a group of children who had read the books, asking them questions about the overall purpose of journalism and the negative depiction of it in the *Harry Potter* series. Alternately, future researchers could assemble a focus group comprised of children who had read the books and ask them questions about the negative portrayal of the media in the series, focusing on whether or not it actually affects how they think about journalism and the media in general.

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