

Between Here and There: Israeli Children Living Cultural Globalization

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Studying the role of media in the lives of children and young people in Israel throughout the last decade has highlighted the operations on their lives of two seemingly conflicting forces – globalization and localization. The focus of this article is to discuss how these two forces are actually mediated by children.

As with their counterparts throughout the world, Israeli children are born into a world, which is global and local. They accept this situation as the normal state of their life. They engage in similar activities as well as share media preferences and interests of children from very diverse backgrounds all over Europe (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001). Mediated globalization was found in Israel as well as in eleven other European cultures to be closely linked to age and class: the older the child from middle and upper classes is, the more he and she relate to the wider world and position themselves within it. Taste markers such as media products (mainly American) and media language (mainly English) play an important role in this positioning process. Mastering the English language, playing computer games, surfing the Internet, preferring American movies and television series – are all associated with children's exercising of a sense of social belonging and personal distinction (Lemish, Drotner, Liebes, Maigret & Stald, 1998).

A central focus of media studies in many countries has been on articulating how children comprehend and understand media texts, e.g., television programs, advertisements, computer games, and the like. Several studies have focused on the role of informal mediation by families in enhancing young children's comprehension and learning from texts, as well as their role as socializing agents. Such mediation studies typically concentrate on parents' restrictions on viewing times and contents, on content comprehension, and on the production of textual meanings. The general conclusion to be drawn from these studies is that, as a result of family influences, children differ, among other things in their attitudes toward media, their uses of media, and their communication patterns. Furthermore, media-meanings attained by children are understood to result not only from individual cognitive processes, but also from their learning orientations and

expectations about texts, which are socially shared (Buckingham, 1993). This suggests that social class, race, and gender play significant roles in the processes of meaning production. Studies on children and media that considered macro system variables and involved relations at the level of subculture or culture, referred mainly to occupation, income, education, and ethnicity (such as Atkin, Greenberg & Baldwin, 1991). However, they overlooked the more general concerns that differ across cultures – national identity, deep social or political conflicts, national goals, and the differing characteristics of media systems.

Yet, Korzenny and Ting-Toomey (1992) do suggest variable clusters that should be considered in cross-cultural research and that bear relevancy to the issue at hand. One cluster, which they label antecedent variables, includes social, political, historical, cultural, and media contexts. Similarly, Berger (1992) stated that the goal of cross-cultural studies is to gain insights into issues such as national character and related social, political, and belief systems and values. All of these have an impact on the specific forms of tension between global and local forms of culture.

In the following pages, I wish to present an integrative summary of research I conducted over the last decade, which will illustrate how these mediation processes work in one particular case study – Israel.

The Israeli media scene

First, the specific culture, Israel, differs from other cultures, in the historical development of dominating media, institutional characteristics, the ideology attached to the media, the mechanisms of control, as well as in preferred genres and content, and the public's perceptions of the media's roles in identity formation. The official discourse describes the national culture as follows: Israel, founded in 1948, consists of Jewish immigrants from all over the world. The country's formative years were characterized by efforts at creating cultural integration and the development of a collective identity, as well as by wars and security concerns. The country is characterized by major social-political-religious divisions over the peace process with the Palestinians, and the Jewish and/or democratic character of the state. Twenty percent of Israel's population of over 6 millions are non-Jewish citizens of Muslim, Christian and Druze faiths, mostly of Arab national identity.

Israel has a well-developed infrastructure of communication, including various commercial and public television and radio stations, cable systems, satellite connections, a thriving print industry and a flourishing market for imported products, such as books and magazines, computer and video games, films, music compact discs and tapes. It has a strong public broadcasting tradition that resisted for many years the introduction of commercial television. This position was based on fear of the possible negative influence of the capitalistic value system and foreign cultural attributes on important national efforts to recreate and nourish the development of a unique Jewish Israeli culture. The argument

that television contributes to cultural imperialism and Americanization of Israeli culture continues to be raised consistently throughout five decades of debate about Israeli television.

The studies

The following is a brief description of several studies of children and media, which I conducted in Israel and which form the base of the analysis presented in this article:

- *Kindergartners' Understandings of Television* (Lemish, 1997; Lemish 1998a) was a cross-cultural analysis that compared 48 American and 25 Israeli kindergartners' understandings of television through in-depth interviews regarding their viewing preferences, perception of "what's real" on television, "what's news", and the meaning and purpose of commercials.
- *Spice Girls' Talk* (Lemish, 1998b) analyzed the reception of this highly popular pop-music female group by 39 pre-teen age girls studied through focus group interviews. The study revealed that the Spice Girls serve as a site of struggle with gender construction, as the girls confront issues of "Girl Power", multiple femininities, idols and whores, "sisterhood", race, and sexual violence.
- *Global Culture in Practice* (Lemish, Drotner, Liebes, Maigret & Stald, 1998) was a preliminary exploration of how globalization becomes embedded in the lives of children and adolescents in Denmark, France and Israel. This research analyzed 336 in-depth interviews with children and adolescents aged 6-17, and was part of larger cross-cultural European study (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001).
- *Perceptions of the U.S. through a Wrestling Television Series* (Lemish, 1999) analyzed 901 questionnaires completed by 8 - 12 year old children and 254 face-to-face interviews with the same population. It focused on their understanding of the differences between their own culture and the American origins of the WWF series.
- *The Rise and Fall of a Virtual Pet* (Bloch & Lemish, 1999) studied the place that a trans-national toy, the Tamagotchi, originally from Japan, had in Israeli children's lives and what it signified for them in terms of relationships, gender identity, and existential predicaments.
- *The Teletubbies* (Lemish & Tidhar, 2002) studied the perceptions of 44 mothers and childhood-experts of this BBC toddlers' television series. Gathered through personal interviews, the results lend support to the claim that audiences actively employ interpretive processes in contending with foreign texts: appropriating universal values through local ideologies; approaching the foreignness of the global with interpretive critical attitudes; contending with linguistic barriers in the attempt to maintain local identity; offering

polysemic interpretation of texts; and, finally, integrating global representations within local rituals. It also highlights the crucial role mothers may play in reconciling the global and the local and is discussed within the framework of parental mediation.

- *The Pokémon* (Lemish & Bloch, forthcoming) studied the perceptions of 46 6-11 year olds interviewed through focus group discussions of this Japanese animated series. The study analyzes children's perceptions of the meanings and values expressed in the series as they relate to issues such as relationships, violence, gender, heroism and cuteness.

In addition, this article draws upon several other on-going research projects on Israeli children's perceptions of popular culture, based mainly on focus group discussions. All Israeli children in these studies are Jewish, mostly but not exclusively, of middle-class.

Mediating the global and the local

Returning to my initial claim, I want to argue that for the children studied the issue of globalization and localization

is not a matter of oppositions. That is, we should not view this phenomenon via dichotomies such as globalization versus localization, international versus national or universal versus particular. Rather, globalization involves the linking by children of their own locales to the wider world. At the same time, localization already incorporates trends of globalization (Lemish, Drotner, Liebes, Maigret & Stald, 1998, pp. 552-3).

Further, I contend that Israeli children's media world provides evidence for at least three forms of mediation between the two extremes of the global and the local. First is the consumption of original local texts saturated with local values and world-views (such as ethnic music, national holidays' ceremonies, or news coverage) along side with the transnational, sometimes ideologically clashing, types of texts. The second form of mediation refers to the consumption of local media texts that exemplify the Israeli version of another culture's product (such as a local soap opera or all-boys pop group). Finally, there is consumption of global texts within a local context and the process of endowing them with meanings made relevant to one's own situation (what Robertson, 1994, calls "glocalization"), as has been documented in studies conducted in the tradition of audience reception. As a result of these processes, we see the emergence of a hybrid children's culture composed of both global and local dimensions.

Universalism

The studies suggest that children do not share a perspective that assumes contradiction, or even tension, between traditional local values and global (i.e., American or late modernity) values, as typified primarily by commercialism, globaliza-

tion, privatization, and individualization (Fornäs & Bolin, 1995). In fact, they perceive universal values – such as friendship, love and cooperation – as global. This perspective dismisses the global-local binary opposition by ascribing to a “utopian” (perhaps naive) world-view of harmony, unity, and shared human values. Indeed, one quality marker of popular texts, such as American series (comedies, soaps, drama) and popular music, is the sense that they cater to the universal interest in relationships, human emotions and interpersonal conflicts. The popularity of soap operas (such as *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Dawson Creek*, or *Baywatch*) is a case in point. Children discuss the universal appeal of soaps in terms of relationships, expression of feelings, dreams and hopes, and romance, and often do not care about their origins. As a 13-year-old girl said:

It doesn't matter [if a soap is Israeli or American]. This one is about people and that one is about people (Lemish, Drotner, Liebes, Maigret & Stald, 1998, p. 548).

Similarly, the Japanese Tamagotchi toy represents for children a site of caring and nurturing human relationships, signifying the life cycle from birth to death.

This analysis suggests that young audiences wish to find symbolic spaces of a shared world consisting of people and relationships, devoid of particular contexts or cultural boundaries or local conflicts. Similarly, the Internet provides another transnational social space. The notion of a utopian world appears often in the children's discourse suggesting that they perceive the Internet as offering direct “human” contact across national borders, and even more important for these children, across local familial borders, where there is no mediation of parents, teachers, schools or computer stores. Media seem to connect young audiences to the imaginary social “center” of humankind.

Social relief

In addition, Israeli children seem to be searching for relief from the contextualized social pressure of which they cannot escape in their everyday life. The deep social conflicts and debates over the nature of Israel as a state, and existential dilemmas stemming from the relationship with the Arab world, occupy a central place in both private and public discourse. In fact, all socializing agents – such as family, educational systems, media, religious institutions, mandatory military service, youth movements, etc. – exert their influence with regard to these dilemmas. Israeli kindergartners, for example, understand that news is “real” and that it deals with what is relevant to their personal lives – mostly issues of war and peace. They are greatly concerned with issues of national security, with threats to society as a whole, and with the people who are in charge of maintaining the social order, i.e., ministers, armed forces, and mayors.

Children's television programs produced locally take pride in emphasizing national identity by highlighting holidays, tradition, historical sites, the Hebrew language, national heroes, the longing for peace, and the like. Military presence is salient in both the private and public realms of life. Hourly news broadcasts,

and the talk they inspire, convey anxiety, insecurity, and physical threats. In this reality, the highly debated television violence issue is greatly amplified and gains additional meanings and concerns absent from mainstream academic discourse (see, e.g., Carlsson & von Feilitzen, 1998).

Such, for example, was children's elaborate explanations denying the violent nature of the *Pokémon* series. This is exemplified by the tactic of comparing the series to other, more realistic and "gory" television programs, suggesting that children develop their own criteria for defining "violence", as has been argued by other researchers (Buckingham, 1996; Tobin, 2000; van der Voort, 1986). The tactics included identifying "rules" of battle-conduct, perceiving the Pokémons as animals and therefore attributing the violence to the world of the wild or distinguishing violence from fighting. However, these data have particular relevance when considering the routine realistic television fare to which Israeli children are exposed, which includes live scenes from military battles, including firing of shots and occasional horrifying sights of the victims of bombings, lynchings, executions on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. The ever-present bloodshed and the continuous debate over the concept of "peace" presents a conflict that children seem to be trying to reconcile by redefining the significance of violence when it serves what is defined as "a good cause". This is expressed in Israel in seemingly conditional slogans such as "Peace, but not at any cost", or conflicting expressions such as "soldiers of peace", the need to "wage a battle for peace", or even "fight a war against violence". It is not surprising, therefore, that for the Israeli young audiences, animated Pokémon fights that adhere to certain rules and never end in bloody deaths are not perceived as violence at all.

Contending with foreignness

Designed for a global market, many of the transnational media texts consumed by Israeli children were produced with a special effort to be as universal and culture-free as possible, and so to cater for the interests of young audiences worldwide. However, the data in my research lend support to the active interpretive processes that audiences are engaged in when contending with foreign texts. While recognizing the foreignness in the global texts, I found that a dual process takes place: appropriation of global values on the one hand, and on the other hand, attempts to impose local meanings on some of them. For example, in a discussion of the Spice Girls, a group of 12 year olds incorporated the Spice Girls' message of "Girl Power" as relevant to their understandings of their positioning as girls in Israeli society:

One girl said: Not long ago on MTV... they had this nice dance and they dedicated it to Princess Diana. They said she had Girl Power.

Her friend added: And Madonna too.

When asked what they meant by that, one answered: Something special in her character. She does things with her singing or with helping other people.

When asked specifically, “Does it matter that it is Girl Power and not just power?” she answered in the affirmative, explaining: Because this is something that singles out women and girls.

Many of the girls perceived the concept of Girl Power to be a demonstrative opposition to boys. In answering a direct question, “What does the Spice Girls’ power mean?” a mixed group of nine to eleven year olds responded in a similar fashion:

That girls are better.

There are boys that think that they are better than girls, so the Spice Girls try to prove that it is not so.

They want to show that girls are important too.

In the discussion that followed, the interviewees gave examples from their own experiences in Israeli society for the unjustified claim that boys consider themselves better than girls:

Why do boys think that they are better? For example, in sports... A. proves that it is not true because she plays soccer better than most of the boys in her class!

And boys can be ballet dancers. My brother, for example, is a very good dancer and he thinks there is no difference between boys and girls. Because he tries to prove to some of the people that he dances and it doesn’t mean that he is a girl.

The unfolding of this particular discussion was an illuminating illustration of the way the Spice Girls were recruited as ideological support in everyday experiences of gender inequality and prejudice experienced by pre-teen girls in Israel (Lemish, 1998b).

The complementary process of imposing local meaning became evident, for example, in their discussion of the one black singer, Melanie B., framed as Scary Spice, the one who breaks the rules, acts wildly, has long curly “messed-up” hair and a pierced tongue. For the Israeli participants who were primarily of European origin, this character, perceived as an “other”, seemed very meaningful. While openly expressing “politically correct” acceptance of the foreign character, their discourse revealed a sense of anxiety mixed with curiosity, as they related the issue of race to that of sexual violence, revealing rumors of Melanie B. having been a victim of rape and abuse. Since I was not able to confirm a grain of truth in these stories, it raised the possibility that the girls were removing the sexual-crime threat from their own context and being by attaching it to the culturally removed “other”.

Children’s discussion of the animated series *Pokémon* provides another illustration of the working of these processes. The importance of friendship was clearly prioritized by the children across gender and age. Values such as love, devotion, self-sacrifice, assistance, comfort, and concern were singled out as being the most crucial in human relationships:

The most important thing is not to win and to earn medals and stuff. The most important thing is to be loyal, to appreciate the things your Pokémon wants, and to love him. To win is not everything, the first thing is to be with friends, explained a nine year-old girl.

In addition, togetherness was a central theme in their discussion:

...they are friends who go everywhere together, play together, feed their Pokémon together, share their experiences with each other, they do everything together, described a nine year-old boy.

The empowering nature of group identity was also evident in discussions of the emotional support provided by team members by relieving loneliness and providing a sense of respect and love. The value of group identity, and unity, known in Hebrew as “gibush” or crystallization, has been shown to be a highly prized key symbol in Israeli culture, fostered and encouraged throughout the entire educational system and in the military service that is compulsory for both males and females (Katriel, 1991).

Prioritizing collectivism over individualism, attributed, among others, to the Japanese culture in contrast with the American, seemed to find an echo with Israeli children who integrate both points of view (Katz, Haas & Gurevitz, 1997). On one hand, children are raised to perceive themselves from an interdependent view as part of a collective devoted to the goals of the society at large. This is achieved through a collective ethos based on the Zionist nation-building ideology, and what remains influenced by the original socialist political system, as well as by means of a variety of socializing agents emphasizing national consciousness and responsibility. Yet, on the other hand, Israeli society has been going through a transition through growing individualism and materialism typical of late modernity processes, or what others have referred to as Americanization.

The integrated view of traditional collectivism with western individualism was expressed in children’s appropriation of “togetherness” for the realization of individual aspirations. A nine year-old boy illustrates this point when he explains why he would like to be Charmander (a favorite Pokémon):

Because I would feel good, that I am developing and helping somebody, and I would have a good feeling, because I have done something good today.

Friendship, thus, surfaced as a central theme in children’s interpretation of *Pokémon*, yet clearly they applied their social knowledge to its understandings and implications for the benefits of the individual as well as the collective (Lemish & Bloch, forthcoming).

Hybrid culture

The working of all of these processes hand in hand supports Robertson’s argument (1994) regarding the increasing interconnectedness of many seemingly clashing local cultures which typifies global culture.

A striking example was evident in a discussion with a group of 12-year-old religious girls who expressed strict religious beliefs (including those of modesty, morality, obeying religious laws, tradition) and at the same time admired the Spice Girls' music and Jean-Claude Van Damme's action movies. At one point in the interview they engaged in a heated discussion on the necessity for modest clothing and total obedience to God. And, a minute later, they described their admiration for performers characterized by exaggerated sexual appearances and extremely violent behaviors. This seeming contradiction of opposing value systems did not appear to bother the girls. In this hybrid world they are living in, you can preach – and believe in – traditional family values, but at the same time view the American situation comedy *Love and Marriage* which mocks all family values (Lemish, Drotner, Liebes, Maigret & Stald, 1998, p. 550).

Yet, a central question remains, as to why some foreign elements of media texts are adopted by young audiences (such as the centrality of cuteness in the *Pokémon* series, or the glorified nature of American society as highlighted in the WWF wrestling programs), and others are rejected (such as the goal of becoming a Master in the *Pokémon* series, or the seemingly sexual promiscuity of the Spice Girls), while yet others inspire a very contextualized interpretation (the Teletubbies' home is perceived as a bomb-shelter, or the definition of violence is adjusted to reality) to be of central interest.

Concluding words

The interpretation of the research presented here suggests that Israeli children's readings of popular texts should be understood within the unique context of present Israeli culture, where issues of war and security, masculinity and force, militarization of civil society, egalitarian ethos, "us" and the "others", are central in children's construction of social life. In this sense, *Pokémon*, *The Teletubbies*, news, or the Spice Girls can never be truly "global" products and are always contextually read and interpreted. Young Israeli audiences bring with them to the media consumption situation their personal experience and knowledge, cultural background, gender and social identities, and integrate their understandings of the texts within a general social context. They approach the foreignness of the global with interpretive critical attitudes, while appropriating global values within local ideologies. This is much in line with a host of other recent studies indicating the flexibility of local cultures as they assimilate and accommodate global trends in a process of glocalization. It is through these children's eyes that our undercurrent value system becomes visible and the effectiveness of the work of socialization most evident.

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