

12. News kids can use – to play with

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Young children are an often overlooked group of news consumers, in public debate as well as in academic scholarship. In this chapter I will argue for a broadened concept of news, focusing on the everyday media practices of younger children. The news they are using and consuming may often bear only little resemblance to “real” news, as it is relevant mainly for children’s everyday life, their peer cultures and their play practices. Even young children may feel an urge to keep themselves informed in order to be able to engage themselves in peer and play communities.

Children use social media to keep themselves informed and up to date on topics of importance to them. News consumption – including youth news consumption – is most often discussed in relation to issues of participation in democratic processes. But news may also be important on a more everyday level. The concept of news in relation to children’s lives should therefore include not only traditional news genres but also new play practices, formats, remixes etc.

This chapter will present knowledge about, and discuss, young children’s use of media content as news sources valuable for engaging in peer communities and play. This will be done through a specific case, which filled Danish news media (traditional as well as social media platforms) in the summer of 2018. The chapter will show why media platforms like YouTube are important news sources for children

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if they want to stay informed and up to date in order to engage in peer play culture.

Social media as a news source for children

The article takes its point of departure from the overall question:

How do social media platforms function as news sources for young children in relation to their peer cultures and play practices?

Children's use of seemingly silly and disregarded content is important for their access into peer and play communities. Just as adults discuss news at work or with friends and family, it is important for children to obtain knowledge about things of relevance to them. It could be sports, such as football,¹ or it could be knowledge about crazes, memes and gossip in online communities, which function as a pathway and as glue in their social relations.

The case of #squishygate

The analysis in this chapter will revolve around a particular case that was prevalent on Danish YouTube in the summer of 2018. For about a year, small latex figures in the shape of food and animals in a characteristic anime style, called *squishies*, had been the talk of the town across tween bedrooms and Youtube channels. As a scholar, I was first acquainted with the phenomenon in early 2018, when I had a phone call from a journalist who was covering the craze and wanted me to comment on the fascination. While I was not familiar with squishies at the time, it was still fairly easy for me to see the resemblance to other crazes such as nice-smelling rubbers, fidget spinners and the – at the same time – highly popular slime.

In June 2018, the Danish Agency for Environmental Protection (under the Ministry for Environment and Food) announced that a test of 12 different squishies had shown an unacceptably high level of toxic gases in all of them. Therefore, they were withdrawn from the market in all countries in the EU and consumers were encouraged to either throw them out or return them to the shops where they were bought.

During the following days and weeks, the news regarding this #squishygate spread not only across regular news outlets (with comments from the Minister for Environment and Food, Jakob

Ellemann-Jensen, as well as interviews with retailers, children and parents) but also across children's own news channels, in particular on Youtube, and especially on the channels of those – mostly girls – who had designated all their uploaded videos to unboxing,² squeezing and talking about squishies and their sensuous affordances. Hours after the news had broken, they expressed their immediate, intense feelings of sorrow, while at the same time encouraging their followers to express their emotions as well. Later on, some of those who before had named their channels directly after their obsession with squishies (such as Madickens Squishies and Kiwi Squishies) changed either channel names or the content of their videos.

Within a few weeks, new and smaller crazes appeared such as home-made squishies made from foam sponges and scotch tape and ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) videos.³ On other channels, youtubers would continue to show and squeeze their squishies while arguing that particular brands were not toxic or that they would keep their squishy collection in closed boxes to prevent emission of the unwanted gases from them. This would lead to intense debates in the commentaries, which would in themselves be a relevant subject matter for analysis but falls outside the scope of this chapter.

News kids can use – for play

Instead, having now introduced the #squishygate case, I will discuss how this serves as an example of relevant news for young children and what this case might tell us about the relationship between content, media platforms and media (prod)users on the one hand and about young children's contemporary play culture on the other.

As mentioned in the introduction, research on young(er) children as consumers of news is scarce. Most scholarship within the field of news consumption among younger age groups is concerned with adolescents and young adults – those age groups that are entering adulthood, including gaining democratic rights such as the right to vote.⁴ Some researchers have focused on the influence of social media in relation to young people's news consumption, and point to the fact that news should be understood in a broader sense than just topics related to fields like society, politics, etc. This means that “softer” topics – lifestyle and gossip, for instance – should also be taken into account

when trying to understand the role of news in young people's lives, not to mention the meaning of news in relation to young people's active participation in society.

Following typical patterns in the rise and fall of toy crazes, as they have been seen in relation to, for instance, yo-yos, fidget spinners, tamagotchis, etc., the story of squishies is a story that is being framed by the influence of social media platforms – Youtube and Instagram in particular. In Denmark, around 70 per cent of children aged 7 to 12 use Youtube on a daily basis,⁵ many of them spending significant amounts of time watching youtubers display and discuss different artefacts such as toys, make-up and clothes or demonstrating their skills in, for instance, computer games.⁶

This means that the interconnections between media use and children's play culture and practice must be taken into account in the overall understanding of a phenomenon like this. As such, framing #squishygate as an example of news for children is not based on traditional concepts of news consumers as interested in political and societal issues or as active participants in democracy, i.e. as voters. Being an active participant in children's play culture means knowing about relevant play structures, toys, memes and crazes in order to take part in play with others, offline as well as online.

If, in June 2018, you were a squishy fan, you would over a longer period of time have achieved relevant knowledge of different squishy brands, of their textures and density, and of vocabulary used to describe these, just as you would most likely have made your choice of which squishy Youtuber you preferred. Also, many children produce content for Youtube (or other social media platforms) themselves, and if they are interesting, skilled and/or cute enough, they sometimes gain a significant number of followers.

Youtube can be said to have become a primary news source for the age group, as it is their first choice for entertainment as well as for information on topics relevant to them.⁷ Schröder (2015) introduced the term “worthwhileness” to grasp the reflections by the users of different news platforms, enabling each individual to choose the platform or format that best suits their needs and aspirations. A recent pilot study by Johansen (2017b), in which 11 children aged 7 to 14 were interviewed about their use of Youtube, suggests that Youtube functions as

the primary content provider and search engine for these children. This means that Youtube as a platform, and not least the specific youtubers themselves, are reference points for them, including in cases such as the one described above in which they need to gain knowledge and guidance in relation to their own practice.

Schröder's "worthwhileness" term encompasses seven aspects⁸ of which three in particular seem relevant in this context. Youtube as a news medium for orientation in relation to #squishygate is particularly significant in relation to: 1) public connection – meaning "any news content that helps maintain relations to one's networks and the wider society";⁹ 2) normative pressure, that is Youtube being the preferred media platform among the age group as such; and 3) participatory potential. In this case the *participatory potential* refers to the general view among the children I have interviewed¹⁰ that they have a "say" in relation to the content on their favourite youtubers' channels.

News kids can use

The case of #squishygate has been discussed above in relation to theories of play on the one hand and media use – in this case use of news in the broadest sense – in children's everyday life on the other. What distinguishes this particular case from other media events circulating in children's own media-related networks is the fact that the story of the withdrawal of toxic rubber toys actually made it to the headlines of traditional news media, involving governmental institutions and thereby also hitting the news menu of many parents and other adults. Still, most of them did not understand the massive fuss it caused, the tears shed on camera and the immense frustration that was expressed in commentaries below the videos.

From an analytical viewpoint, though, this particular case is a highly relevant example of the type of news content that is important to children, as it highlights similar aspects of news consumption (referring to Schröder's notion of worthwhileness) as is seen in relation to adults. For children, relevant content providers and platforms are chosen in order to stay updated and able to make relevant choices in their lives, in this case related to whether or not they should throw away or keep their squishy collection. And in doing so, they involve themselves in communities that to them are important – online as well as offline.

The case of the withdrawal and banning of seemingly silly toy figures could function as a relevant example to broaden traditional notions and understandings of children's participation in culture and society. As described above, it shows how younger children actually take on the role of active participants in their own lives, and how much they are willing to involve themselves if only the subject matter of news, as well as the communities in which news is used, is relevant to them. This should be acknowledged and included in policies regarding media literacy, even for very young children, in order to help children and young people form supportive, democratic and creative communities, including in online settings.

Notes

1. As described in Johansen (2017a).
2. Marsh (2016).
3. For an introduction to this particular genre, see Breth Klausen and Have (forthcoming).
4. Examples of this can be found, for instance, in Kobbernagel et al. (2015), Svenningsson (2015) and Schofield Clark & Marchi (2017).
5. DR Media Development (2016).
6. Johansen (2017b).
7. *ibid.*
8. Schröder (2015 p. 63).
9. *ibid.*
10. In Johansen (2017b).

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News articles etc. about #squishygate

UltraNyt: <https://www.dr.dk/ultra/ultranyt/butikker-fjerner-squishies-fra-hylderne>.

DR nyheder: <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/ekspert-squishies-skal-ud-af-boer-neaerelset>.

Several videos are available on Youtube (search for “squishies er ulovlige”). This includes illegal copies and remixes of the video by *Madickens Squishies* in which she shows her immediate response to the news. She later took the video down and deleted her channel. She now continues creating content as *Madickens anden verden*.