Journalist Fellowship Paper

Beyond cartoons: why newsrooms must take children seriously

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Introduction

Take a stroll down the "Twitter streets" of Kenya, and the disdain for mainstream media among the platform X's largely Gen Z user base is palpable in post after post.

It's not a uniquely Kenyan problem: legacy media across the world is contending with an audience that has not only shifted to new platforms but rewritten the rules of trust, tone, and attention. What is uniquely Kenyan is the name given to mainstream news: Githeri Media.

The slur stems from a major fumble in media coverage of Kenya's 2017 General elections. A group of journalists spotted a man eating a traditional Kenyan maize-and-beans dish out of a plastic bag (referred to locally as githeri) as he queued to exercise his democratic right in the biting cold. Mainstream media highlighted the man's simple and inconsequential act as part of their headlines.

The man became a hit. Then the media became a punchline. Many asked, "How could they shift focus from vital information about a crucial election to something as inconsequential as a regular citizen eating?" And so, the term Githeri Media was born – shorthand for "microwaveable" content, lacking depth or facts, and disconnected from the lived reality of young Kenyans.

For Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2009, that moment landed during their most impressionable years. The oldest were 20. The youngest were eight. It shaped their expectations of what journalism is, and perhaps more importantly, what it isn't.

In the years that followed, they didn't just drift from legacy outlets; they built their own media ecosystem: TikTok explainers, meme-laced commentary, longform podcasts, and personality-driven YouTube deep dives. News, but on their terms.

This was nowhere more evident than during last year's Gen Z protests, #RejectFinanceBill2024. As young Kenyans took from their phones to the streets, it wasn't the 9pm bulletin that they turned to for the most part. It was livestreams, Twitter threads, TikToks in Sheng and vernacular, and creators breaking down policy with humour, outrage, and clarity.

While legacy media enjoyed short moments of glory as a verification tool for updates circulating on social media, they trailed behind in their agenda-setting role as Gen Z took the driver's seat.

The oldest members of Gen Z are in their late twenties now, and a new generation is already rising: Gen Alpha, born from 2010 to 2024 onwards. Today, the oldest are 15 and the youngest is a year old.

Their habits are currently being formed and they're watching how we talk, what we share, and whether we're worth listening to.

In the years ahead, Gen Alpha and future generations will face challenges more complex than any generation before: climate change, democratic backsliding, AI disruption, inequality and more. To meet those moments, they will need access to reliable, transparent, verified information – delivered in ways that make sense to them.

And we need to ask: are we ready to build that bridge in good time?

I approached this fellowship with a simple idea: to distil news and its value in the lives of children, starting with Gen Alpha. To do so, I spoke to media experts in countries where news for children is being practised – including France, Denmark, Finland, and the UK – I interviewed child psychologists, and mined research to map out a blueprint for the architecture needed.

Over the next pages, I will introduce the values that inform effective children's content, the innovative formats that can help us convey them, and the ethics we must uphold if we want to shake the image of Githeri Media in Kenya – and at the very least become a more palatable flavour in Kenya's news diet.

Why children's news matters

"Why do you want to traumatise children with the news? Can't they just enjoy their young lives without that interruption?" That's the reflexive response I've had in conversation after conversation about this project.

Growing up in the early 2000s, in a home where I was encouraged to read, watch and discuss the news, the Kenyan media I encountered seemed like superheroes going up against the villains of the day. It was an age of thriving investigative journalism, before digital disruption began to erode the old order.

By the election of 2017 – and the Githeri Media flop it encompassed – Gen Z's trust in news media had collapsed. But my own young grounding in news planted a seed of suspicion: Gen Alpha could still be served well by intentional news media.

My research and interviews for this project suggest I am not alone in thinking so. Aralyn McMane, Executive Director of the Global Youth & News Media Prize in France, told me: "In the last 10 years, just when it was needed most, there was a radical decline in newsroom interest in children."

She's right. Working in an enclave of the Kenyan news universe, I have heard the phrase "young people are not interested in news". News for children is, in many newsrooms, still unfathomable.

McMane attributes this neglect to shrinking staff and budgets under a strained business model – and to some "increasingly greedy owners" (her words, not mine).

A decade of missed opportunities

And what has topped the news agenda during the decade we've neglected children's news needs? Between 2015 and 2025, the world has been shaped by events that will define the lives of today's children. The migration crises from African nations and Syria reshaped politics and policies across Europe. The Iran nuclear deal – and its collapse – brought new geopolitical tensions. FIFA's corruption scandal forced Sepp Blatter's resignation. And 2015 saw the signing of two historic global agreements: the Paris Agreement on climate change and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

None of these stories were niche or short-lived. Their legacies are alive today: the war between Israel and Iran, migration continuing to shape policy worldwide, corruption scandals reshaping sport, and climate change at the centre of almost every political conversation since Paris.

Most leading news outlets left a gaping hole in their coverage for young audiences. The children of Gen Z – now young adults – were not served news in ways they could engage with. Gen Alpha risks the same fate unless we change course.

Children as audience – and actors

In 2015, Ellyanne Wanjiku, a Kenyan girl, was just five years old. Today she is recognised globally for her work to save the planet, armed with a deep understanding of the science of planting trees. She has been formally taught about species site matching — finding the right tree to plant in the right place, at the right time.

Her inspiration didn't come from a school textbook, but from Kenyan Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, whose fight to save green spaces in the 1990s made headlines. Maathai's story reached Ellyanne because the news carried it.

Ellyanne is not an outlier. Across the world, children are leading climate strikes, inventing technologies, influencing policy debates, and reshaping their communities. They are not just passive consumers of information; they are protagonists in the stories shaping our future. Yet most newsrooms do not speak to them directly, even as their actions become part of the very headlines those outlets cover.

This isn't a new idea. As McMane pointed out, news organisations once invested seriously in the next generation of readers.

"News organisations used to be willing to invest in education programmes that brought newspapers into classrooms to be used as a trusted source for all kinds of subjects. There were robust commercial programmes behind these extremely worthwhile efforts that included business and reader sponsorship of classroom subscriptions. The research around these programmes was robust as well, indicating that children who had access to newspapers did better on standardised tests and — teachers reported — developed a stronger, more informed civic curiosity," she said.

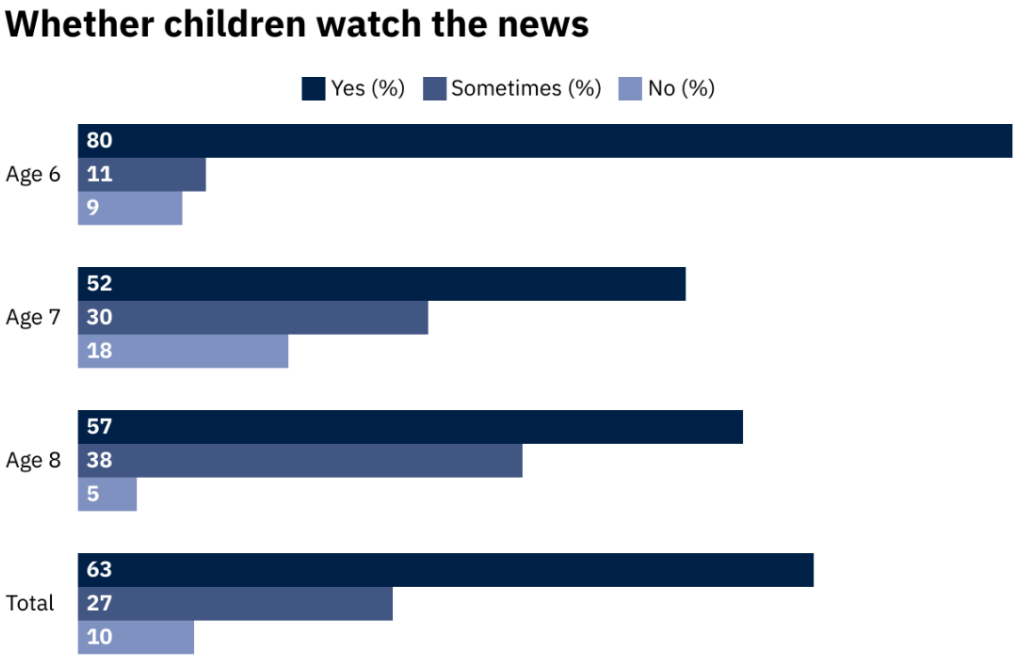
The model worked. It created informed, engaged young citizens. But in the decade when digital disruption redefined budgets and priorities, children's news was quietly set aside.

What the research reveals about children's news

A 2024 study, *The Impact of the News on Children and Children's Perception of the News*, sheds more light on these concerns.[1] Conducted with 105 children aged 6-8 in Istanbul, it used descriptive analysis to draw out four key themes:

1. Whether children watch the news
2. The purpose of the news
3. The news and the family
4. The emotional impact of the news

The findings were striking: 63% of children surveyed said they had come into contact with the news.



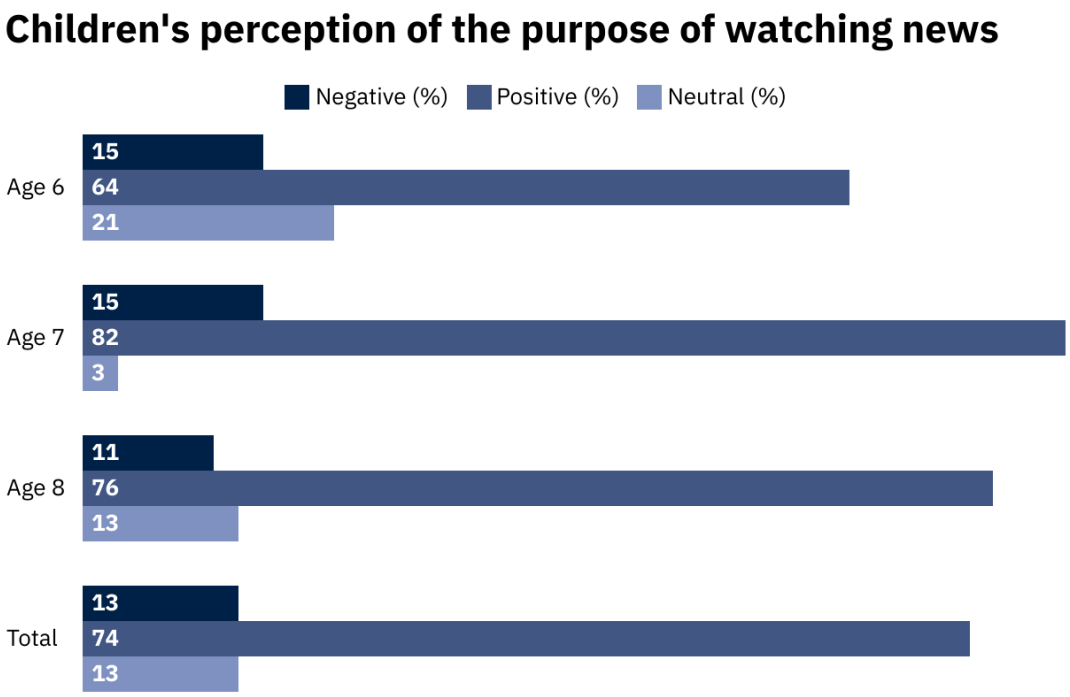
Source: Akyüz, Özmen & Yalman (2024) The Impact of the News on Children and Children's Perception of the News

[1] Akyüz, M. Özmen, K. Yalman, D. (2024), The Impact of the News on Children and Children's Perception of the News, 57-75

It reached most children in traditional ways at home: 91% of 6-year-olds said they encountered it through the main evening bulletins, compared with 82% of 7-year-olds and 90% of eight-year-olds.

In other words: regardless of whether the news is tailored to them or not, children, like the information sponges they are, will absorb it.

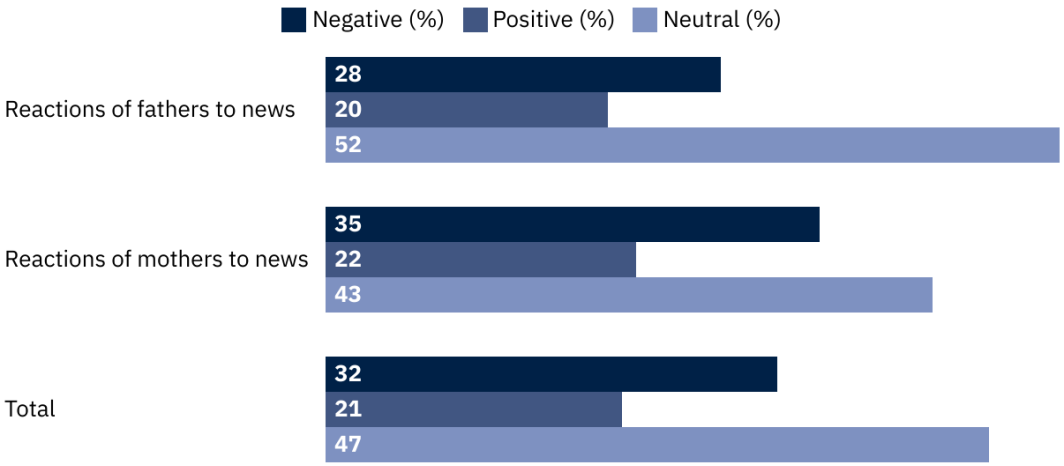
Asked why they thought people watched the news, 74% of the children thought viewers tuned in for positive purposes (sample response: “to gather information or to learn something”), 13% for negative purposes (sample response: “to learn about bad situations”), and 13% saw it as neutral (sample response: “to look”).



Source: Akyüz, Özmen & Yalman (2024) The Impact of the News on Children and Children’s Perception of the News

This points to an urgent need to rethink what appears in general news bulletins and how it’s presented. But the research also underscored the role of family in mediation. For many children, first contact with news happens at home. That makes parents’ responses to news crucial – whether they discuss it openly, ignore it, or react with visible worry.

Children's perception of their parents reaction to the news



Source: Akyüz, Özmen & Yalman (2024) The Impact of the News on Children and Children's Perception of the News

The study recommends active parental mediation: engaging with children about what they've seen, rather than reacting negatively or brushing it aside. "Everything is fine, nothing to see here" doesn't reassure children; they often notice when that isn't true.

This resonates with my own experience. As I mentioned earlier, I grew up in a home where my parents modelled how to talk about news – reading it together, discussing its implications, and encouraging me to ask questions. The data suggests this isn't just a nice habit, but a protective one.

Child psychologist Tamar de Vos-van der Hoeven offers practical advice for this kind of parental engagement:

"Children increasingly know what is happening in the world and they need concrete information. This information helps them understand better what has happened. From the age of 6 or 7, information – of course, tailored to the age of the child – can contribute to a safer feeling. Always connect to what the child asks for and do not give details that are not important. However, if the child asks for details, give an honest but short answer. Questions that are not allowed to be asked are more frightening than hard details."

Learning from those who already do it

The decade of inaction described in the previous chapter is part of the reason newsroom managers are now chasing Gen Z audiences by their coat-tails, crying: "Why aren't they interested in us?"

The answer: because we didn't take an interest in them. And while we were ignoring them, they were building their own information metropolis on alternative platforms.

For the older generations in newsrooms – those who carry newspapers under their arm as a badge of seriousness and boast about their knowledge of the latest news to younger colleagues who saw it on TikTok two weeks ago – the idea of shaping news for children would likely be met with pearl-clutching bewilderment over where to even begin.

That's why I was over the moon to hear from those who are actually doing it: giving children a worthy seat at the news table.

Children's news in print

Fanny Froman has led children's news at *Helsingin Sanomat*'s *Lasten Uutiset* since 2016. In that time, she has been awarded Finland's state prize for publication for her work with children, and in 2018 Children's News won UNICEF's Children's Influencer Award for developing children's media literacy and social inclusion.

Froman says hope and joy are as important in children's news as accuracy and clarity – a sharp contrast to the doom-laden tone of much general news.

"This is actually the most important part, and sometimes I feel most journalists don't understand that. They say, 'Why must you do it like this instead of just having a simpler layout?' But children are different from adults: they don't just need simple. They want joy as well."

The *Lasten Uutiset* journey began about ten years ago, when Helsingin Sanomat's editor-in-chief took an interest in Nordic approaches to children's news and hired Froman to develop the Finnish model.

Rather than commission lengthy research projects, the team adopted a "go with the flow, test-and-see" approach.

“We went to Norway to see what they were doing there. Then I created a draft newspaper, while another agency created a different version to compare. We held group interviews with children, asking which style, format, and content they preferred – and what they didn’t like, and why. We used the elements they liked most and launched in 2020. Since then, we ask our subscribers – both parents and children – every year what changes they’d like to see.”

Children’s news on radio

Polly Bayfield is a journalist at BBC Radio One’s Newsbeat, a daily news bulletin with youthful delivery for a target audience aged 16-24. In a seminar at the Reuters Institute, she spoke about how her team deals with difficult topics, like climate change news.

“Anxiety around climate change is a large factor with young people and it is about telling them the news with assurance through tone instead of delivering this and other news topics like a seminar [of doom]. It is not about giving a voice to the voiceless, because they have always had voices: it is about dismantling the systems that refuse to listen to them.”

She continued: “Everyone can relate to hope and agency in news stories.”

Children’s news on film

Sanntu Natri is a Finnish journalist who, at the time of interview, was the producer of the children’s news and current affairs at Yle Mix, Finland’s public broadcaster. He said that beyond the journalistic duty of informing children, something much greater has emerged from his experience.

“It is incredible how young video journalists can become a close friend, ally, and trusted person for children at such a crucial age. Despite being surrounded by all kinds of characters and content on social media, they can still connect with a news reporter. Our journalists go for school visits, meet children in person, take their questions, and gather feedback. That face-to-face interaction is really critical.”

In contrast to Froman’s approach at *Lasten Uutiset*, Yle built its children’s news offering on a foundation of traditional research, and made a deliberate decision to avoid heavy marketing.

“When we started, we wanted to let children find us. That way we could see for ourselves whether we were doing something right – or wrong.”

At the core, Natri said, is a commitment to tell the truth without overwhelming children. "In all the content we make, there has to be a glimmer of hope. If the situation is such that there is no hope to be told, we sometimes make the decision to skip it. When Russia started its invasion, weeks before the world broke, all the news was full of speculation about whether Russia was going to attack. We started getting messages from children in the comments section because they were anxious about it. So we created a series of Q&A videos with our foreign correspondent to answer their questions — keeping it simple and filtering out any graphic details. When Russia attacked, we actually got messages from children saying they were grateful, and that they handled the information better because they were prepared."

Print or digital?

While most newsrooms fret and iterate to find the best new digital format, children in France are actually fighting to retain the humble hard copy.

McMane said readers of the French daily newspaper *Mon Quotidien*, which is specifically designed for young people aged 10 to 14, are extremely loyal to the print edition and have resisted efforts to move to an online-only outlet.

"The editor has repeatedly told me he would love to [go digital] because it would be a lot cheaper," said McMane. "Not long ago, I watched a bunch of cellphone-toting, rambunctious middle school students in the USA become absolutely quiet in a workshop – absolutely absorbed in reading printed front pages, which they'd likely never seen before. The concentration levels were amazing to their teachers and to me. I am seeing signs of a return to older platforms and I do see a bit of a Renaissance in an appreciation of print. But, so far, market forces are making it difficult for print to be a mass option: it is expensive and everyone's budgets are tightening."

I heard the same from Froman in Finland: "Interestingly children feel fancy when they get this package created just for them which they get to go home with every week. They feel that we take them seriously."

On the other hand, Natri's production, which is fully digital, makes a strong case for news content created for the world wide web. "It's been five years since we started. We began with surveys with children from schools: Do they read newspapers? How many times, if at all, do they visit news sites? Those numbers were not very high," he said. "When we asked them the main media they consume via platforms, it was

obvious that it was YouTube, not necessarily linear TV. Children did not find social media as dubious as we adults believe it is. They were more trusting of it. And when I say 'kids', I mean those aged from 1 to 7. The teenagers had a little more media literacy so this was something the research we did also took into account. How to inform them while still keeping them within the safe confines of the internet."

Which would Kenyans prefer? Data from the latest Reuters Institute Digital News Report suggests adult Kenyans are among the heaviest users of TikTok and social media platforms for news.[2] Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and so on, have minimum age requirements (usually 13+) due to COPPA (Children's Online Privacy Protection Act) in the U.S. and similar regulations in other regions. However, in practice, under-13s do access these platforms – often with parental permission, via older siblings' accounts, or simply bypassing age gates. More on this to follow.

Edutainment as a digital vehicle

We cannot discuss digital media for children without mentioning Ms. Rachel. Her signature blue overalls, pink shirt and infectiously warm and chirpy intonation are synonymous with educational content for babies and toddlers.

Rachel Accurso's YouTube show, with a staggering 14 million subscribers at the time of writing, was inspired by her personal journey with her son's delayed speech development. A lack of online resources to help guide him pushed her to create content herself.

Ms. Rachel's brand mostly focused on bright and cheery edutainment. It was not exactly filled with news information. Until recently.

In 2024, Ms. Rachel propelled herself into the space of news by educating children about the wars in Sudan, Gaza, Ukraine, and other areas.

[2] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2024) Kenya – Digital News Report 2024. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/kenya (Accessed: 4 August 2025).

“I couldn’t look away from the scale and gravity of suffering I was seeing every day,” she told *The Independent* in an interview.[3] “I wouldn't be true to myself if I didn’t use that platform to speak out for every child, everywhere.”

Speaking about the war in Gaza is not the only news event Ms. Rachel has covered. She has also spoken about funding for early child development programmes, postpartum depression, and other topics one might find in a news outlet. However, she still uses entertainment as her vehicle of dissemination.

Young Nation in Kenya

Thomas Rajula is the editor of Young Nation, a pullout section of Nation Media Group’s newspaper *The Daily Nation* in Kenya.

“We have a page inside the newspaper that has a story time which has a moral or ethical lesson behind it,” he said. “We include interviews that are just for children who are excelling in different fields. It could be chess, sports, writing, showbiz… We strive for it to be children uplifting other children.”

Rajula said *Young Nation* was crafted as a way for children to feel included in the daily news ritual. “Children were and are being left out; there wasn’t any space where they could find information that was about them. *Young Nation* started so it could stimulate their imaginations. It was just to make them happy. But then it grew into showing them what they can do, what’s happening in their world, showing them what’s happening with their peers, in a light and fun way.”

Gaming for news

Rajula has also experimented with gaming as a vehicle for children’s news. These would be advertised in Daily Nation, naming a date and venue.

“We would choose a huge space and invite parents and children to come in and play different educational games on more than 40 screens,” said Rajula. “There would be sessions for interaction and prizes would be won and they would learn how to use the information they had learned to improve themselves.

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[3] The Independent. (2025) Ms Rachel: Beloved YouTube teacher on why she spoke out about Gaza’s children. 28 January. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/ms-rachel-interview-youtube-gaza-children-b2690048.html (Accessed: 4 August 2025).

“Gaming is actually an interesting way of teaching children coordination. You know, when we were growing up as children, parents were telling us that it’s just a waste of time. But then, over time, we’ve come to realise that with the right setting and just the correct amount of time spent, gaming can actually help a lot in the development of brain function.”

While the events were not financially sustainable, the idea remains an interesting one: combining children’s interest with in–person community building. Formats that work for children are formats that meet them where they are – in the medium, tone, and interactivity they value most.

Barriers to children's news

As much as I hate to sow doubt, another school of thought must be given space here: according to some scholars, news for children is a radical and premature idea.

In a 2017 article in the Journal of Children and Media, *Children and news: Opinions of children's news program creators in Israel*, Michal Alon-Tirosh found that, "Exposing children to television news is considered problematic primarily because the content is perceived as threatening and unsuitable for children. Accordingly, parents and professionals often suggest that children should not be exposed to news." [4]

Citing the work of Cohen (1998), Vandebosch, Dhoest, & Van den Bulck (2009), and Walma van der Molen (2004), she wrote: "Prominent problematic factors include, the swift coverage of issues, the use of terms and metaphors that are largely unfamiliar to children, and the use of anxiety-inducing images, such as physical distortions and physical injuries."

The "swift coverage" stood out to me. General news is designed for adults on the move – quick updates, little commitment. Children, by contrast, need time to process. And news that gives them that takes time to produce too.

The psychological impact of news

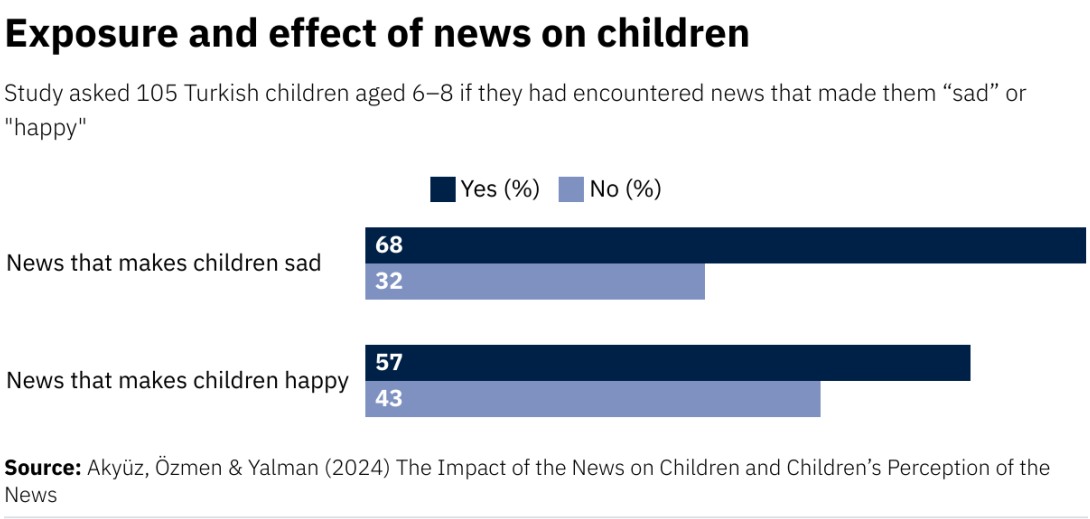
It's no surprise that the psychological impact of children's news is a key concern for Tamar and others I spoke to. After all, news avoidance is at a record high globally – 40% of people now say they sometimes or often avoid news, according to the 2025 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, up from 29% in 2017. If adults are disengaging because news feels relentless, gloomy, or overwhelming, one can only begin to fathom the impact on children.

Journal articles already cited show that children will inevitably come into contact with news, whether it is served to them intentionally or not. So what is the aftermath? How does it land, what impressions does it leave?

[4] Alon-Tirosh, M (2017), Children and news: opinions of children's news program creators in Israel, 132-146

Studies suggest that exposure to negative news – news coverage about negative events such as crime, riots, violence, fires, accidents, and disasters – can lead to both short-term and long-term negative emotional responses in children.[5]

The previously mentioned 2024 poll by Akyüz et al. asked children if the news they had encountered incidentally made them "sad" or "happy".



Among news that made them "sad" (which 68% had encountered): natural disasters, war, terrorism, theft, diseases, accident news, and death incidents. Among news that made them "happy" (which 57% had encountered): treating sickly animals, meeting their food needs, weather events, the reduction of the COVID-19 pandemic, football, cars, school holidays and news containing funny elements.

If children are going to encounter news anyway, it makes sense that they encounter news made intentionally for them – news that is prepared to equip them, and deal with the resulting emotions. That is not to suggest that we try to push them beyond their years through the glorification of traumatic news.

In a 2017 study, *Children's Responses to Negative News*, Dutch media and communication scholar Mariska Kleemans and colleagues at Radboud University

[5] Kleemans, M. De Leeuw, R. Gerritsen, J. Buijzen, M. (2017) Children's Responses to Negative News: The Effects of Constructive Reporting in Newspaper Stories for Children: Effects of Constructive News on Children, 781-802

tested how children respond to constructive reporting.[6] A survey of Dutch children aged 8-13, found that constructive news reduced negative emotions, increased understanding, and encouraged engagement with societal issues.

Other key findings suggested:

- Serving children as a target group for news can be an important step in stimulating their news consumption
- This encourages them to be informed members of society both now and in future.
- Although children indicate that they like to follow news because they see themselves through it, they criticise the media for being too sad and scary.

Is it possible to track our impact over time? Denmark's weekly children's newspaper *Børneavisen* has a direct line to its readers thanks to their dedicated app for children. Readers can send questions, tips or artwork to the editors, giving staff insight into their worries and curiosities – a design built explicitly to monitor and respond to audience needs. McMane called it a "miraculous direct link".

Vulnerable child or empowered child?

Two of the most respected voices in children's media research internationally are Patti Valkenburg and Jessica Piotrowski. In continuing the debate on news for children, they propose two dominant paradigms in their comprehensive work *Plugged In: How Media Attract and Affect Youth*:[7]

- The "vulnerable child paradigm" argues that children should be protected from potential negative emotional and behavioural effects of media, such as fear or antisocial behaviour.
- The "empowered child paradigm" emphasises children's need for autonomy and their ability to cope with life's stresses.

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[6] Kleemans, M. De Leeuw, R. Gerritsen, J. Buijzen, M. (2017) Children's Responses to Negative News: The Effects of Constructive Reporting in Newspaper Stories for Children: Effects of Constructive News on Children, 781-802

[7] Valkenburg, P.M. and Piotrowski, J.T., 2017. Plugged in: How media attract and affect youth. New Haven: Yale University Press.

A promising bridge from one paradigm to the next is constructive journalism. This is an approach that delivers reality but pairs it with solutions, context, and hope.

As discussed above, Kleemans' Dutch study of 8- to 13-year-olds found that constructive news reduced negative emotions, increased understanding, and encouraged engagement with societal issues.

Constructive reporting can act as a catalyst for civic participation, they said, countering negative news cycles. It does this by:

1) Using upward spirals of positive emotions to counter downward spirals of negativity. Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory suggests that both individuals and societies benefit from positive emotions.
2) Providing solution-based information – what psychology literature calls "coherent positive resolution" – which encourages audiences, including children, to stay engaged.

This balancing act is something that Tamar agrees with. "There must be a balance between intense news reports and lighter reports. Otherwise, children will also watch the news less, because it becomes too heavy for them. Involving children in the news can also help. You can think of interviews with children in an area where something bad has happened or asking children their views on things that are happening in the world," she said.

Findings from Kleemans et al. suggest children themselves have a combined view: they wish to be protected from the adverse aspects of negative news, but they simultaneously want to be taken seriously as a target group and, thus, be informed about core societal issues – including negative ones, just in a positive way.

Online risks

Any discussion of children's news needs to grapple with the risks of the online playground – the modern-day architecture of information.

Research offers reasons to celebrate children's agency, motivation and literacy in navigating online spaces. In 2009, Sonia Livingstone, one of the leading scholars on children and media at the London School of Economics, and senior researcher Leslie Haddon, brought together results from 70 researchers across 21 European countries

and found that children's access to the online world benefits them in dimensions such as education, civic participation, creativity, and social connection.[8]

But as use increases, so does risk. This points to the need for careful guidance – both online, through the design of websites, platforms and services, and offline, through the role of schools, families and communities.

This theory was made relatable through fiction this past spring when Netflix drama series, *Adolescence*, ignited many conversations. The show explores the impact of the internet on young minds and the influencers who dominate their online worlds. Shot in an unbroken take, with melancholic lighting and everyday-looking actors, it immerses viewers in the darker side of the web and how nobody is immune to its influence.

While its main focus is on misogynistic influencers exploiting the anxieties of young men, the drama also highlights a broader truth – the search for identity and the need to feel valued online. Children are no exception.

On the flipside, Livingstone and Haddon also found that the internet can act as a precursor to valuable growth and knowledge. Opportunities include education, digital literacy, participation in civic life, creativity and self-expression.

Over-policing may limit those opportunities, but doing nothing is not an option. Until an individual is an adult, there ought to be a collective societal effort to ensure safe access, whether at home, school, in playgroups, and so on. This requires digital literacy – not just the child's part, but their parents and guardians too.

"I know we say this with every generation, but we are living in a time when children are really absorbing so much information," said Thomas Rajula. "Especially with phones being at their hands and even in rural areas. It's different from a child who grew up as a millennial."

[8] Haddon, L. Livingstone, S. M. (2009) Kids online: opportunities and risks for children

Case study: applying it all to climate news for Kenyan children

Why does climate news for Kenyan children matter?

Climate change is not a distant or abstract concept for Kenyan children; it is part of their lived experience. From prolonged droughts in northern Kenya to flooding along the coast, they are already seeing its impacts in daily life.

In the next decade, climate will intersect with nearly every issue that shapes their future: food security, health, education, migration, and even job opportunities. Yet the news coverage they encounter often feels either alarmist ("the planet is burning") or detached (international summits far removed from local realities).

Kenyan Gen Alpha need more than facts about melting ice caps; they need relevant, contextualised, solutions-focused coverage that connects global developments (like COP decisions or climate finance agreements) to their everyday environment. And they need it delivered in ways that respect their capacity to engage without overwhelming them.

What formats might work?

Learning from models in Finland, France, the UK, and Kenya, effective climate news for children in Kenya will need to balance tone, relevance, and delivery. The formats can be grouped into three broad approaches:

1. Local storytelling

- Peer role models: Stories of Kenyan children leading mangrove restoration, urban gardening, or water conservation initiatives.
- Local solutions pages: Dedicated climate sections in *Young Nation* or similar pull-outs, featuring tips, success stories, and child-friendly explainers.

2. Digital explainer formats

- Short videos & Q&A: Modelled on Yle Mix, climate myth-busting, explainers with local scientists, or "ask an expert" segments.
- Edutainment: Climate stories embedded in familiar, trusted styles (e.g. Ms Rachel's format, but with environmental topics).

3. Interactive experiences

- School-based clubs & projects: Climate clubs that combine reporting with action (tree planting, waste audits, clean-up campaigns).
- Climate fairs: Building on *Daily Nation*'s gaming event model, host in-person community events that mix interactive learning stations with games, prizes, and peer sharing.
- Gamified apps: Mobile or school-based games that reward learning and participation (tracking carbon savings, identifying local biodiversity, etc.).

All content should use hopeful framing by pairing challenges with tangible examples of agency. And blend local and global: tie the Paris Agreement, SDGs, or COP outcomes directly to Kenyan contexts. For example, what global climate finance means for local school solar projects or clean water access.

What are the barriers to doing this well?

Kenya's climate story for children faces many of the same challenges that emerged throughout this project — but with some additional complexities unique to the topic and the context.

1. Socioeconomic divides and access gaps

A child in rural Turkana will encounter climate change differently from a child in Nairobi or Mombasa – possibly in a different language, on different platforms. Urban children may access climate news through smartphones, YouTube, or TikTok; rural children may rely on radio, school discussions, or community events.

This mirrors the format lessons from *Mon Quotidien* (print loyalty), Yle Mix (digital video) and *Young Nation* (print embedded in mainstream papers). A hybrid model – multiple formats, flexible language – is advisable.

2. Perceived complexity of climate science

Climate change science and policy can feel "too technical" for younger audiences. The danger is twofold: oversimplifying risks misinforming and patronising, but overwhelming detail risks alienating them entirely. This balance is already evident in the Finnish examples: simplicity without condescension, complexity without jargon.

3. Risk of eco-anxiety

As McMane and de Vos-van der Hoeven emphasise, tone matters. Relentless doom can paralyse rather than empower. Successful models, from *Lasten Uutiset* to Yle Mix, keep a "glimmer of hope" at the centre.

McMane also warns of pitfalls in the space: "I've seen a lot of greenwashing around this topic with 'opportunities' for children and youth accomplishing much of anything except a good PR picture for the funder." The challenge is to give children real agency without tokenism, avoiding both empty gestures and despair.

4. Resource constraints in newsrooms

Producing quality children's climate news, especially in multiple formats and languages, requires sustained investment. Few Kenyan newsrooms are resourced to take this on without partnerships – whether through corporate or state sponsorship, or collaboration with NGOs, climate organisations, or government education programmes.

5. Digital access and safety

While online safety concerns should not be dismissed, there are platforms with strong child-protection policies in place, such as YouTube Kids. These offer controlled environments with curated, age-appropriate content – providing a potential home for children's news without breaching platform age restrictions.

Inspiration can also be taken from models like *Børneavisen*'s app in Denmark, which offers a direct and safe line to young readers. The app not only delivers news in an age-appropriate format but also allows children to send questions, tips, and artwork directly to the newsroom, creating a safe two-way dialogue.

6. Cultural attitudes

Scepticism persists about whether children "should" consume hard news at all. Climate change is often seen as too frightening or abstract. Yet, as research in Turkey and the Netherlands shows, children are already encountering – and being emotionally affected by – climate events. The question isn't whether to inform them, but how.

Wolfgang Blau, co-founder of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network and an expert in climate reporting, put it succinctly during a seminar at the Reuters

Institute: “When people were asked about what they want to see more of the number one response was, ‘tell me what I can do about it’.” That insight applies as much to children as to adults: climate news that offers agency can transform fear into engagement.

Kenya offers its own example: Ellyanne Wanjiku’s story illustrates what’s possible when climate news is accessible to children.

Comparative analysis: climate news for Kenyan children

Aspect	Poor practice (Githeri Media approach)	Better practice (constructive children’s news)
Headline	World leaders fail again: Climate talks collapse amid bitter divisions	Global leaders meet to tackle climate challenges – here’s what it means for our planet
Tone	Doom-heavy, hopeless, focused only on failure	Balanced, realistic, includes progress, solutions, and ways children can relate or act
Framing	Focus on political infighting, technical jargon, and blame	Explain key decisions in age-appropriate language, using analogies (e.g., teamwork, shared gardens)
Content depth	Dense policy terms (net zero, mitigation pathways) with no explanation	Simple definitions, visuals, or metaphors to explain terms (e.g., “net zero is like balancing a seesaw”)
Child connection	Children cast only as victims of future disasters	Highlight child activists, school projects, or youth-led climate innovations
Emotional impact	Fear, helplessness, disengagement	Hope, agency, empowerment – while being honest about challenges
Visuals/formats	Stock images of smoke stacks, floods, and polar bears	Infographics, animations, interactive maps, stories of young people making a difference
Call to action	None (children left feeling powerless)	Tangible actions: community clean-ups, tree planting, talking to parents, science projects
Follow-up	Story disappears until next climate crisis	Ongoing coverage: small updates, child Q&As, classroom resources, seasonal check-ins

Conclusion

To truly to pierce the veil, children's concerns must stop being treated in newsrooms with a texture of inferiority.

At the beginning of this project, I shared some of the personal inspiration behind this effort: my own experience of superhero journalism and the feeling it evoked in my youth. After being guided by the data on what children need in present day, I can say with confidence that this model no longer serves young audiences.

This may be the hardest lesson for mainstream media to absorb if they are to succeed in planting their roots in the next generation. Success will require setting aside pre-conceived notions and exercising the humility needed to allow children to guide us in the news space.

If Gen Z has taught us anything, it is that young people would sooner create their own systems than submit to one that does not serve them. The media is no exception.

If my tone sounds admiring, it's because it is: admiring, and even celebratory. Their interruption of the norm may be the catalyst mainstream media needs to ignite its creativity and adaptability.

As we have learnt from those creating and researching news for children, children's needs run deeper than feeling fancy while carrying a newspaper tailor made for them. They face important, grown-up challenges – climate change among them – that deserve deliberate and constructive coverage.

On the question of format, I believe the answer must mirror the curious and explorative nature of children. Whether highlighting their efforts through edutainment as Rajula's *Young Nation* does, or delivering information through a tailormade product like Froman's *Lasten Uutiset*, or perhaps through an in-person gaming simulation experience, the possibilities are endless. But it must be done right. Children's impressionable nature means we must inform them without traumatising them with relentless negativity.

News reflects the full coin of human experience – both the positive and the negative. But as this project has shown, hope goes a long way in delivering reality with care to these rising generations.

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If you have made it this far, thank you. You have journeyed with me through an outpouring of words – with some silly puns and all – to grasp an idea that still needs tidying at its seams but is well on its way to representing the news needs of children.

There is a tale as old as time you will likely hear from most journalists: that they chose this career path because, at some point, they came into contact with news and decided it was important.

For me this happened because of my mother and father, who impressed upon me the belief that I was important to educate, and worthy to discuss and debate matters of national importance with. (I can neither confirm nor deny who won these debates.)

And so, my main acknowledgment is dedicated to them. The newspapers they left on the dining table to be read, our shared time in front of the 7pm and 9pm news bulletins, spoiling me silly with the Saturday morning book store hauls, and lots of love and dedication.

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May we all strive to be that impactful – purposefully and inadvertently.

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