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2014: What our kids think



By
Danny Smith



I grew up scared. This isn't a 'woe-is-me' tale, I was a weird little kid born during the tail end of the Cold War and somehow, possibly through harrowing TV shows like *Where The Wind Blows* and *Z for Zachariah*, I absorbed the horrors of the nuclear bomb. I remember clearly looking at maps trying to work out the blast radius from the centre of the city to my house and my school. Would I be vaporized in the first detonation? Have my clothes melted to my body with thermal radiation? Or would I be forced to fight severely-mutated former friends for fetid water? Actually, I knew the last one wasn't true - I knew I would kill myself before then. I was eight. As I said, I was a weird little kid.

But I'm not sure which is worse: gleaning what information I can by cultural osmosis, with all the myth and hearsay that involves, or having access to truly terrifying, peer reviewed, Wikipedia articles. Today we have unparalleled access to information, streams and screens spitting it right in our faces. So much, it could be argued, that it's actually harder to filter the signal from the noise: leaving us information rich but data poor.

This past year has been tough for anyone who follows the news, the summer soundtrack was a percussive rhythm of images and stories of schools and hospitals being shelled into rubble in Gaza. While pop culture seems obsessed with zombie fiction and other pandemic diseasecore a genuine outbreak of an infectious disease has killed thousands of people. A whole aeroplane went missing. Read that last sentence again. that's the year we've had.

My school contacts let me down but I was able to visit a scout troop in south Birmingham and ask them some questions. Scout ages are from 10 and a half to fourteen, with Explorers — a little older — there as well. The names have been changed, and picked by them. They're disappointingly mundane considering on the same night they came up with team names for their games such as "Currybomb" "Epic Ninja Friends" and "Just Bob".

The one subject they all mentioned straight away was the Ebola outbreak. Bob was able to tell me "the earliest ever Ebola virus that spread was in nineteen seventy four, 200 people got infected and a hundred people died, and in 2014 10,000 have been infected and five thousand have died. And they're making a prediction that by the end of November 50,000 will have died from Ebola." a little fact checking later and it seems to check out, except for the '50,000' estimate at the end. Digging in to see if I could find where he got that figure and I found the gloomiest of World Health Organisation predictions some months ago, taking into account unreported cases, put the figure at 1.5 million cases worldwide at the end of January, at a survival rate of 71 per cent that puts the death toll at 1,065,000. Which would fit the 50,000 by end of November figure. The WHO have since amended the figure to less than a million.

When I asked how Bob how he knew so much about the Ebola outbreak he told me his friend did a speech about it but with the casual shrug as if this sort of stuff was common knowledge. Kevin put the estimate of total deaths so far

much higher at two million “maybe a little bit more” added Charles with a straight face.

Despite these huge figures there didn't seem to be any concern about the disease. Although he was sure that Ebola would make it to England Bob wasn't worried “I know the NHS are prepared enough to take care of any situation”, Rose adding “I'd be worried if a lot of people got it in England, but at the moment it's quite far away.”

The second most common thing mentioned is ISIS, Bob's friend, although I'm unsure if it was the same friend who did the speech on Ebola, told had told Bob that “it's this terrorist group and they're going around parts of the world, and I can't remember where it started from, but for no apparent reason, they're going around parts of the world beheading people.” Kevin, one of the younger kids I interviewed, said “They're not very nice lets put it like that. They kill people, and they take people hostage. And there was a man a week back that got killed, got his head chopped off.”

Dave is a couple of years older than the others, he seemed to have a bit of a clearer picture, he speaks precisely and has great posture for an adult, let alone a teenager. He told me that ISIS stands for “Islamic state for Iraq and Syria,” and their aims were, “to bring down western civilisation and install Islamic rule throughout the world basically, but they're starting with the Middles East”. Dave was also able to describe the situation in Crimea with adult clarity.

I asked if anyone had seen the videos of the beheadings, and everybody was vehemently against watching them. I'm not entirely sure as a teenager I would have the same restraint. When I asked why Charles commented with just one word "inappropriate". His friend Kevin did warm to the idea when pushed "I'd watch it to see what it's like, and see if you pick up on what they're like, so when you're over there you can pick up on their mannerisms, see if they're acting strangely," he assures me, "but I wouldn't share it or put it on Facebook or anything."

But were they scared? Bob felt safe because of geography, "We're on an island and that could be a good thing and it could be a good thing because if they get over here there's no where to really run to but it's really hard for them to get over here is by boat by plane or something like that. So its quite hard to get over here without being noticed". Proximity seems to a factor too, Jamie was generally quiet but he seemed confident, "If they get too big and they start threatening everywhere, and then I'll start to be worried but at the moment they're concentrated in the Middle East there isn't so much to worry about." Rose added that she wasn't that aware of the situation "I've been told other news stories around it, but I havent heard as much about this, like when they drove the plane into the twin towers, that one worried me when I heard about it, but I'm not as worried now - I don't really know why." A terrible thought occurs to me, I how ask her how old she was when 9/11 happened: "I wasn't born" she says. "I was two," says Dave, which is somehow worse.

The rest of the news that interested them seemed to be what was happening right now. A couple of them mentioned the by-election Bob describing it as “[to] see what’ll happen in the real election in six months”. Dave was looking forward to the election next year, “because if you look at the opinion polls the two major parties are dropping considerably compared to new forces like UKIP coming through, and Lib Dems are non-existent anymore. So it will change the government set-up next year quite a lot.” He did admit that UKIP finding power was “worrying” because “if you look at what they’re doing in Europe, like joining that Polish guy that is clearly off in his views about women and stuff”. When asked about the other big vote this year, the Scottish independence referendum, most expressed a want to be part of a United Kingdom. So I asked if Scotland had made the right decision, Bob summed it up best: “I think they’re allowed to do what they like”.

The news of celebrity deaths this year has hit me quite hard, both Robin Williams and Rick Mayall were childhood heroes. No one bought them up, so I prompted and got back various answers, surprisingly Joan Rivers, “that guy from *Jurassic Park*” Richard Attenborough, “the game maker from *Hunger Games*” Philip Seymour Hoffman, Craig Charles’ brother, and of course Robin Williams known mostly to them from *Flubber* and *Jumanji*. Kevin said of it, “it was a shame he died because he was a good actor and he had a sad life apparently”.

Of course some of them have a personal connection to a news story, when I asked about anything worrying them, like bird flu Rose said “I have been,

because I have three pet chickens in my garden. I don't think I'm that worried, we check them loads and the only case in England was ducks, in Yorkshire I think it was. I haven't heard of chickens near me, if it was in chickens near me then I'd definitely be worried."

And of course Bob had heard about a girl, "I can't remember what her name was, but she was in this bad country, and there were people going around going 'errr you don't need to go to school or do any of this' and she said 'I want to go to school' and they laughed at her and shot her in the head." I ask if he means Malala Yousafzai, winner of the Nobel Prize, Bob, who has a yet another friend at Edgbaston High School, seems unimpressed, "she goes to EHS, and my friend goes to EHS and says she's a bit unusual [...] ever since her surgery, since she got shot."

One of my big surprises was how they consumed the news in an age of digital screens and media streams almost none of them used the internet. Charles conceded that his brother would retweet the BBC news account into his timeline but that was it. Almost all of them said more traditional news outlets, most said the radio, nearly all of them also said the television, Kevin told me he read the headlines of the papers as he walked past them in the mornings, and a few more talked about *First News*, which is a weekly newspaper for kids. Of course this I don't think this is representative of how the next generation will consume news in the future, this is probably more an indication of their complete lack of will to seek out news. It seems the news that they mostly got was from second-hand

news shrapnel from their parent's media habits. Although the popularity of *First News* is interesting, with a readership of over a million as of a survey in 2011.

I remember reading once that the most successful people in the world don't read the news: so the negativity won't affect their life. And I can empathise with this, 2014 has been harder year than most in recent memory and how have I really benefitted? It was telling that most of the news stories the kids remembered were from recently. None — even with prompting — remembered Gaza, weren't aware of young black men being gunned down in America, and they were only vaguely aware of the pedophile scandals that the news currently obsessed with. I said that it had perhaps it had been a bad year, Rose corrected me: "For *me* it hasn't been a bad year, but the news stories, the news has been mostly bad. But generally it hasn't *been* bad." which shows a hell of a lot more perspective than I have. Despite the news this has been one of the best years of my life in recent memory, and it took kids to show me.

All of them felt safe, and I asked why. Kevin answered beautifully "because it seems quite a long way away". And I'm happy for our children to feel safe and distant from the abstract harm of the news, because not all of them can or do from the real harm of their lives.

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About the writer

“My wings are like a shield of bourbon. Writer, drunk, lover, not always in that order.”
Danny’s work has appeared in *Vice*, *Fused* and *Area* magazines. He typically writes about culture, pop and otherwise, and his own experiences travelling through subcultures. He’s worked behind the bar and on the doors of the roughest pubs in Birmingham, sold encyclopaedias in the Australian outback, and taught gang kids from the ghettos of New Jersey how to shoot a bow and arrow. He most recently worked as a teaching assistant in a pupil referral unit, but gave it up to explore India and spend more time writing.

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