



Real News

In a world beset by fake news, how do we help young people understand what's really going on? A dedicated magazine dealing in the real thing is helping children make sense of their world



LIBBY NORMAN

When *The Week Junior* launched in November 2015, it was in the enviable position of having already gained over 3,000 subscribers, rare for any new magazine, more so for a title aimed at children. It helped that this was a known quantity, as little sister to the respected adult news digest *The Week*, but pre-launch it wasn't always an easy sell to the market. Some people said the target readership of young people aged eight to 14 would not be interested in a paper magazine in a digital age, or that children weren't interested in news. Neither prediction, as it turned out, was close to the mark.

For the title's editor Anna Bassi – with more than 20 years' experience in creating magazines for young people – it

is refreshing to be leading a children's magazine with plenty of content and not a plastic giveaway in sight. Feedback from parents has been positive. They like the fact that it is a print product – especially as there is ongoing concern about the amount of time children spend in front of screens.

Anecdotally, it has helped fuel dinner-table discussions about the 'big stuff', even helping out parents who haven't stayed abreast of every geopolitical development themselves, so appreciate a solid news source laying the groundwork that can inspire informed debate. Anna Bassi recalls the note from one parent that said: 'I had hoped I could get my children to bed; instead they are asking me about North Korea. Thanks *The Week Junior*'.

Presenting news and information for this audience does bring huge content and design challenges. For one thing,

there's the scope of the readership – the differences in reading skills and comprehension between age eight and age 14 may be vast. In fact, it's this breadth that sets the style and tone of the title. "It's never about dumbing anything down," says Bassi. "We've always seen our role as to help children make sense of the world. The design of the pages is integral to that, as are the words, and we describe stories really concisely so things are crystal clear."

"Every word has to be understandable – and where it's an unfamiliar word or concept we'll always explain it – but within every spread of the magazine we combine longer stories with shorter pieces. Where a story is longer, we'll highlight key information to present takeaway facts and encourage children to dive in and pick up some information, then maybe read on."



“BITE-SIZED INFO,
OR ‘BISCUITS’,
ARE PLAYGROUND
CURRENCY”



Small pieces of information are currency in a news-hungry playground. “We call them ‘biscuits’,” says Bassi. These bite-sized chunks offer the kind of fascinating facts that appeal to young minds and can be told to friends or parents. Layout of *The Week Junior* remains critical and, says Bassi, involves “tons of pictures” to enliven every story. This can be a challenge when you are working on an area such as politics or government. Let’s face it, there is a plethora of what Bassi describes as: “men in suits looking grumpy” for any story involving these subjects, so it’s important to find variety among the images – also, when you can, tapping into positive and different images, especially if they also reinforce inclusivity and equality.

It’s worth noting that the magazine template was checked carefully against designing for dyslexia guidelines to ensure accessibility to the widest cross-section of young people. Bassi says that feedback from teachers indicates that this has been a real positive – even tempting in half-hearted and reluctant readers.

It does remain a constant challenge to present stories simply and briefly – as anyone can testify who has tried to explain American politics or, come to that, British politics – to a young person. Accuracy on salient facts and background is crucial and the team includes deputy editor Felicity Capon, formerly writer on titles such as *Newsweek*, *The Telegraph* and *The Day*. Balance is also critical, so that grim news stories are mixed in with entertaining features of perennial interest (dinosaurs, historical figures, et al). Stories about inspirational people, including young people, also feature in the magazine.

~
**“SCIENCE STORIES
 ARE EQUALLY
 POPULAR WITH
 BOYS AND GIRLS”**
 ~

So are there any news stories that *The Week Junior* would exclude? In fact, there is very little. For instance the terrorist attack in Manchester was included, even though this was a deeply distressing story by anyone’s lights. Bassi says that in stories like this the focus is on what happened, without too much detail, then information about what was done to help and what will be done now. “With Manchester, there were so many children involved, and at such a high profile event, that we couldn’t not write about it, but our aim is to use facts to empower rather than frighten children. We did explain what ISIS is, but were careful to put risk into proportion.”

On the other hand, Harvey Weinstein did not make the news, although *The Week Junior* did include an Oprah Winfrey quote about female empowerment. Bassi says that there are some stories that raise more questions than they answer. Really hard news always has to be handled with care and sensitivity, and counterbalanced with positives so that children can move on.

So what do children most like reading about? *The Week Junior* gets feedback direct from readers and also using PopJam, the children’s social media/community app. Yes, children do like cuddly animals, but harder science and technology stories consistently come in the top three topics – equally popular among boys and girls. They also want to know the big stories. “Our readers are passionate about all sorts of things and they have voiced strong opinions about both Donald Trump and Brexit,” says Bassi. “They also care deeply about the environment, the NHS and equality.”

The magazine’s readers participate enthusiastically in each issue’s big debate, which explores a contentious topic by presenting both sides of the argument before asking children to vote, via PopJam, for the side they agree with. Topics are broad but can be quite challenging (for example, ‘do we spend too much at Christmas’ and ‘should Russia compete in the Winter Olympics?’). In an era when fake news, unreliable news sources and low election turnouts are, say some, a threat to the very bedrock of our democracy, it is good news that a topical magazine finds a ready audience. Perhaps even more heartening for any parent is that it encourages next gen voters to hone their critical thinking skills and decide on the things that matter to them. **P**