Interesting choice

The (relative) importance of choice and interest in reader engagement

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Why do some individuals become involved and interested in their reading and others do not? How can interest be stimulated in those who currently lack it? This paper looks at the impact of choice, interest and self-awareness on reading behaviour. It highlights the importance of interest in reader engagement in particular, both as an important outcome variable but also as a motivational factor that influences reading behaviour and learning.

This paper outlines the research evidence about the importance of choice and interest in reading activities. The practical aspect of this topic is also included and the strategies that could be used to make choice meaningful and to engage interest most effectively are explored. Some of the interesting findings are highlighted below.

Some interesting findings from this paper

- **Choice** empowers learners and creates personal responsibility to complete an activity
- **Interest** is associated with persistence and achievement
- Different **types of interest** are distinguished; these may have differing impacts on learner outcomes
- Interest and choice are frequently conflated as individuals typically make choices based on their interests, but studies show that interest is a more powerful **predictor** than choice
- Overall, **interest is a powerful influence** that predicts topic knowledge as well as breadth of vocabulary and text comprehension, even when background variables are controlled for

Having a choice
… and how it relates to personal responsibility, achievement and effort

It is widely accepted in educational circles that providing students with choice and control over their reading material enhances their involvement with and enjoyment of reading. More generally, choice has been linked to increased educational outcomes, such as greater levels of intrinsic motivation, greater persistence, better performance, more positive affect and higher satisfaction (e.g. Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Giving individuals control over aspects of their learning is also believed to lead to independent thinking, greater personal responsibility for the activity and feelings of autonomy (Guthrie and Davis, 2003). Indeed, the power of choice is regularly harnessed by teachers who provide choices because they believe it increases effort and learning (Flowerday and Schraw, 2000).

Regarding literacy, researchers have argued that, "including students in deciding which topics to explore, which texts to read, the sequence of texts, and the particular skills to emphasize is empowering" (Guthrie and Davis, 2003: 75). Opportunities for students to select their own reading materials therefore promote positive feelings about reading and improved achievement (Worthy and colleagues, 1998). Pachtman and Wilson (2006)

further detail that book choice not only fostered a sense of ownership, but "translated into students reading and enjoying more books" (p. 683).

For example, a U.S. study (Reynolds and Symons, 2001) investigated the impact of choice on text searches, finding that students who had a choice of books to search were not only faster but also more efficient in their search strategies than students who were not given a choice. This study also reported that students invested more time and effort, and made more correct responses, when they were given a choice of the type of text used in a reading comprehension task compared to students who were not given any choice.

Even struggling readers will show effort and persistence when reading self-selected texts, while other studies have shown that choice can affect attitudes and personal feelings (e.g. Cordova and Lepper, 1996). Finally, and most importantly as we will see later, choice also creates opportunities for individuals to choose materials and texts that engage their interests and values within a meaningful context (Turner and Paris, 1995).

To sum up,
- providing choice can be a motivational strategy,
- choice empowers the individual, instils ownership in the task, and encourages self-determination in literacy learning.

Overall, "allowing students to make choices encourages them to develop an interest in literacy, and it provides students with an opportunity to plan and regulate their literacy learning" (Turner and Paris, 1995: 666). These findings are important to us because our projects, in particular Reading Is Fundamental, advocate allowing children to choose their own books in order to help them develop a love of reading.

A note of caution. Studies have also shown that in situations where the provision of choice is haphazard, choice can have a negative impact on engagement, learning and affect. According to Renck-Jolango (2007) "choice involves making a judgment and, in the absence of information on how to render that decision, a huge range of options can backfire, causing students to disengage and rush through the task just to get it over with" (p. 404).

Flowerday and colleagues (2004) also reported that choice was negatively associated with engagement and attitudes in their experimental studies. The negative effects of providing choice in a non-systematic manner can be compounded by a chooser's lack of knowledge or lack of confidence about making a choice. For example, Schwartz (2000: 86) cautions that if individuals are not taught how to make correct choices and not given the confidence to make informed choices, then "rather than even try, people may disengage, choosing almost arbitrarily to get the process over with"

For choice to be effective and empowering, it therefore needs to informed and meaningful. Strategies to achieve this are outlined in the following section.

Choice strategies
… the basics of making a choice and some pitfalls

Making a choice involves selecting texts that tap into personal interests (more on that later), are of an appropriate level and support the reading progress (Turner and Paris, 1995). Strategies for making choices can therefore be grouped broadly into strategies for choosing a personally interesting book, and strategies for choosing a book at one's reading level. The relevance of these strategies is dependent on pupils' age, reading level and confidence around books.

For beginning readers, for example, familiarity, predictability and size are important in making a choice (Mertinex and Teale, 1988 cited in Pachtman and Wilson, 2006). More experienced readers may seek books that elicit a certain mood or experience; one student said, "I like to choose my own books because sometimes I'm in the mood for a sad book, or a happy book, or a really different book" (Pachtman and Wilson, 2006: 683).

The potential pitfalls: Even those strategies that are developmentally appropriate for a group of pupils may not be particularly meaningful for all pupils in that group. Educators should therefore look critically upon these suggestions, and consider the needs of their pupils when selecting strategies for instruction.

Sibberson and Szymusiak (2003), for example, reported that their pupils used book titles and covers to choose books, but many did not persevere with the choice, suggesting that these strategies are not always effective. One strategy will probably not be universally appropriate or effective; likewise a pupil will feel more empowered to make a choice with three or four well-mastered and personally effective strategies, than a dozen less understood methods for choosing.

Specific choice strategies
… or how to make a meaningful choice

Strategies have been collected from personal experiences of educators, and published articles. The articles reviewed detailed strategies used by adult readers (Ross, 2001), as well as strategies that educators teach to pupils in classroom settings (e.g. Pachtman and Wilson, 2006).

Ross (2001) developed categories to organise choice strategies; these have been paraphrased and used to organise the strategies collected from the above resources. These include clues on the book, elements of the book, cautionary clues and reading experience desired (Note: one additional category designated by Ross is "cost to the reader in getting access to book". This is not explicitly relevant to children who will generally choose from available books in local or classroom libraries and is therefore not included below.) Additional categories have been created for recommendations, and for strategies relating to choosing a text at a readable level.

Clues on the book. This refers to clues that pupils can get without opening up the book. Pupils can be instructed in how to ask themselves questions like, "Does the title sound interesting?" or "Does the cover look like another book I've read and enjoyed?" or "Is this book by an author I've read before, or an author I've heard of?".

    a. Title
    b. Author
    c. Cover illustration
    d. Blurb (i.e. BOB or blurb on back)
    e. Key phrases (i.e. Based on the TV series)
    f. Prizes

Elements of the book. More in-depth qualities of the book may reveal more useful "interest" information. Pupils can be instructed to ask themselves questions like "Do I like mystery books?" or suggest that pupils "dip in" the book, reading a page and evaluating it then for interest.

    g. Genre
    h. "Dip it"

Cautionary clues. Pupils are likely to have an idea of what they don't like, even if they are not yet sure what they do like. Pupils can reflect on their dislikes, such as thrillers, romance novels, or books about space aliens, and then look out for cautionary elements in the book (illustrations, chapter titles) and clues on the book cover (highlighted quotations).

    i. Keywords e.g. thriller
    j. Types of characters

Reading experience desired. Pupils who are more familiar with reading for pleasure may seek to incite a certain mood by reading a book. Pupils can ask themselves, "Is this a book I'm in the mood to read?".

    k. Mood - reflect on genre, length, degree of challenge posed by the text, and reading purpose (informational versus pleasure)

Recommendations. Because many pupils value their teacher's opinions, and almost universally value their peers' opinions, asking teachers and peers for book recommendations can be very meaningful (see Sibberson and Szymusiak, 2003). This information can be requested formally through postings of recommended reads, or informally by allowing pupils to ask their friends for help in choosing a book.

    l. Teacher recommendations
    m. Peer recommendations

Readability. Although having a readable text is not a priority for older, more proficient readers, beginning and struggling readers may need to use strategies that help them identify books that they will be able to read. Beginning readers may be happy to consult a teacher regarding readability but older, struggling readers may feel more comfortable using more discreet methods for selection.

    n. Five-finger method
        i. A student chooses a page to read in the book, and holds up his or her open hand. Each time an unknown word is encountered, the student puts one finger down. If the student encounters five unknown words on a page, and all five fingers are down, then that book is not at an appropriate reading level for that student.
    o. Reading-level boxes

i. Teachers or librarians group books of similar difficulty into baskets or buckets. These groupings should be colour coded or labelled in a manner that does not overtly mark books for less fluent readers (books could be labelled as "challenging" and "very challenging").

Recent research by The Bookseller (2008) showed that most adults are persuaded to buy a book because they like the author, the story or material looks like something that they might enjoy, the cover is engaging and has got a good review, it has interesting first pages or is based on a recommendation by family or friends.

To sum up
- having an opportunity to choose a text to read can result in greater engagement, more perseverance and higher satisfaction,
- because choice has been shown to have a positive link to reading behaviour, it is important that pupils who are given an opportunity to choose are also educated in effective strategies for making a successful choice.

Ross (2001) asserts that when pupils read something they have chosen for themselves, they are more likely to want to "repeat the pleasurable experience by reading something further" (p. 12). One student states, "choice is good because *you* know what you like, and other people don't know what you like" (Pachtman and Wilson, 2006: 681).

A factor that is closely related to choice, and which has been explored considerably more often in research, is interest. It is closely related to choice as individuals tend to choose according to their interests. We will outline the importance of interest in reader engagement in the following sections.

Engaging interests
… the motivational power of something enjoyable

Broadly speaking, interest plays a critical motivational role in human learning and development (Alexander and Murphy, 1998). The term interest refers to an affective state that represents an individual's personal experience of learning. According to Ainley (2006: 391), interest arises from either situational stimuli or well-developed individual interests and is "an integration of feelings, motivation, and cognition".

Interest affects learning through determining "how we select and persist in processing certain types of information in preference to others" (Hidi, 1990: 549).
With regards to interest in reading, research suggests that,

> it is such a powerful influence that, even when background variables such as past achievement and parental income are controlled for, students' self-initiated reading predicts their knowledge of topics as well as their proficiency in vocabulary and text comprehension (Renck-Jalongo, 2007: 400).

Generally, interest has been shown to affect emotional engagement (e.g. Schiefele, 1999), persistence with a task (Vollmeyer and Rheinberg, 2000), and to influence learning, attention, and comprehension (Schiefele, 1999). With regards to reading, children who are interested in the texts comprehend them better than children with

similar reading skills but lower interest. Interest is also related to persistence to read challenging text passages (e.g. Naceur and Schiefele, 2005).

In fact, research suggests that interest has an effect above and beyond the impact of prior knowledge and intelligence. For example, Schiefele (1992: 153) showed that the relationship between interest and text,

> *is relatively independent of age of student, type of text (narrative vs. expository), the modes of the text presentation (written vs. oral), and kind of comprehension test (free and cued recall, 'cloze' procedure, multiple choice and open-ended questions).*

Researchers have also demonstrated that interest affects the type of learning that occurs. Interest appears to have an effect on the quality of learning by increasing the amount of recall and affecting the level of processing (Naceur and Schiefele, 2005). For example, Daniel, Waddill, Finstad and Bourg (2000) reported that when readers engaged with bland narratives they focused on individual text elements, such as extracting proposition-specific content; readers of interesting texts tended to engage in organisational processing of information.

Practically speaking, this means that when asked to recall information relating to bland narratives, subjects recalled mostly text specific information; in contrast, personally interesting narratives allowed readers to incorporate new information into a broader knowledge base from which more general information could be recalled. To best enhance the effects of choice on interest, students should therefore choose from a variety of texts, e.g. classroom texts, library books, and internet sources (Guthrie, Schafer, von Secker and Alban, 2000).

Types of interest
… exploring individual and situational interest

Though interest is of paramount importance to reader engagement as shown above, it should be noted that interest is not just a one-dimensional factor. Instead, several types of interest have been described in the research literature. For example, Kintsch (1980) differentiates between two forms of interest: emotional and cognitive interest. Emotional interest refers to the affective impact of a text, while cognitive interest describes the impact a text has on our thinking.

More recently, two different types of interest have been distinguished: *individual* (also frequently referred to as topic or personal interest) and *situational interest.* Individual interest refers to a type of interest that is stable and content-specific, and appears to be based on personal experiences, previous knowledge (Schiefele, 1999), level of skill, and the emotions associated with the learning topic or experience (Cheng and Darst, 2002; Hidi, 2001). By contrast, situational interest is short-lived and context-dependent and appears to be based on salient informational content and novelty (Schraw and Lehman, 2001; Wade, 1992).

Both types of interest are positively related to short-term and long-term learning. For example, across numerous studies situational interest has been related to better recall and text interpretation (see Naceur and Schiefele, 2005; Schraw and Lehman, 2001) as

well as greater and deeper levels of text processing (e.g. Schraw, 1997). Individual interest has also been found to be linked to deeper levels of learning (Schiefele and Krapp, 1996). Furthermore, individual interest has also been linked to choice, particularly of challenging tasks (e.g. Inoue, 2007).

Very few studies have explored the relative impact of these two types of interest on learning and the findings are confusing. There is some indication that individual interest is a more powerful predictor of learning than situational interest. For example, Randler and Bogner (2007) found that although both individual and situational interest are associated with achievement, individual interest had the strongest impact. In contrast, Flowerday and colleagues (2004) found that situational interest, not individual interest, is associated with reading engagement and positive attitudes.

Whatever their differential effect on learning may be, situational interest may be a more important motivator for low achieving pupils than individual interest. For example, deSousa and Oakhill (1996) showed that situational interest had more impact on reading comprehension in primary pupils struggling with comprehension than for those who were good comprehenders.

Although differences exist between situational and individual interest, they are not dichotomous phenomena; a specific topic may be both situationally and personally interesting. In addition, situational interest can act as a catalyst for the development of more long-term personal interest (Harackiewicz, Durik, Barron, Linnenbrink-Garcia and Tauer, 2008). Guthrie and colleagues (2006) argue that students' situational interest in reading may lead to long-term intrinsic motivation to read; given an instructional context that supports engagement and motivation in reading. It appears, therefore, that in some cases, situational interest will develop over time into individual interest. Unfortunately, very little is known about this process (see Durik and Harackiewicz, 2007; see also Hidi and Renninger, 2006, who advanced a four-phase model of interest development).

Indeed, Hidi and Anderson (1992) convincingly argue that using students' interests as a primary motivation tool could be difficult because of the diverse nature of interests among learners. Young learners may not even have established values, or enough knowledge on which to develop individual interest (Alexander, 2006). For these students, a situationally interesting activity can immediately attract attention, providing students with positive feelings about the activity (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000). In practice, educators often utilise situational interest as a motivator (Schraw et al., 2001).

Factors contributing to readers' interest
… the impact of death and violence

Interest, in its many guises, clearly motivates individuals to read. However, what is an important educational issue is how to increase the amount of reading that students engage in, through interesting text. In his seminal paper, Roger Schank (1979) suggested that certain concepts (e.g. death, violence and sex) can be considered "*absolute interests*" that almost universally stimulate individuals' interest. Further research supports this assertion; adding "*life issues*" to the list of topics that appear to have universal appeal (see Zahoric, 1996). Although some of these topics will not be appropriate for children, young adults, who can be particularly difficult to engage in

reading, may be surprised to find texts that explore these themes, and may be motivated to read by these topics.

It is important to point out at this stage that there are some long-established findings linking gender with interest in reading specific types of text. In conjunction with research conducted at the National Literacy Trust (NLT), we found that boys tended to prefer texts about adventure, sports, science and information, while girls tended to prefer mystery and romance (Clark and Foster, 2005). However, simply making available to boys reading materials that contain male protagonists is not sufficient to elicit interest in boys (e.g. Ainley, Hillman and Hidi, 2002).

Research has also investigated the use of supportive activities to increase reader engagement. Guthrie and colleagues (2006) found that stimulating tasks in reading increased situational interest, which increased longer-term intrinsic motivation and reading comprehension. *Involvement*, such as hands-on activities, is also highly correlated with situational interest (e.g. Guthrie et al., 2006; Mitchell, 1993) and is frequently used by educators to create interest in the classroom (e.g. Zahoric, 1996). However, Zahoric (1996) cautions that hands-on activities cannot be ends in themselves but need to be thought-engaging to result in learning.

Of note is that children report that their interest in book reading is influenced by their teachers, along with their mothers, and other factors such as availability and identity as a reader (Edmunds and Bauserman, 2006). This statement is especially important for educators because it supports researchers' assertions that teachers can have a direct impact on children's interest in reading. Educators should therefore use strategies, or choose texts, that generate situational interest in reading. But they should also teach children effective strategies for choosing personally interesting, and readable texts to support the development of an intrinsic interest in reading.

Interest strategies
… in the classroom

There are numerous ways by which interests can be engaged in the classroom (Bergin, 1999). Factors that influence situational interest, such as modifications in task presentations, curriculum materials, and self-regulation, can be used to elicit interest in reading. In a series of studies, Sansone and colleagues (1992, 2000) showed that individuals can self-regulate in order to make tasks more interesting and subsequently develop interest in activities initially considered uninteresting. Educators may therefore consider teaching pupils strategies for summarising information, or reflecting on comprehension whilst reading.

Research has also shown that the presence of others in the learning environment is a powerful factor that elicits interest. Educators may consider involving pupils in reading partners or reading groups. Although these studies did not deal specifically with interest in reading, they indicated that interest in reading could also be increased by similar methods.

Some of the suggested activities for eliciting interest in reading include creating a greater sense of belonging, enhancing personal identification with the task, skill

modeling, increasing novelty in the classroom through activities and games, and providing relevant background knowledge.

Research also suggests that in order to enact change on children's motivation to read, the experience of reading needs to be explicitly linked with interest through, for example, highlighting the personal relevance of the text, or the relation between the text and the potential reader's background knowledge (see Harackiewicz, et al., 2008; Schraw, Flowerday and Lehman, 2001).

Schraw, Flowerday, and Lehman (2001) reviewed the literature on interest in the classroom, outlining six strategies for increasing interest, which are summarised and discussed below:

1. *Provide pupils with meaningful choices.* Schraw et al. (2001) note that choice may "increase students' interest in a text" (p. 220), and that less skilled students should be supported to make meaningful choices. As this is the crux of this paper, it is unsurprising that it is an important aspect of increasing interest.

2. *Use well-organised texts.* The researchers suggest that coherent and informationally complete texts support interest. Providing pupils with background knowledge about the texts can help to highlight these textual qualities. Practically speaking, this may involve pre-selecting books for a classroom library that have familiar story structures, or organising books in the classroom library that have common themes into identifiable boxes or baskets.

3. *Pre-select "vivid" texts.* Texts that contain, for example "rich imagery" and "suspense" are valuable in eliciting students' interest. This suggestion highlights the importance of educators being familiar with existent books for children and young adults. This may also mean moving beyond notions of what should be read, and moving towards the inclusion of texts in classroom libraries that will capture pupils' attention. This could include books featuring TV tie-ins, books from popular series, joke books and other materials that may be considered "vivid" for pupils.

4. *Use familiar texts.* Pupils, particularly beginning and struggling readers, will look towards texts that are familiar (have been read before) or have familiar themes, authors, etc. Though the idea of using familiar texts seems contrary to stimulating interest, familiar texts will support struggling readers' literacy, while texts that are mostly familiar (e.g. sequels, series, etc.) will provide enough support to catch the attention of most readers.

5. *Encourage active learners.* Schraw et al. (2001) argue that encouraging pupils to create meaning from the text will increase interest. Practically speaking this may involve using strategies such as KWL charts, noting "what I already **K**now, what I **W**ant to know" before choosing and reading a text, and subsequently detailing, "what I have **L**earned."

6. *Highlight the relevance of the task.* Research suggests that when tasks are linked to a greater goal, interest in the task will be greater. With reading, effective strategies may include highlighting the information that could be

acquired from a given non-fiction book, or encouraging pupils to read and then share opinions as a part of a book-club of peers.

Several classroom practices can be used to implement the strategies outlined above. For example, practitioners report on the effectiveness of using mini-lessons for teaching pupils how to use strategies (Pachtman and Wilson, 2001). In this small group setting, an educator can target a group of children who may find, for example, choosing books at their reading level a challenge. An example mini-lesson may include a short introduction on the importance of making an informed book choice, and then teach and model the Five-Finger strategy to a group of struggling readers.

Sibberson and Szymusiak (2003) engaged students in conversations on reading related topics. In a whole group or small group setting, the educator asked students to reflect and share their opinions on specific themes relating to book choice. These topics included:

1. Why do people choose the same author over and over again?
2. Why do people choose certain topics to read about?
3. Why do people read? (i.e. reading for different purposes)
4. Why do people recommend books?

Mini-lessons and focused conversations are valuable forums for educating pupils in how to make a good choice, but to sustain the effects of this training, educators should strive to engage pupils in making good book choices as part of the reading culture of the classroom (Pachtman and Wilson, 2006). Making informed choices should be a part of pupils' everyday practice.

Interaction between choice and interest
… and interest wins!

So far this paper has shown that having a choice and engaging interests are powerful factors in reader engagement and reading behaviour. "One problem with previous research, however, is that it fails to address whether the positive effects of choice are due to choice itself or interest in what one chooses" (Flowerday and colleagues, 2004: 94).

Using an experimental design to control for the effects of choice and interest on learning, attitudes and general reader engagement, Flowerday and colleagues (2004) found that interest, or more specifically situational interest, promotes reading engagement and positive attitudes but choice does not. Therefore, it appears that "it is not choice but situational interest in what one reads that increases engagement" (p. 111). However, the findings from this study need to be validated by further research.

It is therefore important to consider that choosing a "readable" text may not be as important as choosing a text that is personally interesting. A highly motivated pupil may persevere through a challenging text, just as an unmotivated pupil may disengage from a readable, but personally uninteresting text. Pachtman and Wilson (2006) asked students to think about a "good fit" book, reflecting on personal preferences, reading ability, and the "degree of challenge" posed by the text. Sibberson and Szymusiak (2003) talk about the idea of a "just right" book as one that you are in the mood for, will

make you think, and is personally interesting. When making a choice, students learned to read the blurb, reviews, an excerpt and the first page ("dip in"), and to ask themselves after each step, "Does this look like a book I'd like to read?". Although strategies for interest and readability are important, making a "good choice" appears to go beyond selecting an appropriate book.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that choice and interest are highly related and often conflated: pupils are more likely to choose books that look interesting to them. We suggest that pupils should be educated in how to make choices based on interest and readability, and supported to develop an interest in reading in general. These strategies should reinforce a cycle of choice and interest in reading, contributing to the development of an intrinsic motivation to engage in reading.

But to affect reading behaviour, pupils have to go beyond simply choosing a book, and must subsequently choose to read that book, over any other available activity (Ross, 2001). A "good choice" therefore involves pupils choosing a book that they are also motivated to read. This last point is particularly relevant to book-gifting programmes, like Reading Is Fundamental, which work to motivate children to read for pleasure by providing them with an opportunity to choose a book. Because being successful in the task of choosing a book may contribute to a pupil's intrinsic motivation (Morrow, 2001), repeated acts of successful choice may reinforce the cycle of choice and engagement, contributing to more sustainable outcomes for interventions focused on reading for pleasure.

This perhaps is particularly pertinent in light of an Ofsted report (2004) that indicated that few schools engaged the interest of children who, although competent readers, did not read for pleasure. This report also noted that schools rarely built on pupils' own reading interests and the range of reading material pupils do read outside of school. A similar finding was made by a recent NLT survey (Clark, Osborne and Akerman, 2008), which showed that pupils believed that there was a discrepancy between the materials that they themselves read outside of school and the types of materials they felt they are encouraged to read by adults in their school.

Numerous studies of young people's attitudes towards reading have also shown that, in particular, reluctant readers, and boys, say that they cannot find anything of interest to them (e.g. Clark and Foster, 2005). While this may partly be an excuse to rationalise their lack of reading, surveys that we have conducted at the NLT support the assertions made by Ofsted, arguing that the interests of many pupils are not engaged by their families or schools (e.g. Clark, Osborne and Akerman, 2008).

In short, research and educator best practices support the importance of using choice and interest to engage pupils in reading:

- Teachers can elicit interest in reading by using situationally motivating activities, and providing texts that are diverse and appealing.

- Pupils' interest in reading can be supported through strategies that engage their personal interest, as well as through strategies that help them to make choices that can lead to successful reading experiences.
- Educators should therefore strive to make choice and interest practices a part of regular classroom activities, in order to support the development of sustainable interest in reading.

Finally, although we have talked almost exclusively about books in this paper, we would like to stress the importance of making available a wide range of reading materials that are not books, including magazines, newspapers, websites (including blogs) and emails, to stimulate the interest of children and young people.

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