

Children and Publicity

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By Mike Jempson (*Director, The PressWise Trust*)

& David Niven (*Director, Action against Child Exploitation*)

This commentary considers the positive and negative impact of children appearing in documentary-style TV programmes about young people under the age of 16 considered in some sense to be 'at risk'. We have attempted to find common ground between two perspectives that are often felt to be in conflict – that of the journalist and the social worker responsible for child protection.

TV as a mass medium brings with it special consequences - more people may see a regional programme than might read a local paper, or see a networked programme than might read a national paper. However, to some extent the same problems might arise from newspaper and magazine coverage as from TV coverage: a child's identity, relatives, location, behaviour pattern etc. might become widely known, bringing with it a certain notoriety; opinions will form in the eyes of the observer whatever the context in which the 'story' is told; and controversy may develop about courses of action/treatment in which the child becomes 'iconic'.

In themselves stories or documentaries headlined, 'The most difficult child in Britain'; '100 convictions and he's only 14!'; 'Brave girl faces death with a smile'; 'At risk - child in care face hidden abuse' etc. do little to assist in resolving an individual's behaviour patterns and may do little more than alert the public to social, psychological or medical conditions for which treatment is likely to be complex and/or the subject of debate among professionals.

Of course there are occasions when such films have a profound effect upon public consciousness and can be a tremendous force for good. But there is an increasing risk that the 'tabloid' nature of these programmes - where issues are simplified or sensationalised to focus attention and highlight extremes rather than exploring more problematic areas of 'greyness' - can leave false impressions, through faulty or foreshortened analysis.

Increased competition for ratings means that documentaries have to fight for an accessible slot in the schedules; as a result there has been a growing tendency to generate controversy by promoting the stories they have to tell through sensationalism. In other words the marketing of the programmes as well as the construction of the programmes themselves may distort rather than distil the information that is being presented.

In the UK, most documentary strands are now made by independent production companies, who have to 'pitch' for their commission. They come up with an idea, assemble the likely evidence they will use, and seek development funds from a broadcasting company with which to complete their project. This is an aspect of marketing that the public never sees.

At this stage there is still no guarantee that the finished film will be purchased or broadcast. Transmission is not just dependent upon the quality of the final product. Another consideration is the extent to which it lives up to, and demonstrates the validity of, the original 'pitch'. And of course it has to be watched, which means it has to be watchable.

During development researchers will make contact with potential contributors, and collect a great deal of information; while they will listen to the stories they are told, their questions will be geared to the intentions of the programme-maker (rather than the protagonists).

It is during this phase that the protagonists begin to develop their own idea about what the programme is seeking to achieve, and frequently arrive at a rather different interpretation of events than the producer has in mind. Those taking part may never meet or talk to the producer or director until filming starts, and they will rarely know or see what other contributions are being made.

The structure and message of the final product comes in the selection and editing from a mass of material and images, and the dubbing in of a commentary; over this process none of the participants has any control. What they see on the screen, often for the first time, will rarely match the idea they have formed of what film is being made. It comes as a real shock to some, by which time such 'damage' as the film causes will already have been done.

Producers' guidelines drawn up media regulators and broadcasting companies may specify that participants should be made aware of the nature of the product to which they are contributing, and the extent to which they may have (usually very limited) power of veto. It would be inappropriate to allow any one participant to have total editorial control, but even the concerns of acknowledged experts who might be acting as consultants cannot over-ride the editorial decisions of the programme-maker and the commissioning editor.

It is worth rehearsing the conditions under which a film reaches the public (a similar if more intimate system of selection and editing takes place in a newspaper/magazine office) when considering the likely impact upon children who feature in it.

The documentary film is a construct which represents their world more or (most often) less accurately than they perceive it themselves. But to the outside observer (who may or may not know the child) it is their life. And so it can easily become their life - because we know the camera never lies (does it?), and newspapers wouldn't publish outright lies (would they?).

We are not aware of much follow-up research on the medium to long term impact of child appearances, although there is always the danger that once a newspaper has sought (quite reasonably in 'the public interest' in its view) to identify a persistent juvenile offender, the notoriety has the effect of lending a perverse status to the offence and the offender. Teenagers rely heavily upon peer groups for validation, and publicity lends 'authority' to an offender either by engendering fear or stimulating public abhorrence, which can in itself make an offender a 'hero' to his or her peers.

Just as those responsible for the care of young people are jealous of their responsibility, so those who edit newspapers or TV programmes are jealous of theirs. Seeking to negotiate changes and improvements in the way children are represented in and by the media requires care, since journalists and filmmakers are already constrained not only by industry guidelines but also by numerous legal restrictions. Journalists are likely to resent interference from those who can already call upon professional confidentiality and the courts to limit what is known about young people caught up in crime, abuse or familial conflict.

The difficulty is that neither side fully appreciates the constraints, or sometimes the motives of the other. And journalists in all media stand accused of being untrustworthy because of the past actions of colleagues who have abused confidences or acted otherwise unethically. A *rapprochement* is vital, yet the media industries are disparate and there are divisions of opinion among social workers, paediatricians, lawyers and the police.

There would seem to be two ways forward: developing greater understanding 'at the top' and especially among those responsible for training in each of the disciplines; and discussions at a local level to develop trust among those concerned with protecting children (which does include journalists). Out of such dialogue could come clearer guidance (along the lines of those proposed by the UK Association of Photographers) governing the conditions under which children are filmed (and including specific regulations about chaperones), as well a best practice arrangements covering research and presentation of sensitive subject matter.

When a system of management is shrouded in 'secrecy', it is natural that those whose task is to reveal information to the public will want to investigate the way it functions and any allegations they receive of 'abuse of power'. That is part of the system of accountability we all expect in a democracy. Where 'freedom of information' is not guaranteed by statute, a vacuum exists which the investigative reporter quite properly seeks to fill, even at the risk of appearing intrusive.

Greater mutual trust, and recognition of the validity of motives which find different forms of expression (the paediatrician or police officer who prefers secrecy, the journalist who prefers publication), could give rise to more thoughtful use of children's experiences in TV and the print media. It might also make it easier for everyone to admit mistakes - and mistakes are bound to be made. But greater openness also means a willingness to take responsibility for mistakes, and their consequences. It is as justified for the media to highlight the shortcomings of the authorities as it is for the public to challenge the shortcomings of the media.

The only other alternative is to introduce stricter legal restrictions on the use or representation of children. Journalists are not the only people who believe that any restriction is too much in an open society, and that a more liberal interpretation of the law might help to improve public understanding of the issues at stake. If journalists were able to attend family court hearings under conditions that protect the identity of the children (and the families) involved, for instance, some myths and misleading information about abuse and childcare practices might be corrected. Recourse to law is not the most sensible approach when the opacity of legal processes is one of the concerns of journalists keen to protect the interests of children.