

Children and media - a global concern

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Introduction

This brief overview to a vast topic cannot hope to be comprehensive. I have tried to highlight issues and trends and provide some Internet contacts through which the inquisitive explorer will find out much more about both the representation and participation of children and young people in media activities. Consider it a 'taster' – from these ingredients you should be able to construct your own menu, and work out how you can turn famine into feast – so that children and young people are fully catered for in the media of the future.

In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in the role the media plays in the lives of children. I am sure that much of it has been inspired by those who recognise the immense potential of the UN Convention on the Rights of Child, which contains many messages for media practitioners, to become a universal standard against which society's attitude towards children can be judged. It seeks not just to 'include' children rather than treat them as unfranchised apprentices to adult society, but to put them at the heart of the human rights agenda.

My interest in this topic sprang from two quite different circumstances – concern as a parent about the commercialism surrounding the media products enjoyed by my own children in the UK, and the difficulties I encountered as a journalist trying to make a TV documentary about paedophile networks in the west of England. So much of what we wanted to warn parents and children about could not be broadcast, because of legal restrictions and lack of co-operation from the authorities.

The media ethics trust PressWise was able to initiate an investigation into the problems caused when the abuse of children hits the headlines. Our [Child Exploitation and the Media Forum, 1997](#) brought together all the interest groups whose different agendas appeared to be in conflict, even though their shared aim was to protect children - the media, the law, social services, children's rights groups, and survivors of abuse.

From that event has sprung a wide variety of projects, including partnerships with the IFJ and UNICEF. We have been able to develop and deliver training courses for media professionals and NGOs around the world, and contribute to exciting initiatives like IFJ Guidelines on Reporting about Children, The Oslo Challenge <http://www.unicef.org/magic/briefing/oslo.html>, and the creation of a website about Media Activities and Good Ideas by, with and for Children <www.unicef.org/magic>.

Digging for information

Log onto any search engine on the World Wide Web and put in 'Children and media' (in English, of course) and the vast majority of the material you will encounter emanates from the USA (surprise, surprise). Much of it will be about the fears people have that the innocence and imagination of children are being undermined by television, especially by violence, commercialism and material with sexual content. These same fears are expressed in the many sites concerned with protecting children from harmful aspects of the Internet.

Look a little deeper and you will find that there is much interest in ensuring that children know how to analyse and interpret media products, and learn how to make use of communications technology to express themselves. Increasingly media literacy is seen as a crucial element of children's preparation for life. After all, the media has a pervasive influence on children everywhere – even if they do not have direct access to broadcast media, or are unable to

read. Ideas, fashions, music, social trends are all reflected in advertising and public discourse.

When you begin to examine the research that has been done about representation of children in all forms of media you will find startling similarities around the world, mirroring the findings of

- Emily Habwe Nwankwo and Arthur Okwenbo in their 2002 report for the IFJ *How the Kenyan Media cover Children's Rights Issues* <<http://www.ifj.org/pdfs/childkenya2002.pdf>>;
- Saurav Kiran Shrestha's 2002 report for Hatelmalo Sanchar on *Print Media coverage on Children's Issues in Nepal* <http://www.unicef.org/magic/media/documents/Nepal_media_monitoring.pdf>;
- Anura Goonaselara of the Asian Media, Information and Communication Centre in her 1999 study *Children in the News* <<http://www.amic.org.sg/>>; and
- Sarah McCrum and Lotte Hughes in their Save the Children booklet *Interviewing Children* <<http://www.scfuk.org.uk>>/<<http://www.savethechildren.net>>.

There is a great deal of stereotyping – children portrayed as powerless victims of abuse, conflict, crime and poverty; or children seen as charming and entertaining accessories to the adult world. Where children themselves have been asked about their views on media portrayal – anywhere in the world – invariably they object to this stereotyping, and want to know why the media so rarely treats them seriously as intelligent individuals who are quite capable of contributing to debate, for instance.

However, mainstream Western-based commercial media owners DO take them seriously, at least insofar as they are the readers, listeners and viewers of the future – they represent new media markets who must be wooed. At the same time, successful children's TV programmes attract advertisers who benefit from children's fascination with new and exciting products. Their demands can influence adults to spend money...

It is easy to be cynical about motivation when global media companies have such inordinate influence. Nonetheless it is worth noting the words of Paul Robinson, senior Vice-President & Managing Director of Branded TV, Walt Disney International who told the Third World Summit on Media for Children in Thessaloniki, Greece (March 2001), "When you distill it down we are all interested in the same thing: producing media of high quality, appropriate for our children, that teach as well as entertain while, at the same time, preserve local identity. Every child, wherever they are raised, should be part of the local culture and also have a window to the whole world".

Newspapers

The World Association of Newspapers (WAN) <<http://www.wan-press.info/>> is a global organisation representing 18,000 newspapers; 71 national newspaper associations, newspaper executives in 100 countries, 13 news agencies and nine regional and worldwide press groups. It has produced a pack with 30 ideas for attracting new young readers, based on experiments conducted throughout the world. WAN has announced a new five-year programme of Newspapers in Education (NIE) projects, financed with \$1.74 million from the giant Norwegian company Norske Skog, the world's second largest producer of newsprint and third largest producer of magazine paper.

"We have long been convinced of the profound importance of NIE for our societies and our business," says WAN Director General Timothy Balding. "We have been working to spread the concept throughout the world, and particularly to developing nations and those making the difficult transition to democracy."

NIE programmes are designed to make printed publications a natural part of the school day all over the world. The new programme will focus on the Balkans and Asia with the production of training kits for teachers in local languages. The idea is to use publications as a way of improving literacy, general knowledge, analytical skills, and an appreciation the value of freedom of expression, tolerance and democratic values.

Radio

Relatively cheap, easily accessible and portable radio has proved to be the most enduring and effective medium even in the most inhospitable of the social conditions. There are thousands of radio stations, big and small, in Africa, where it remains the most important communication system. Under tough conditions in Somalia, UNICEF has teamed up with youth organisations to develop a radio project which has given young people free access to the airwaves. It is being used not just to entertain and enfranchise young people but to influence behaviour change on social and health issues. (For more information contact: jspryleverton@unicef.org)

Young people have proved adept at harnessing radio technology for their own purposes, seizing access to the airwaves through 'pirate radio' often to make sure that their particular music tastes are catered for. Their creative energies can have a powerful influence on mainstream broadcasters.

Following a PressWise workshop with the Chaskiwawas <www.idl.org.pe> youth radio groups in Peru, local radio stations agreed to make regular airtime available to young programme producers, increasing audiences and preparing the next generation of broadcasters. A similar workshop with the Butterflies Programme of Street and Working Children in New Delhi, India <www.cwa.tnet.co.th/Vol11-2&3/butterflies.htm> helped dispossessed young people to start their own radio project.

One of the trainers, former BBC producer Sarah McNeill, went on to found the World Radio Forum <www.worldradioforum.org/> which is devoted to the promotion of quality broadcasting by and for children. Set up at the Third World Summit on Media for Children in Thessalonika, Greece in March 2001, the WRF is seeking to champion child rights and the status of children and young people within their communities through radio.

It includes projects and private companies from every continent, but there is strong African contingent. The 2002 the Radio Kidocracy Conference, organised by South Africa's Bush Radio Children's Radio Education Workshop (CREW) began to draft an [International Children's & Youth Radio Manifesto](#) in preparation for the 4th World Summit on Media for Children which will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in May 2004.

There has been a massive increase in speech-based community radio around the world, supported by the World Association of Community Broadcasters <http://www.amarc.org/> which has networks and members in all world regions.

Television

Worldwide it is estimated that there are some 1.8 billion TV-viewers under the age of 15 years. Of these, 190 million live in the richest regions, and 1.6 billion the developing world. It is estimated that there are 142 satellite and cable TV channels dedicated to the under-15 population in five continents, of which 88 are in Europe.

Public service broadcasters throughout the world have obligations to provide programming for children that will inform, entertain and educate, although the quality and quantity of some such programming varies enormously.

To champion quality broadcasting for children, and to involve children in the broadcasting process, UNICEF and the International Council of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences established the International Children's Day of Broadcasting. It takes place on the second Sunday of every December, and over ten years has engaged 2,500 TV and radio station in 170 countries over the past decade. <http://www.unicef.org/videoaudio/video_icdb.html>

On 20 June 2003, 200 delegates from 36 countries gathered in Bologna, Italy for the Mediterranean 'AGORA' Summit on 'TV and Minors', organised by Raisat in collaboration with RAI, the European Children's Television Centre and the Bologna City Council. Over 3 days

they debated issues around TV content for children and the latest audiovisual market trends in Europe, the Mediterranean and the world.

In 2002 MTV Networks Asia <<http://www.mtvasia.com/>> teamed up with UNICEF <www.unicef.org> and a leading jeans manufacturer <http://www.levistrauss.com/brands/levi.htm> to run the Speak Your Mind Campaign – designed to encourage children from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, India, Korea, Taiwan, China and Japan to tell the world about ‘the things that are important to them and close to their hearts’ on Youth Day, 1 August.

Some may regard such initiatives with suspicion, but MTVs many chat rooms have proved to be an eye-opener about the issues that do concern young people around the world – and could be sources for features that give voice to the diverse opinions of young people on quite controversial topics. Young people themselves do not regard these opportunities to share their views as patronizing, perhaps because there are so few openings for them to speak and be listened to in more conventional mainstream media.

New media

The new communications technology has enabled many children and young people to become media producers too. In America, Children's Pressline <www.cplmedia.org> encourages young people to take up their pens in the cause of children less materially privileged than themselves.

TakingITGlobal (TIG) <<http://www.takingitglobal.org/home.html?width=1024>> ‘led by youth, empowered by technology’, brings together young people on-line in more than 200 countries to collaborate on projects concerned with global problems and initiatives for change.

Many other exciting *Media Activities and Good Ideas by, with and for Children* (MAGIC) identified by PressWise and Media Action International are showcased on a special website <www.unicef.org/magic> which also contains codes of conduct for working with and writing about children, as well as many useful links, and information about the many formal declarations issued by broadcasters and other media agencies insisting that the best interests of children should take precedence in media production.

The MAGIC website was a direct consequence of The Oslo Challenge issued on the 10th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which called on media owners and practitioners, teachers, carers, politicians and children themselves to find new ways of making mass media a positive influence in the lives of children throughout the world.

The site itself demonstrates that many had already taken up the challenge before it was issued. Two important initiatives are worth noting, one from South America which has been going for some time, and another in Europe which UNICEF has supported since.

ANDI, Brazil

The Children's News Agency ANDI in Brazil < <http://www.andi.org.br/>> was started by journalists concerned about the plight of street children. At first they concentrated on establishing school facilities because they saw education as the way out of poverty, especially under a dictatorship.

Then they began to monitor the media and noticed that the vast majority of coverage about children was negative. They published ‘league tables’ to show which publishers were the worst offenders, and encouraged a more positive approach. Gradually the pattern of coverage changed, with publishers competing to occupy a better position in the league.

They managed to get funding to issue awards to ‘Journalist Friends of Children’ who found that the accolade gave them access to anywhere that children were to be found – including the jails. ANDI has transformed the media scene in Brazil.

Youth Media in Europe

In Central Asia and Eastern Europe a network of youthful media projects has been established, so that young journalists and programme-makers are able to share ideas, information and media products through the Internet. The network is co-ordinated from Hungary by Chris Schuepp with support from UNICEF.

Anyone can join the mailing list if they are willing to share their skills and experiences. Just get in touch with Chris (Tel: +36 (1) 438 1050, Fax: +36 (1) 438 1055, Email: cschuepp@unicef.org, Mailing list: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/youthful-media>)

Many of the previously isolated projects are now showcasing their talents by taking part in competitions and film festivals. There is no doubt the participants will form a new generation of media professionals with a distinctly international perspective.

The MAGIC website is regularly updated with the latest news on event and awards for youth media projects around the world. <http://www.unicef.org/magic/users/calendar.html>

Scepticism

Elsewhere in Europe many mainstream journalists are sceptical about the value of paying so much attention to the needs (and rights) of children.

In the UK, for instance, every week the journalism trade journal Press Gazette <<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/>> carries stories about legal challenges to restriction on reporting of court cases involving young people under the age of 18. Even though the law has recently been changed to take into account the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which acknowledges that young offenders have the right to learn their lessons free from the glare of publicity, it is seen as a restriction of the freedom of the press if the media cannot 'name and shame' persistent offenders.

The National Union of Journalists (UK and Ireland) has only recently adopted the IFJ Guidelines on Reporting Children. There is still a lot of work to be done to persuade journalists in Europe that it is time to rethink their attitude towards coverage of children's lives. Those in less well resourced countries seem to have taken up the challenge of engaging with children's rights with more alacrity.

There are plenty of individual journalists keen to put the interests of children at the centre of their work. For example, an International Club of Journalists for Children's Rights has been formed by Matthew Mac-Kwame of the Ghana Institute of Journalism and Frankie Asare-Donkoh of Choice FM, in Accra, Ghana.

Child exploitation and participation

In countries where sensational and often uncaring coverage of the sexual abuse, commercial and military exploitation of children is still common, concern is growing, not least because of the activities of the IFJ, the International Labour Organisation IPEC initiative <<http://www.ilo.org/>>, and non-governmental agencies such as Defence for Children International <www.defence-for-children.org>.

In India the young people associated with the Butterflies Programme for Street and Working Children <<http://www.cwa.tnet.co.th/Vol11-2&3/butterflies.htm>> not only produce wall-newspapers and radio programmes, but monitor the media coverage of their issues and produce a quarterly digest of cuttings and termed analysis.

Guidance for media professionals

Working with UNICEF, The PressWise Trust has produced a compact handbook for media professionals *The Media and Children's Rights*. It is designed to make journalists question themselves about what types of stories they could write about children and how they can test whether their copy respects children's rights. The handbook has already translated into many

different languages and has been used as part of training course in some 20 countries. There are plans to revise and republish the handbook, but its content is freely available on the PressWise website <www.presswise.org.uk> to any journalists wishing to refresh their thinking about coverage of children.

The IFJ's more recent booklet (*Putting Children in the Right: Guidelines for journalists & media professionals*, Peter McIntyre, 2002) applies the principles to reporting of the sexual abuse of children by tourists.

Story ideas are not hard to come by, but journalists wishing to keep in touch with new developments about campaigns by, with and for children can become part of the Children's Rights Information Network <<http://www.crin.org/>> which can put them in touch with hundreds of organisations around the world.

The IFJ is now working on a project to encourage new approaches to the coverage of children in Africa, where lack of funds has encouraged reliance upon western-made media products. The Banjul Declaration announced by the West African Journalists Association in 1999 incorporates the IFJ guidelines, and East African Journalists recently held their own conference on the topic. Later this summer journalists from Southern Africa will be taking part in similar training workshops.

Indigenous broadcasters in the region have already made their views known through a series of Charters - ten Southern African Developing Countries have signed up to their own version of the Children's Television Charter adopted by international broadcasters (Munich, May 1995). An Africa Charter on Children's Broadcasting has also been adopted by the Union of National Radio and Television Organizations of Africa (URTNA) (Algiers, June 2000), and the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (CBA) (Cape Town, October 2000).

Such general principles provide a firm base upon which to build best practice. Many other such declarations, including the Asian Declaration on Child Rights and the Media signed by ministers and media executives from 27 countries at the Asian Summit on Child Rights and the Media (Manila, July 1996) can be found, along with a great deal of research information about children and media at the UNESCO Clearing House based in Sweden <http://www.nordicom.gu.se/unesco.html>

Apart from collating research about children and media issues, the Clearing House also publishes extremely useful annual reports bringing together the latest developments in theory and practice about children's involvement in media.

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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following publications are useful resources for those interested in the relationship between children and the media (listed in reverse chronological order of publication date).

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Children Young People & Media Globalisation
Cecilia von Feilitzen & Ulla Carlsson, UNESCO Clearing House Yearbook 2002, Nordicom

Kids On-line: Promoting Responsible Use & a Safe Environment on the Net in Asia
Kavitha Shetty, Asian Media, Information and Communication Centre, 2002

Plug-in Drug: Television, Computers, and Family Life
Marie Winn, Penguin, 2002

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Peter McIntyre, International Federation of Journalists, 2002

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