

Information and Child's Rights - The Challenge of Media Engagement

International Survey of Journalistic Standards Established for Reporting Children's Issues

Conducted for the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)
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1. Information and Child Rights

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), which has carried out this survey, recognises that journalists and other media professionals are part of civic society and have a critical role to play in the development of democratic pluralism and human rights. Journalists enjoy no special rights by virtue of their profession; they are the ears, eyes and voices of the public. Their central function is to inform the public not only about events and public debates as they arise but also about the activities of governments and other organisations which shape society and social attitudes. That includes a responsibility to identify shortcomings and successes in the field of human rights and to raise awareness and promote public debate about human rights issues.

The IFJ seeks to build links and develop dialogue between media professionals and others engaged in the broad area of social education, particularly human rights and those who work with children and those who are responsible for the development of policy and legislation to protect children.

As a professional media workers' organisation the IFJ is especially keen to promote dialogue between journalists and media organisations, including the trainers of media professionals, to enhance responsible coverage of human rights and particularly childhood issues.

The IFJ, along with other professional media associations such as the World Association of Newspapers, believes that non-intrusive, collaborative strategies which promote the participation of journalists in raising awareness and promoting public policy on child rights are essential to the success of international efforts to improve the well-being of children everywhere.

Above all the IFJ holds to the view that ethical journalism concerns primarily the search for accuracy and truth independent from vested interests combined with a sensitivity to the consequences of publication. Media professionals require freedom from undue pressure in order to work ethically; they also need space to be able to resolve ethical dilemmas among themselves.

The IFJ has launched an international initiative to promote recognition among media professionals, governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) of the positive role journalists can play in developing new approaches to media representation of children, promoting the human rights of children, and contributing to efforts to raise professional awareness of the need to eradicate all forms of child exploitation.

In summary the aims of the Information and Child Rights project are:

- to promote discussion within the media about the coverage of childhood issues and develop guidelines to enhance reporting of the human rights of children;
- to engage journalists and media organisations in the development of positive policies at international, regional and national level to defend and promote the rights of children;
- to encourage dialogue between media professionals and relevant NGOs about best practice information and communication strategies to promote child rights and the protection of children;
- to develop information materials to assist media professionals in accurate and effective presentation of childhood issues;
- where possible to monitor and evaluate media coverage of childhood issues and international efforts to eradicate child exploitation in all its forms.

The IFJ works closely with UNICEF, the ILO and national agencies in the development of this work, which reflects increasing international concern about the plight of children.

In 1996 the IFJ made a significant contribution to The Stockholm World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, by drawing attention to the special role of journalists and the mass media in reporting offences against children and informing civil society public about the political and social issues raised by child abuse.

In a background paper commissioned by UNICEF, the IFJ examined the legal and ethical dilemmas faced by media professionals when seeking to provide accurate and responsible coverage of the commercial and sexual exploitation of children. It focused on the importance of avoiding sensationalism, protecting children's identities and providing clear information to the public, and included recommendations for further action among media professionals.

The IFJ also contributed to discussions on The Child and the Media with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 1996 and 1997, which have given rise to a number of important initiatives to strengthen understanding and implementation of Articles 13 and 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

These activities were followed up at the Child Exploitation and the Media Forum organised in London on 11 March 1997 by the UK media ethics body PressWise in conjunction with the IFJ and other media and child care organisations. The deliberations of lawyers, media and child protection professionals at the Forum were influential in the development of new statutory guidelines for broadcasters in the UK on media coverage of children's issues, and continue to impact upon the debate in the UK and overseas.

Since then the IFJ has extended its work in the area of media ethics and the coverage of children's issues with the preparation of an international information and child rights project: The Challenge of Media Engagement.

As part of the project a background paper was submitted to the Oslo International Conference on Child Labour held in the autumn of 1997, where the IFJ pressed for recognition of media professionals and the mass media as 'players' rather than merely observers of efforts to effect social mobilisation around the issue of child labour.

As a result over 30 national governments committed themselves to:

- *Support and encourage journalists and other media professionals who may contribute to social mobilisation by providing information of the highest quality, reliability and ethical standards concerning all aspects of child labour; and to*
- *Encourage national and international debates among media professionals on the economic and social conditions of children, including child labour.*

The IFJ is now developing links with international organisations working on child rights issues. As a first step the MDU has undertaken this worldwide survey of voluntary and statutory codes of journalistic conduct as they relate to media coverage of children. It has also prepared draft guidelines for media professionals to stimulate debate and effect improvements in media coverage of childhood issues.

This study was submitted to the international conference for media professionals - Journalism 2,000: and Child Rights and the Media - held in Recife, Brazil on 2 May 1998 in advance of the IFJ Triennial Congress on the theme *Global Media and the Struggle for Social Justice and Human Rights*. The Conference signals the start of a formal consultation process among media professionals to develop International Guidelines on the Coverage of Childhood issues.

The current project intends to stimulate discussion and mobilisation among media professionals at regional and national level over the next three years, by way of consultative seminars and training programmes, and to produce information materials including registers of specialist journalists and child rights agencies. The IFJ is already actively engaged in a similar process on a number of fronts, including the development of strategies to counter racism and xenophobia; the promotion of general ethical standards among journalists who have previously been constrained by state control of the media; the production and delivery of training schemes on election coverage techniques, and journalism and human rights.

2. The Role of Media Professionals

Good journalists are naturally inquisitive and value their independence. They see their role as gathering and communicating information about the world as it appears to them. They may have to tailor their work to the market they serve, and even the agendas set by their employers, but they jealously guard their right to be able to report without undue pressure.

They are acutely aware of the gathering strength of the public relations industry in all its forms – official government information services, political ‘spin doctors’, commercial public relations, pressure groups, and the use of covert attempts to spread misinformation. Understandably they are also suspicious of any attempt – through bribery, threats and other forms of coercion - to inhibit their professional independence.

Governments and international agencies need to recognise that media professionals have a key role to play in monitoring efforts to implement international agreements including actions to eradicate child exploitation and promote the rights of children. Inevitably, this may result in critical coverage, but providing such coverage results from a non-partisan commitment to the rights children of it should be recognised as a positive contribution to the elaboration of child rights.

Media criticism of shortcomings is seldom welcomed by governments, which have variety of expressing their displeasure. This may help to explain why, in the course of our international survey of ethical codes for journalists, it has become clear that media professionals everywhere resent attempts by a wide range of organisations, each with its own vested interest, to impose codes of conduct or to dictate how journalists should do their job.

As one trades union executive member in Central Europe commented: *‘a lot of attempts have been made ... to prepare such codes by different organisations. However, not one of them has been adopted or put into practice because journalists do not like them and do not want to obey their proscriptions.’*

Among the reasons given for such antipathy was is the view that such rules tend to be *‘designed by those with the biggest "stick”*, especially governments and organisations which have the power to frustrate the scrutiny which journalists apply to powerful institutions. There is concern that external regulators tend not to protect journalistic integrity, but rather seek to proscribe their activities and so hinder the journalist’s role as investigator of the activities of others. As such they *‘do not facilitate execution of journalists’ professional rights and responsibilities towards society; they are aiming to place boundaries on (our) professional and private freedom.’*

Journalists are understandably reluctant to allow governments to dictate the terms under which they should operate. They resent external pressure and are sceptical about the intentions of powerful elites. They know well that journalists have lost their lives and their personal liberty in seeking to expose wrongdoing that might otherwise have remained hidden because of restrictions upon press freedom.

Faced with evidence of cruelty to children, for instance, a journalist’s first response is to seek out and expose those who are guilty. They sometimes are sceptical about NGO activity in the field. The same union executive member commented: *‘We have plenty of human rights organisations, foundations and other institutions, most of them charities, with perfect programmes and charts... But nobody knows where the money raised goes, and what portion is for children.’*

Journalists and other media professionals see it as their duty to call to account those who hold sway over civil society, and jealously guard their independence. Their most important role in civil society is to act as a watchdog for the public interest and to promote debate, awareness and public recognition of issues crucial to the exercise of democracy and respect of human rights. The ability of journalists to fulfil this role is weakened by the extent to which they became subservient to vested interests.

That said, it is important to appreciate that serious journalists constantly ask themselves questions about how and why they are doing their job. They consider carefully the consequences of publication. In the field of child labour media professionals will wrestle with difficult questions before proceeding with a story. How can we expose an abusive employer without interviewing or identifying the children? What will be the consequences to the children, and their families, if we expose wrongdoing in which they are involved? Is the greater good served by exposing an injustice at the risk of placing a child in greater danger?

There are limits to the responsibility that media professionals can be expected to shoulder. They cannot always guarantee to predict accurately the consequences of exposing injustice. Nor can they ensure that the proper remedies are put in place. They cannot ensure, for instance, that the working child of a poor family will end up in a classroom rather than on the streets. But they do have to live with the fact that injustices will certainly continue if they fail to alert civil society to what they have uncovered.

Most journalists are very conscious of their responsibilities and are keen to develop approaches that will improve rather than inhibit their ability to communicate effectively. They are also aware that increased media literacy has made readers, viewers and listeners more conscious of the potential for manipulation of information by powerful groups in society, including commercial interests.

Journalists, programme-makers and their editorial managers, appreciate the importance of operating to widely understood codes of conduct which offer some guarantee of their independence and impartiality. Even if they do not know the texts by heart (and most do not) they understand that ethical values apply. Where these are imposed by statute, media professionals may work within them, but will always seek to test their authority and validity if they believe that such restrictions are being used to undermine the public's right to know.

However, journalists are equally aware of the enormous power that media institutions now wield over public perceptions of civil society, and especially the conflict between the commercial interests of national and multi-national media corporations and the public interest.

Throughout the world mass media play an increasingly important role in everyone's life, providing 'instant' entertainment, education and information. Between them newspapers, magazines, radio and television, and the 'information super-highway' constitute perhaps the single most powerful system of influence over how people perceive the world both within national boundaries and beyond.

As the people who gather, select and present 'the news' media professionals are at the heart of this process. They must demonstrate an ability to comprehend and communicate different topics quickly against tight deadlines and limited budgets. Yet most journalists have little control over the structure and development of their industry, the technological convergence of communication technologies, the growth of global cross-media conglomerates, or the way in which media companies operate within a highly competitive global media marketplace.

Media professionals have to adjust to the consequences of technological change, and increased cross-media and cross-border ownership. Recent years especially have witnessed increased competition for work with a shift away from full-time employment towards short-term contract and freelance work. Instead of conventional specialisation in a particular medium, 'multi-skilling' now requires journalists to be conversant with print, broadcast and electronic communications technology as well as their traditional skills. Exploitation of the new communications technologies increases the likelihood that material produced for one particular medium and one particular (national) market may be distributed to much wider and very different markets.

The media landscape and news-gathering techniques vary from region to region, and differ too according to the mode of transmission – print, television, radio and or other electronic means – just as the regulatory systems under which media professionals operate differ throughout the world. Local legal restrictions and the trend towards over-simplification as a means of reaching broader markets further constrain media coverage of sensitive and

complex issues such as child exploitation and the human rights of children. There is an inevitable risk that all these developments could have a significant negative impact upon the quality of coverage, especially of matters where specialist knowledge is desirable.

It is because the mass media are the leading edge in the creation of global markets that the IFJ believes it would be helpful if journalists throughout the world were better equipped to appreciate the differing standards and ethical concerns of their colleagues and media consumers in other countries and cultures. As we shall see, few of the existing journalism codes make special mention of the rights of children, or provide guidance on how childhood issues should be dealt with. By sharing information and experience it should be possible to develop broad international guidelines that will encourage common approaches to coverage of stories involving children and exposing child exploitation in all its forms.

The IFJ is convinced that the adoption by media professionals of international guidelines would contribute significantly to improving media performance in coverage of children's issues, and to assisting government and NGOs in their efforts to improve public understanding of the rights of the child. However, that will require consultation over time among media professionals and the development of professional training programmes.

3. Children and the Media

Since 1989 the human rights of children and young people under the age of 18 have been codified in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child which has been ratified by 191 national governments.

The Convention lays stress upon the role of the media in children's lives, affirming children's right to freedom of expression (Article 13) and to privacy (Article 16). It also lays a responsibility upon governments to ensure that children have access to as wide a range of information as possible (Article 17). This Article is worth quoting in full since it contains admonitions to media professionals about which States Parties to the Convention are supposed to report back to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child every five years. (*Note our emphasis.*)

Article 17. *'States Parties recognise the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end states parties shall:*

- a. *encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of Article 29; (Aims of Education)*
- b. *encourage international co-operation in the production, exchange and dissemination of material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;*
- c. *encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;*
- d. *encourage the mass media to have a particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous;*
- e. *encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of children from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of Articles 13 (Freedom of Expression) and 18 (Parental Responsibilities).'*

It can be seen that media professionals are recognised as having a vital role to play in social mobilisation around the rights of children. They may be involved primarily as reporters of the misdeeds and omissions of others, but they are catalysts nonetheless. As watchdogs in the public interest and promoters of democratic exchange they have a distinct role in the process of improving the image, rights and prospects of children.

One of the difficulties facing journalists is that they operate in an increasingly commercial environment. Children have a universal appeal, and, in theory at least, are cherished in every culture. They also constitute an important segment of growing advertising and consumer markets. Threats to children generate emotive responses which can be harnessed to capture readers and audiences. It follows that there is always a risk that stories and images of about children will be valued as much for their marketing potential as for the social significance of the stories themselves.

Media professionals are able to stimulate public outrage by the use of children to illustrate the traumas of illness or abuse, and the horrors of war, starvation, poverty, etc. This 'shock value' is often seen as a valid technique to cut through the protections that otherwise cushion people from the harsher realities of life, and especially when seeking to expose the relative deprivation suffered by those who live in the southern hemisphere or in the less well-off communities of Central and Eastern Europe or the run-down suburbs of the developed world.

As a result children are often represented in the media as victims, villains, or as 'cute' attachments to adults. Identifying specific children considered to be at risk of harm, exploitation or abuse, can bring danger to them and their families. At the same time the denial of children's identities by treating them as icons can be problematic. Such 'iconic' representation does little to improve recognition of their rights and dignity as human beings.

If stories about children are to illustrate a 'truth', journalists need to know what lies behind the experiences they are writing about. That includes appreciating the rights of the children involved – their right to security and (even) anonymity, knowing about the laws and conventions that exist to protect them, and being free to investigate any breach of those rights.

How well they do their job depends as much upon their personal skills and knowledge as it does upon the medium they work through. Journalists most often communicate by producing 'stories' that help people to understand the world around them. The 'human interest story' is a dramatic device to capture people's interest/anger/sympathy and so explain a wider 'truth'. So, if journalists are to play a part in improving public understanding of children, they need access to 'good stories'. Often their sources will be NGOs working among children or on their behalf.

Other than specialists in the field, few journalists in any country have a detailed knowledge of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, let alone the Bratislava Resolution, the Asian Declaration on Child Rights and the Media or, for instance, the European Broadcasting Union's Guidelines for Programmes Dealing with the Portrayal of Violence. Fewer still are likely to be aware of which countries have ratified what conventions on issues such as child labour or the sexual exploitation of children. And yet alert and inquisitive media professionals are the most effective agents to challenge and change government and public attitudes through social mobilisation.

This raises an important issue about the nature of vocational training for media professionals. At present the emphasis is on equipping trainees with adaptable skills so they can survive in a constantly changing work environment where flexibility is the key. Children rarely feature other than as examples of 'winning' feature material (with compelling pictures) or as part of the law curriculum (legal restrictions on coverage of children at risk).

It will be difficult to persuade training institutions to incorporate additional modules on child rights, unless employers make it clear that they expect their staff to be well versed in the topic. Photographing and filming children can be especially problematic - in the methods used to obtain visual images, in the construction of the images and in the forms employed to display the images – and should attract as much attention in training as technical proficiency.

Clearly if media professionals are to become more actively engaged in the protection of the human rights of children there is a need for the development of guidance about training, information materials, and international co-operation within media industries to ensure that coverage of childhood and child rights issues receives the attention and care it deserves.

A particular area of concern that needs to be addressed is the access which children have to potentially harmful material, including the depiction of violence, sex, and 'sexualised' images of children – especially in advertising, and fashion and pop music marketing. While controversy may continue about the extent to which such material directly influences the behaviour of children, it should remain a priority among media producers to ensure that children are not brutalised or otherwise put at risk by easy access to material, including imagery that appears to condone or encourage violence or inappropriate sexual activity.

Attention must also be given to the issue of media literacy among children and to their active engagement with the mass media. Children are consumers of mainstream media products as well as specialist publications aimed directly at younger people. This is recognised by the *Newspapers in Education* project of the World Association of Newspapers. It is as important that children should have an appreciation of the role of the media in civil society as that journalists should be aware of the needs, concerns and rights of children.

In many countries the mass media, and especially television, play an increasingly important role in the education of children. They deserve to understand that the mass media is a 'construction' of the wider world rather than a simple reproduction of 'reality'.

Media professionals have a significant role to play in developing effective media literacy programmes within schools, as well as a vested interest in ensuring that future generations recognise the value and come to trust the mass media as a source of reliable information. Media literacy will also enhance the vested commercial interests of the media, as well as encouraging the development of future generations of competent media professionals.

Central to the aims of work in the field of child rights and the media must be opportunities for the voices of children to be heard. Media professionals need to hear what children and young people think of their products, and especially media representations of childhood in all its facets. Children themselves have a vital contribution to make to the debate - as 'consumers' of media, as contributors to the publishing process, and to the future of newspapers in particular.

It would be revealing and helpful to journalists and other media professionals if forums could be developed which would engage children and young people in debate about their representation in the media, the content and appropriateness of programmes and publications directed at them, and their concerns for the future. It is important that parents and teachers are part of this process.

Opportunities for children to become involved in media production, such as the Children's Express project in the UK and USA, and UNICEF's 'Voices of Youth' initiative offer useful models of collaborative measures to increase mutual appreciation between children and journalists. The media industry in each country might consider developing similar projects to generate closer links with young people. This is another area where international guidelines may be worth further exploration.

4. NGOs and the Media

The role of journalists is to record what happens around us, not as historians but as instant communicators. If civil society is putting pressure on politicians to act, it is the journalist's job to record the fact rather than take sides. If politicians respond and decide to follow a particular course of action, the journalist monitors their achievements and reports back to the public. And if political leaders from different countries agree to implement policies designed to eradicate a perceived common evil, it is the journalist's job to monitor how well they stick to their promises.

By the same token, organisations that set themselves up as beacons for the oppressed, as service providers or as pressure groups must expect to be subjected to scrutiny by the media on behalf of civil society – especially when they have sought public funding to achieve their aims.

Cynicism among media professionals is fuelled by the failure of many working within NGOs to appreciate the nature of modern journalism, and the tendency to see relations with the media as primarily the securing of favourable coverage of NGO activities, as distinct from providing accurate, reliable and inclusive information to broaden and deepen public understanding.

The media policies of some NGOs are perceived by journalists as a part of their marketing and fund-raising strategies. For instance, NGO criticism of the images of childhood published by the mass media fall on deaf ears when NGOs employ similar techniques to persuade members of the public to contribute money to the organisation.

To do their job well media professionals need access to clear, reliable and accurate information. The work of NGOs concerned with child welfare benefits from the exposure that the mass media can provide, especially as media organisations are always keen to give 'added value' by letting their audiences know about organisations that provide help for children.

The world of commerce is well aware that editorial coverage is far more valuable than the space purchased for advertising copy, and NGOs can benefit their clientele by adopting techniques that guarantee them coverage where budgets preclude display advertising. Human interest stories are the stuff of successful mass media communication, and the staff of NGOs are closer to the stories than a desk bound journalist. There is no better way to illustrate the need for governmental action to protect the welfare of children, for instance, than to be able to alert the public via the mass media to the consequences of inaction.

Most media professionals are not experts in the field of child rights or the implications of international conventions. They value the advice and expertise of people working in NGOs providing they are convinced that it is the cause of the children that comes first.

A valid symbiotic relationship between journalists and child rights pressure groups can exist provided a relationship of trust can first be established. The starting point for NGOs must be the formulation of media strategies and policies that acknowledge the needs and constraints of journalists. Those which employ media professionals in their public affairs departments could give testimony to the effectiveness of such an approach.

This is not to say that NGOs should simply accede to the demands of journalists. Above all they should expect media professionals to act responsibly and in accordance with their own Codes of Conduct. NGOs should be prepared to complain about inaccurate, unnecessarily intrusive or sensational coverage and the use of unjustifiable methods in the gathering of material.

If NGOs are geared up to provide accurate, verifiable and up-to-date information, and expert commentary in response to legitimate questions from the media about current events, they should also be in a position to set reasonable terms for their co-operation with the mass media. That includes measures designed to protect the interests, rights and dignity of an individual child or groups of children.

The UK NGO PressWise, for instance, happily co-operates with the media on issues concerning all aspects of media ethics and regulation, but makes it clear that it will not supply contact names and numbers of 'victims of media abuse'. It may occasionally arrange for willing clients to speak directly with the media having first briefed them about what to expect and obtained assurances from media professionals about the use to which their contribution may be put. Among the recommendations that arose from the Child Exploitation and the Media Forum organised in the UK by PressWise were suggestions about ways of improving understanding about how the separate and different disciplines of law, child care and journalism operate, and to encourage a more informed coverage of child protection issues in the future through a collaborative approach to training. At the heart of the recommendations was a plea to establish openness and trust and respect for confidences between professionals at national and local level.

Another example is the practice of the Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights (CPCR) in Bangkok. Members of the CPCR Public Education & Campaigns Team have developed a questionnaire which they expect visiting journalists to complete. The CPCR has always been willing to co-operate with foreign media professionals to help expose and eradicate child labour and the sexual abuse of children by 'sex tourists'. However, it has been disappointed on numerous occasions by the sensational nature of subsequent coverage which they believe is ultimately unhelpful to the children. They now filter media requests by means of the questionnaire. In effect it sets out the terms for their co-operation, and helps to protect children as well as promoting CPCR's aims.

NGOs need to be aware of media techniques, and consider the consequences of collaboration with media professionals. They should seek relationships of equality with their colleagues in the media in the interests of children and they should also appreciate that although the motives and attitudes of media professionals may not coincide with their own they are equally legitimate.

Of primary importance is the need for international agencies and NGOs to recognise that building confidence among journalists in their work is essential to improving media performance. The IFJ believes that establishing effective structures for dialogue and consultation, between journalists and media organisations on the one hand and representative United Nations agencies and other international agencies and NGOs on the other, is of the highest priority.

This is particularly important in regard to the preparation of information policies and project activities which aim to raise awareness and to influence public opinion on matters of child rights, or which are specifically aimed at improving the quality of media coverage.

If the aim is to increase public awareness of child rights issues and to raise standards of media coverage it is important that NGOs and media professionals have opportunities to discuss and evaluate their respective activities. Locally there needs to be contact between NGOs, teachers, young people and media professionals to improve understanding of child rights issues and levels of media literacy. At national, regional and international level there needs to be an opportunity for dialogue and sharing of information.

In particular media professionals and NGOs should collaborate on the development of information materials that will improve understanding of international conventions, national laws and Codes of Conduct and the impact of media coverage, as well as exploring some of the more problematic aspects of promoting the human rights of children and balancing freedom of expression and the public's right to know with the child's right to privacy. These are areas where both academic and training institutions may be able to assist.

5. International Survey of Codes of Conduct

In the past remarkably little attention has been paid to the ethical dilemmas facing journalists when covering issues affecting children. Considering the importance of the subject, few Codes of Conduct adopted by media trades unions or national Press Councils specifically mention children.

One of the oldest journalistic Codes of Conduct, adopted by the UK National Union of Journalists in 1936, and which also applies in the Republic of Ireland, makes no mention of children even in the most recent version revised in 1994. Nor does the Bordeaux Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists adopted by the International Federation of Journalists in 1954 or the version revised in 1986, upon which many other Codes are based.

A similar omission is to be found in the Declaration of the Duties and Rights of Journalists, adopted by the Swiss Federation of Journalists in 1972 and revised in 1994; in the Code devised by Greek journalist unions and the Rule of Ethics in Journalism of the Icelandic Press Council, both adopted in 1988; and in the Code of Professional Principles of the Press adopted by the Turkish Press Council in 1989.

Children are absent from the Declaration on the Press and Other Forms of Mass Media adopted by the Latvian Parliament, and the Code of Ethics adopted by the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists in 1990; from the Code of Ethics adopted by the Association of Journalists of Poland, and the Code issued by the Press Club of Malta and the Maltese Institute of Broadcasters in 1991; from the Code of Ethics adopted by the Latvian Union of Journalists (LZS) and the legal Code adopted by the Danish Parliament with the consent of the Danish Journalists' Union in 1992; nor do they appear in the Journalists' Ethical Code adopted by the National Association of Hungarian Journalists (MUOSZ) in 1994.

The Media Ethics Charter adopted by 10 industry bodies representing media professionals in Poland in 1995, and the Ethics Code adopted by the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia in the same year, all appear to ignore the particular interests of children.

In Bulgaria, where the plight of many children abandoned in seriously under-resourced institutions has received considerable media attention in recent years, there are no journalistic codes to inform journalists how to cover such stories. The Union of Bulgarian Journalists adopted Rules of Journalistic Ethics in 1994 which are primarily concerned with asserting the independence of journalists from state or other vested interests.

However it would be wrong to suggest that journalists and other media professionals are insensitive to the needs and concerns of children. Codes of Conduct cannot legislate for coverage of every social grouping. They are devised to provide media professionals with guidance about the standards they should expect of themselves and against which they are willing to be judged, by their peers if not by civil society.

In the Netherlands, where a Press Council set up in 1960 after public demands for parliamentary action over allegations of journalistic excess, journalists continue to use the current IFJ Code as their guide.

Many codes do warn against discriminatory coverage or the risk of encouraging discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, sexual orientation, language, marital status, religion, or political opinions. Some add 'age' to this list, and it provides a peg upon which the debate about more specific guidelines about the coverage of childhood issues might be hung. Journalists are as likely as other members of civil society to consider that ageism relates more to older people than to children.

On a day-to-day basis journalists tend to operate on a 'common sense' approach to dealing with ethical issues, and would probably say that it 'stands to reason' that children deserve greater protection than most other members of society.

In France where press freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution, and the courts are used to resolve disputes over privacy, the Charter of the Professional Duties of French Journalists - revised in 1938 and containing no mention of children - remains the basis on which members of the Syndicat National des Journalists in France operate. They are expected to follow the guidance offered by international codes to protect children.

Although there is no specific mention of children in the Code of Ethics adopted in 1995 by the Yerevan Press Club in Armenia, for instance, Clause 5 reminds journalists that they should *'be aware of the social; and political consequences of (their) activities and bear moral responsibility for them'*. Slovenia asks journalists to be *'especially tactful and considerate when reporting on accidents, tragic events in families, diseases, children and juvenile persons.'*

The pressures of both deadlines and the desire to produce 'sympathetic copy' can place the human rights of children at the margins of concern when a 'good story' or picture comes up. Finding the space for education and discussion among media professionals about the implications of what might be regarded as a cavalier attitude towards children is one of the most difficult problems to overcome.

In the course of our survey, the resistance of journalists and media professionals to external regulation was frequently made clear, as were the difficulties of enforcing standards. Some feel that singling out children is the thin end of a wedge which might encourage other social groups to demand what might be seen in the trade as 'special treatment'. Others feel that they are best placed to make decisions about coverage in their own backyard, and express the view that they "don't mind exporting our ideas to anyone else, but (they are) certainly not going to import any." The solution may lie in encouraging international exchanges of experience and interpretations of codes so that the importance of acknowledging the rights and dignity of all social groups is better appreciated.

Although many Codes are fairly recent, or have been revised in recent years, only Italy has a code which actually mentions the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Charter of Duties of Journalists adopted in 1993 contains a section on Children or Vulnerable People which reads: *'A journalist respects all the principles confirmed in the 1989 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, to protect children, their character and their personality both as an active protagonist and as a victim of a common law offence.'* The section goes on to counsel against unnecessary identification of children.

In Morocco journalists are taking an active role in monitoring the rights of children. The Syndicat National de la Press is a founder member of *l'Observatoire* – a watchdog body set up in 1994 to safeguard the rights of children.

A common Code of Ethics adopted by media professionals in Lithuania insists that journalist *'shall show particular respect to the rights of the children and adults with physical or mental incapacity,'* but it also contains an earlier clause of potential relevance to children. Clause 13 requires that *'The journalist or publisher (must) assess information obtained from an individual under stress or shock, who is in a helpless position, or who is communicating for the first time with a representative of public mass media, with particular care.'*

In Australia the Code of the Australian Press Council, set up as a system of voluntary self-regulation in 1976 by employers' associations and the Australian Journalists' Association, makes no specific mention of children. However, following the amalgamation of the AJA with other media professionals in the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, which has a long history of concern about ethical matters, a revised Code of Ethics urges *'particular care for the welfare of children in reports involving them.'*

In Germany, which has had a Press Council since 1956, a comprehensive Press Code has been developed by employers and journalists. Originally adopted in 1973 it sets out principles and offers guidelines for implementation. Article 11 states *'Violence and brutality should not be sensationalised. Reporting must take due account of the need to protect young people.'*

Article 13 covering court reporting includes guidance that *'When reporting on juvenile crime and juvenile court proceedings. The press should exercise restraint out of consideration for the future of the young people concerned. This recommendation also applies to reports on juvenile victims of crime.'* The section goes on to say *'As a general rule, there is no objection to the publication of photographs and names of missing persons. These should only be published, however, with the agreement of the relevant authorities.'*

In the United States of America, where the autonomy of the press is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution, individual publishers and broadcasters have developed their own codes and standards. There are no Press Councils, although there is concern among media professionals about the ethics of their trade. The Code drawn up by the US Society of Professional Journalists advises members to *'Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects'*.

Spain has no Press Council and press freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution, and journalists have formalised their attitude towards covering childhood issues with a Code that says: *'Special attention should be paid to the treatment of issues which concern children and youth. The right of privacy of minors shall be respected.'*

Journalists in Catalonia adopted a Statement of Principles in 1992 which requires them to: *'deal with special care all kinds of news concerning children. There must be no identification when they appear as victim (except in the case of murder), witnesses of the accused in criminal prosecutions, especially in those cases of great social repercussion such as sexual offences.'*

We have found no specific guidelines or policies for journalists when covering stories involving child labour or other forms of child abuse and exploitation. Usually children merit a sub-clause in a section dealing with a broader issue. Most codes encourage media professionals to protect the rights of individuals except where the public interest or press freedom is best served by publication.

In those codes where references to children do occur they are most likely to appear in clauses dealing with coverage of court cases, and echo standard legal proscriptions restricting identification of victims and juvenile offenders.

Self-regulation in Austria is conducted by a Press Council founded by publishers and the Austrian Trade Union of Journalists (KMFB) in 1961. It promotes a Code of Honour for media professionals which contains only one specific reference to children. The clause dealing with privacy advises that *'reports of the 'false steps' of juveniles must not hinder or make more difficult their re-socialisation. In such cases the names must be shortened.'*

A similar clause dealing with privacy matters in the voluntary Code of Ethics governing journalists in Croatia states: *'Special care and responsibility is needed in reporting about accidents, family tragedies, diseases, children and minors, or court proceedings where the journalist must respect presumed innocence integrity, dignity and feelings of all the persons involved...'*

Norway has had a Press Council since 1936, and the rights and duties of editors have been codified since 1953. In the most recent (1994) revision of the Ethical Code of Practice for Norwegian Journalists the only mention of children again comes in a section dealing with court proceedings: *'As a general rule the identity of children should not be disclosed in reports on family disputes or cases under consideration by the child care authorities or by the courts.'*

In the personal Code of Ethics to which journalists in the Philippines are expected to sign up there is a requirement that *'I shall exercise caution in publishing names of minors and women involved in criminal cases so that they may not unjustly lose their standing in society'*.

In Russia any identification of victims or relatives of those charged with a crime is frowned upon and *'With special strictness these norms should be observed when the journalistic communication may harm the interests of minors.'*

A similar structure appears in the Code of Journalists in Portugal. *'The journalist must not identify, directly or indirectly, the victims of sexual crimes or juvenile criminals, nor must s/he humiliate people or disturb their pain.'* And in Paraguay the journalists' code prohibits identification of children in court cases, especially those involving sexual offences.

In a Code approved by the Government, the Press Council of Sri Lanka also requires that journalists shall not *'name any young person accused of a criminal offence who to his knowledge is below the age of eighteen and to his knowledge is a person who has no previous convictions.'*

The international furore about press standards that broke out in 1997 after the death of Diana Princess of Wales has given rise to increased concern about the impact of coverage on children, and their involvement as the subjects of newspaper and magazine articles and broadcast programme. As might be expected it has had the most noticeable impact in the UK, although more in terms of the formal response of the industry than in any sea change in journalistic practice.

The Code of Practice devised by the UK newspaper industry in 1991 was revised after the death of the Princess, in time to take effect from January 1998. Policed by the self-regulatory Press Complaints Commission, a non-statutory body funded by the industry to adjudicate on complaints from members of the public, the new Code has been welcomed especially because it goes in to some detail about journalists and children.

It is worth recording these in full:

Clause 6: Children

- (i) Young people should be free to complete their time at school without unnecessary intrusion.*
- (ii) Journalists must not interview or photograph children under the age of 16 on subjects involving the welfare of the child or of any other child, in the absence of or without the consent of a parent or other adult who is responsible for the children.*
- (iii) Pupils must not be approached or photographed while at school without the permission of the school authorities.*
- (iv) There must be no payment to minors for material involving the welfare of children nor payment to parents or guardians for material about their children or wards unless it is demonstrably in the child's interest.*
- (v) Where material about the private life of a child is published, there must be justification for publication other than the fame, notoriety or position of his or her parents or guardian.*

Clause 7: Children in sex cases

- 1. The press must not, even where the law does not prohibit it, identify children under the age of 16 who are involved in cases concerning sexual offences, whether as victims, or as witnesses.*
- 2. In any press report of a case involving a sexual offence against a child:*
 - (i) The child must not be identified.*
 - (ii) The adult may be identified.*
 - (iii) The word 'incest' must not be used where a child victim might be identified.*
 - (iv) Care must be taken that nothing in the report implies the relationship between the accused and the child.*

The most comprehensive protections for children are to be found in the field of broadcasting, and particularly television. Significantly, this is also the part of the media most subject to statutory, rather than voluntary regulation. It may be that these much tighter and thus more proscriptive rules reflect public concern about the influence which television is alleged to have on juvenile behaviour and development.

We have examined the broadcasting guidelines for Ireland and the United Kingdom where a comprehensive body of regulation has developed over the last 75 years. The stringency of these codes stands in marked contrast to those for print journalists.

In the Republic of Ireland, the state broadcaster Radio Telefis Eirean (RTE) applies tough rules governing the involvement of children in all forms of programming, and enforces strict regulations regarding the portrayal of children in broadcast advertisements.

In the UK where broadcasting is regulated under statute, the regulatory bodies are obliged to produce detailed guidance for programme-makers and broadcasters based on draft requirements set out in the legislation.

Although the main public service broadcaster, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and commercial radio and TV companies have separate and distinct regulatory systems, members of the public can also take complaints to the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC), a statutory body which advises broadcasters and investigates complaints from the public. All broadcasting bodies are bound by its adjudications. Like RTE it sets the top age for childhood at 15.

The BSC has recently completed a lengthy consultation process to develop a new Code on Fairness and Privacy, which contains the following section:

'Children's vulnerability must be a prime concern for broadcasters. They do not lose their rights to privacy because of the fame or notoriety of their parents or because of events in their schools. Care should be taken that a child's gullibility or trust is not abused. They should not be questioned about private family matters or asked for views on matters likely to be beyond their capacity to answer properly. Consent from parents or those in loco parentis should normally be obtained before interviewing children under 16 on matters of significance. Where consent has not been obtained or actually refused, any decision to go ahead can only be justified if the item is of overriding public interest and the child's appearance is absolutely necessary. Similarly, children under 16 involved in police enquiries or court proceedings relating to sexual offences should not be identified or identifiable in news or other programmes.'

Considerable efforts have been made in recent years to develop a common pattern of guidelines for broadcasters, and while wordings differ slightly the comprehensive nature of the guidelines and their general intent are essentially the same.

The BBC Producers' Guidelines are spelled out in a comprehensive handbook and seek to cover all eventualities. It contains a variety of rules that apply to its staff when dealing with children, and goes into some detail.

The Guidelines make clear that:

'wherever in the world the BBC operates, programme makers must have due regard for the welfare of children who take part in their programmes', and points out that 'Programme makers may need to consult professionals and experts when dealing with children. BBC Children's Programmes have developed considerable expertise and support systems to protect children before, during and after the programme process and can offer advice in this area.'

The BBC has also devised and promoted a Children's Television Charter explaining how the Corporation's 'Mission Statement' is to be interpreted in terms of the quality and range of children's programming. It is one of the more progressive and positive acknowledgements of children's rights we came across in our survey.

The Independent Television Commission (ITC) which issues licences to UK broadcasters and has a statutory responsibility to regulate the commercial sector. Its Programme Code (currently under revision) contains strictures about the portrayal of children, and reflects public sensitivity about exposing children to violence and 'bad language'.

In the Code the term 'children' refers to those aged 15 or under, and 'young persons' means those aged 16 or 17. It requires broadcasters to obey the rules and develop their own in-

house procedures to ensure that output is regulated accordingly. Much stress is laid on the 'watershed' of 21.00, after which time the stricter rules governing 'family viewing' are relaxed.

The ITC Guidelines extend to the transmission of films on TV, and set out scheduling requirements to reduce the risk that children may be exposed to films which have received adult classification in cinemas (usually films containing explicit language, sex or violence).

The ITC is particularly explicit about the potential harm of violence on the small screen, and the risk of transmitting material that includes behaviour easily imitated by children as well as stressing the importance of protecting the identities of children involved in sexual abuse cases.

The ITC also warns broadcasters about commercial exploitation of children whether through in-programme promotions, the use of 'premium-rate telephone services in programmes, or the offer of prizes:

'Prize values in, or associated with, children's programmes should normally be considerably lower than those on offer to adults. If prizes aimed at children do have significant value, they should offer a product or experience appropriate to the target audience. Cash sums and prizes appealing simply to greed are not acceptable.'

Slightly less restrictive conditions are set by the Radio Authority which awards licences and regulates commercial radio broadcasting in the UK. Its Programme Code explains:

*1. Taste and Decency and the portrayal of violence
1.4 Children and Young Persons*

The Radio Authority believes that adult radio listeners have the right to enjoy material which would not be thought suitable for children. However, License Holders must be aware of circumstances such that large numbers of children and young persons might be expected to be listening. Adult material must not be broadcast at the times when a License Holder regularly directs his programmes at children and young persons by the inclusion of music, stories or speech items acknowledged to be specifically attractive to children and young people below the age of 18.

Adult programmes include drama where strong language or violent scenarios might occur, discussion or 'phone-in' programmes which cover explicit violent or sexual topics in a frank manner and musical items with violent or sexually explicit lyrics unless the programmes have educational aims.

The Radio Authority and the ITC have broadly similar rules governing the Interviewing of Children – urging care in interviewing children aged 15 and under, and warning against attempting to 'elicit views on private family matters nor ask for expressions of opinion on matters likely to be beyond their judgement'. Both provide similar guidance in section dealing with Reports on Young Offenders, Children in Sex Cases; Smoking and Drinking, Drug Taking and Solvent Abuse, Appearances by Children in Programmes; Protection of Children from Indecency.

As can be seen, almost without exception where regulation or voluntary codes of practice deal with children, it is to promote protective mechanisms and guard against their exploitation. They acknowledge the vulnerability of children and the special responsibility of media professionals towards their protection. There is relatively little affirmation of child rights

There remains the vexed question of implementation, and systems of redress. It is one thing to devise a Code of Conduct, quite another to enforce it. It was not the object of this survey to review systems of redress, but where statutory controls are not in operation and where there are no means of redress via the courts, most codes depend upon voluntary acquiescence to sanctions applied by those policing systems of self-regulation. In the print media those sanctions rarely extend beyond publication of apologies and corrections where appropriate. Tackling the issue of general failures to acknowledge the human rights of children falls outside the scope of most systems of media regulation, and can only be resolved through education, dialogue and other collaborative strategies.

Media professionals are expected to absorb codes of conduct and guidelines as part of their everyday work. The survey did not deal with training issues, but in general where media professionals have received training they may expect to consider ethical issues within the curriculum, but it rarely features significantly in qualifying examinations. They will be required to have some understanding of the law as it relates to journalism.

Once employed by a media company, they will be expected to discover and apply the 'house rules' and formal regulations that govern their work. In some cases Codes of Conduct may be a part of their contracts of employment.

Joining a trade union or professional body implies acceptance of the organisation's Codes of Conduct, and while in some countries disciplinary action may follow if a member is found to be in breach of the Code, in general it is impracticable to enforce good practice.

One of the difficulties about media regulation is that most of the Codes of Conduct or industry guidelines will not be known to the vast majority of the readers, viewers and listeners. One of the values of self-regulation however, especially where an external body such as Press Council or Ombudsman adjudicates on complaints, is that it generates debate and public awareness about ethical issues. This in turn encourages best practice, since editors, journalists and programme-makers dislike being accused or publicly criticised for breaching their own Codes of Conduct, especially by their peers.

Where there are formal systems of adjudication it is normal for newspapers, magazines and broadcast programmes to make known the outcome. Acknowledging persistent or even occasional breaches of good practice can have an impact upon the credibility, and thus the market value of the product.

A perennial problem is the issue of who can complain. Normally it has to be someone who is directly affected, if not actually mentioned in an offending article or programme. It is more difficult for third parties, especially NGOs with their own vested interests, to make complaints on behalf of groups of people, such as children.

It is perhaps more useful for NGOs to be aware of the Codes that do exist, to let media professionals know that they are expected to abide by them, and to develop positive relationships with media professionals whom they trust.

Media professionals are sensitive to general criticism if it can be backed up with clear and impartial evidence. In the longer-term, academic studies of media coverage which highlight both strengths and weaknesses can have an impact upon future coverage. As in so many walks of life, positive encouragement and an appreciation of the constraints which influence editorial decision-making are more likely to achieve results than constant sniping and allegations of bad faith.

Most important of all it is vital that those concerned with the well-being of children recognise the value of strong and constructive links with the mass media, and seek a continuing dialogue with media professionals and the institutions of the mass media to highlight the consequences of ill-considered reporting of childhood issues and to acknowledge the value of responsible reporting.

In the meantime it is incumbent upon media professionals themselves to examine the shortcomings of their own work and to develop appropriate guidelines and other measures to ensure that children are not abused by the mass media, and that children throughout the world are beneficiaries of the efforts of media professionals to assert and defend human rights.

6. Draft Guidelines for Media Professionals

What follows is an attempt to devise general guidance about practicable measures which will both protect children and enhance the human rights of children without damaging freedom of expression. The purpose of this draft is to stimulate debate around the value of media professionals throughout the world adopting common guidelines which will help to improve the lot of children everywhere.

Given the vulnerability of children, the responsibility which all adults owe to children, and the fact that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child looks set to become the first universal law of humankind, when reporting issues involving children journalists are urged to:

- *avoid stereotypical or sensationalist coverage of issues concerning children;*
- *seek to expose hazards to children's safety and security, including lack of basic human rights (food, clothing, housing, care) and all forms of exploitation;*
- *have constantly in mind the consequences that publicity may bring to them or to their families. They must do everything possible to mitigate such consequences, including the de-identification of photographs and videotape and the use of pseudonyms in interviews where appropriate.*
- *be no more nor less willing to accept the word of a child than any other informant, but make strenuous efforts to obtain independent verification of the accuracy of information supplied by children without putting their informant at risk;*
- *seek to avoid promoting sexualised images of young children;*
- *seek to ensure that where possible photographs of children are obtained openly and fairly and, where appropriate, with the knowledge and consent of the children and/or responsible adult guardian or carer;*
- *carefully check the credentials of any organisation purporting to represent the interests of children.*

Journalists specialising in childhood matters or embarking upon investigation into child welfare issues should acquaint themselves with the terms of national and international laws as they relate to children, especially UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Print and broadcasting companies should give serious consideration to the appointment of specialist Childhood Correspondents, to keep in touch with current policy and legislation and to advise other staff working with children or on childhood stories.

Journalists should initiate and maintain dialogue with bona fide organisations concerned with child rights and child welfare, and should play an active part in the development of media literacy among children.

7. Proposals for future action

Media professionals may wish to initiate discussion and debate within the industry, including training institutions, at a local (national) level, and with governments and non-governmental organisations about how to improve the lives of children and their representation in the mass media.

Within their own organisations media professionals might seek to raise awareness about child rights and issues of non-exploitative representation.

The IFJ is seeking support for a series of regional and international consultations around these issues, and to develop training programmes for journalists and other media professionals around the issue of child rights and all forms of child exploitation.

The IFJ is seeking partners for the creation of prestigious awards for media professionals who do most to alert civil society to child rights issues and/or convince governments to effect change in favour of children.

The IFJ intends to ensure that media professionals and their views are represented at international gatherings concerned with child rights issues, including the process launched by the International Labour Organisation to develop a Convention to eradicate the most extreme forms of child labour, the efforts of UN agencies throughout the world to heighten awareness of child rights issues, and the planned international conference on Children and the Media of the Future to be held in Oslo in January 1999.