

In November 1999 PressWise Director Mike Jempson contributed to a three-day workshop with young people, media practitioners and UNICEF staff which led to the production of The Oslo Challenge, on the 10th Anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The challenge, directed at young people, media practitioners, teachers, and policy-makers, was designed to encourage a positive relationship between young people and the media. It would lead to the development of the European Young People's Media Network and the creation of the MAGIC website to which PressWise was a major contributor.

THE OSLO CHALLENGE

Laid down at a meeting organised by the Norwegian government and UNICEF on 20 November, 1999

The Oslo Challenge is a call to action. It goes out to everyone engaged in exploring, developing, monitoring and participating in the complex relationship between children and the media. This includes governments, organizations and individuals working for children, media professionals at all levels and in all media, the private sector including media owners, children and young people, parents, teachers and researchers.

The Challenge to governments is:

- to recognize children as an investment rather than a cost, and as potential rather than a burden, and to strive to integrate this reality into policy, including that related to the media;
- to meet national obligations set out under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to report regularly to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on policies and actions aimed at fulfilling Articles 12, 13 and 17;
- to ensure that resources are provided so that children and young people have access to information;
- to explore ways in which, without compromising professional independence, support can be given to media initiatives aimed at providing greater access to children, serving their needs and promoting their rights;
- to recognize that an independent media is fundamental to the pursuit of democracy and freedom and that censorship and control are inimical to the best interests of both children and adults, and thus to create an effective and secure environment in which the media can work professionally and independently.

The Challenge to organizations and individuals working for children is:

- to respect the need for independence of the media as a component of democratic society;
- to work together with media professionals to promote and protect children's rights and to respond to children's needs;
- to provide effective media liaison services to ensure that media have access to reliable sources of information on children's issues;
- to facilitate accurate coverage of child-related issues by developing media liaison policies that discourage misrepresentation in the interests of publicity and fundraising.

The Challenge to media professionals at all levels and in all media is:

- to raise awareness in the media professions about the rights of children and how they can be protected and promoted by good professional practices or harmed through inappropriate policies or actions;

- to work ethically and professionally according to sound media practices and to develop and promote media codes of ethics in order to avoid sensationalism, stereotyping (including by gender) or undervaluing of children and their rights;
- to resist commercial pressures that lead to children's issues and the rights of children to freedom of expression, fair coverage and protection from exploitation, including as consumers, being given low priority;
- to work to enhance the relationship between children and the media so that both grow and improve in understanding of the positive and negative power and potential of the relationship.

The Challenge to children and young people is:

- to know and understand their rights as laid down in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and to find and develop ways to contribute to the fulfilment of these rights, including the rights of access to information and to diverse points of view, and to find ways to promote their own active participation in the media and in media development.
- to learn as much as they can about the media so that they can make informed choices as media consumers and gain maximum benefit from the diversity the media offer;
- to grasp opportunities to participate in production of media output and to provide feedback to media producers, both positive and negative;
- to share their opinions about the media with those who can help to support a positive relationship between children and the media: parents, teachers and other adults and young people.

The Challenge to the private sector, including media owners is:

- to take into account the rights of children to access, participation, media education and protection from harmful content in the development of new media products and technologies;
- to make the best interests of the child a primary consideration in the pursuit of commercial and financial success, so that today's children become adults in a global society in which all people are protected, respected and free.

The Challenge to parents, teachers and researchers is:

- to acknowledge and support the rights of children to have access to media, participate in it and use it as a tool for their advancement;
- to provide a protective and supportive environment in which children can make choices as media consumers that promote their development to their full potential;
- to be as informed as possible about trends and directions in the media and, where possible, to contribute actively to forming such trends and directions through participation in focus groups, feedback mechanisms and by using procedures laid down for comment and complaints on media content.

THE RATIONALE

Once the world was flat; then it was round. Now its shape is defined by bundled networks of cables, the orbits of satellites, the hot points where people meet to communicate, reaching out from desert radio post to suburban billboard to the virtual realm of Cyberspace. Tomorrow's world - the world of our children - will expand even further along the global pathways of communication. It will offer the potential for a brighter global future; at the same time, the myriad opportunities of the media will also bring more complexity to ensnare the unready.

The powerful and close relationship between children and the media is explicitly mentioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the international instrument that almost every

country in the world has adopted as its promise to children. Article 17 of the Convention "recognises the important function performed by the mass media" and calls upon States Parties to "ensure that every child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources". The same article also encourages the media "to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child" and calls on governments to encourage the development of guidelines to protect children from harmful content.

A number of other articles in the Convention also engage the media in the promotion and protection of children's rights. Article 12 aims to "assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the rights to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child". Article 13 also underlines the child's right to participate in the media, including the "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice". At the same time, several articles aim to protect children from abuse and exploitation, including from "information and material injurious to his or her well-being", and Article 3 is an over-arching reminder that "in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration".

In the implementation of these fundamental rights, the media are in many ways children's best friend: across their wide diversity - television, radio, film, advertising, the Internet, print products, music and more - the media are able to protect, inform, educate, nurture, entertain, encourage and accompany children and young people in a unique way. But the same media also have the power and capacity to exploit, abuse, misinform, exclude and corrupt children, and in so doing deny them the rights the Convention aims to guarantee. With their substantial and growing influence at the very centre of children's lives, the media represent a potent force for both good and evil in the life of a child.

The relationship between the media and children - and between the media and the Convention - is complex, often misrepresented and far from realising its potential for good. In recent years much work has been done to explore different aspects of the relationship. This has ranged from the effects of screen violence on children to the abuse of Cyberspace by those who intend them harm, from the issue of children's right of access to the media, taking into account the tyranny of distance, the marginalisation of poverty and the boundaries of culture and belief, to the realisation that children's role in the media goes beyond the robotic to the unpredictable, the unexpected, the fantastic.

The power and influence of the media and of the commercial motive have provoked fear and at times a desperate call for control and censorship. Children and young people themselves have shown time and again how, if respected, consulted and engaged in the media process, they can help professionals produce better media. And a number of initiatives have grown to explore these topics, and in particular to see how the media can further the rights of children or at least protect them from accidental or deliberate contravention of their rights.

THE PROCESS

In 1996, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the mechanism tasked with monitoring progress in the realisation of children's rights and with advising on implementation of the Convention, held a theme day on children and the media. On the basis of recommendations from participants, the Committee set up a multi-sectoral working group to explore the issues involved in developing a positive relationship between children and the media, and in particular in furthering the implementation of Article 17 of the Convention.

The working group attempted to begin to map some of the initiatives and resources available on the issue, and to bring together individuals and organizations working in this area, including media practitioners and professional associations such as the International Federation of Journalists. In late 1998, the Norwegian Government and UNICEF responded to a request from the group to initiate a process that would not only continue this work but identify examples of good practice, forge co-operative links among the many sectors involved

in the issue and produce, where possible, resources that would help other players to develop the work further.

On 18 and 19 November 1999, as part of this response, more than 30 adult and youth participants from the worlds of film, television and radio, government, journalism, child rights advocacy, advertising and academe met in Oslo to share ideas and experiences in an attempt to identify good practice and gaps in the work done so far, explore possibilities and potential for the future, and recommend practical tools and mechanisms for moving ahead. They considered the relationship between children and the media under five broad headings:

- Children's right of access to the media, including new media.
- Children's right to media education and literacy.
- Children's right to participate in the media.
- Children's right to protection from harm in the media and violence on the screen.
- The media's role in protecting and promoting children's rights.

The OSLO CHALLENGE is the next step. It is launched on 20 November 1999, the tenth anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most ratified instrument in the history of the United Nations. This date was chosen to underline the importance of the Convention as a global platform for action and rallying point for the many groups and individuals who, in responding to the Oslo Challenge, can become part of the search for new to develop the relationship between children and the media.

In ten years the Convention has been a tool that has been widely used to improve understanding and implementation of children's rights. In the next ten years, however, the world will experience globalisation on an unprecedented scale, and the commercial pressures resulting from this will have an enormous impact on both the work of the media and on children and young people as media consumers and participants. The time is right, therefore, to synthesise good practice in the relationship between children and the media, challenge the media further, and send out a global invitation that will energise people from many different groups to join in the task of developing the powerful relationship between children and young people and the media who shape their world.

The Oslo Challenge signals to governments, the media, the private sector, civil society in general and young people in particular that Article 17 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, far from isolating the child/media relationship, is an entry point into the wide and multifaceted world of children and their rights - to education, freedom of expression, play, identity, health, dignity and self-respect, protection - and that in every aspect of child rights, in every element of the life of a child, the relationship between children and the media plays a role.

THE FUTURE

Building on the work undertaken in preparation of the Oslo Challenge, a number of dynamic processes will be initiated. These will include:

- the production of a resource pack containing awareness-raising, training and other materials for operational agencies to become active in exploring and developing the relationship between children and the media;
- documentation for the Committee on the Rights of the Child to develop further understanding of the reporting responsibilities of States Parties relating to Article 17;
- mechanisms to encourage and nurture relationships between young people and the agencies who work for their rights, the media and decision-makers in governments and industry;
- agendas for research and study, consultation and sharing;

- networks of people from many different sectors who are committed to working together to develop the relationship between children and the media and to meet the Oslo Challenge.

This ambitious process will be undertaken in a spirit of agreement that anything is possible in a world where the media industry, voluntary sector, intergovernmental agencies, governments and civil society all want to pull in the same direction to create a better future for children - a future in which their relationship with the media will be pivotal.