

Slander, sentimentality or silence?

What young people have to put up with from the media

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There are few young people who listen to the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme (willingly at least). Therefore, most will have missed John Humphry's introduction to an interview with the Home Secretary during the Labour Party conference, which summed up a dominant theme of contemporary journalism in the UK: that young people are anti-social and out of control.

'Tony Blair will address the big issues in his conference speech today – world peace and war and globalisation and so on. But for many people it's the little things that ruin their lives. The rowdy family next door. The children hurling abuse in the street. The thugs terrorising the old lady when she goes to collect her pension. The town centre turned into a battleground by drunken youngsters on Friday and Saturday nights. All that worries the politicians too of course, which is why we now have the 'respect agenda'.'

The way in which the media portray young people has a significant impact: the media are a dominant feature in almost everyone's lives and as a society we have come to believe that what they tell us must be true. In the minds of many *'a million headlines cannot be wrong'* and the gospel according to popular media is that if children are not *victims* of crime, disease, abuse, war or natural disasters, they are *perpetrators* of crimes and wrong-doing, making victims of the rest of us.

This article analyses the popular portrayal of children in the media by outlining some recent research into the phenomenon in the UK and internationally. It then discusses the way in which the stereotypical and biased representation of children, identified through the research, may impact on the rights of children, and raises questions over the media's responsibility to protect children and promote their rights.

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF CHILDREN: RESEARCH FINDINGS

There are various research projects that have looked at the way in which children are portrayed in the media and it is important to note that the stereotyping of children is an international phenomenon. Indeed, despite efforts by organisations such as the International Federation of Journalists, which launched its own initiative to improve responsible coverage of children as far back as 1998,¹ this pattern of stereotyping children remains evident on every continent.

This may reflect a universal perception of childhood as a time of innocence - and delight for parents (the 'aah' factor) - which accords children a status somewhere below that of citizenship. Their charm brings out in adults a sense of protectiveness, nostalgia, and superiority. If they are hurt or suffer misfortune, adults feel the need to express both

¹ www.ifj.org/default.asp?Issue=Children&Language=EN

sympathy and moral outrage. But when people transgress – whether the compliant role assigned to them by adults, or the rules laid down by adult laws - and display the first signs of rebellion, it alerts in adults an (Oedipal?) anxiety both about their own failings and negative prospects for the future.

In one notorious case some years ago a mother sought the help of the press to obtain better treatment for her young son who suffered from acute attention deficit disorder. When the story hit national under the headlines 'Worst Brat in Britain' and 'Terror tot', she was branded a heartless publicity-seeker. Her vilification wrecked family relationships and she left the country. In America she found the treatment her son needed, but when she returned to the UK some years later and asked her local authority to continue the treatment, she was told she could have the help providing she didn't speak to the papers. It was an ironic reversal of the media's potential for good. The right sort of publicity might have helped many more children obtain similar assistance. Instead the child had to resort to the courts to obtain redress.²

Of course, there are other explanations. It may simply be a lack of imagination – stories about children fit into a limited range of pre-ordained packages because it is easier that way. Coverage of children rarely features in their vocational training because, by and large journalists deal with adult themes in an adult world for an adult audience. It is unusual to see stories about how new social or fiscal policies might impact upon children, unless they are about child benefits or schooling, for instance. It is rarer still to find newspapers soliciting comments from young people themselves about the issues of the moment. After all, they are not the primary market for most magazines and newspapers. Yet, in the UK especially, human interest stories about children can have a powerful marketing function. Local paper features about schools, for example, guarantee extra sales as relatives buy copies to show others little John and Mary in the paper.

UK coverage

Stereotyping

In 1997, when teenagers from the youth journalism agency Children's Express³ analysed all 370 stories about children that appeared in the UK national papers during one week, they identified various stereotypes attached to children (see the panel).

Prevalence of stereotypes in UK national newspaper stories about young people during one week in 1997

<u>STEREOTYPE</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
<i>VICTIM</i>	37.5
<i>CUTE</i>	26.7
<i>LITTLE DEVILS</i>	10.8
<i>BRILLIANT</i>	9.7
<i>ACCESSORIES</i>	8.4
<i>BRAVE LITTLE ANGELS</i>	5.4

Source: '**Kids these days...**' Children's Express, 20.4.98.

These stereotypes have since been identified by a number of studies including one by MediaWise conducted in November 2003, which took a snap-shot of three national broadsheet and tabloid Sunday papers. The results presented a grim picture of the

² *The Guardian*, 24 May 1991, Disabled boy forces *Sun* to pay for 'worst brat' libel.

³ www.childrens-express.org

portrayal of children in the UK. In total there were 32 items about children, only two of which were positive about children's rights. In three of the articles parents' rights were championed over those of their children.

Children appeared as victims in six news stories and four features - including shocking material about child rape and voodoo killings. There were four stories about the children of celebrities, and one 'human interest' story described how a 12-year-old girl had dumped her 15-year-old runway boyfriend by voicemail.

Children were also referred to in two seasonal features about Christmas and Guy Fawkes Night, in two stories where they were incidental to the real storyline about adults, and in an article about saving schemes. Finally four political stories mentioned children: in one the tension between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown was described as 'childish'. A linked picture story suggested that the Chancellor was displaying his new baby as part of a 'charm offensive' against the Prime Minister.

There were also two powerful pictures that showed children as icons: the dead body of a child killed during the Soweto uprising in 1976, and a boy playing with spent bullets in war-torn Baghdad. Another picture story told of the joy of a 'sex-selection mum' who had at last given birth to girls. In these pictures children were being used to represent events and fulfil adult wishes and rights rather than considering children as individuals with rights themselves.

Children as problems

In 2004 a survey conducted by MORI for *Young People Now* magazine demonstrated that young people are increasingly represented as 'problems'. Of all the stories about them in UK national and local papers during one week in 2004, 71% were negative, 14% were positive and only 15% were neutral.

In 48% of the stories about crime and violence, young people were depicted as the perpetrators. 70% had boys as the offender and only 32% had boys as the victim. Girls were the offenders in only 10% of the stories and the victim in 91%. Contrary to the impression given by media coverage, official crime statistics show that boys are more likely to be victims of violent crime than girls and while 31% of schoolboys and 20% of schoolgirls admit to having broken the law - mostly petty theft - the police were involved in only 7% of cases. The media would argue that this apparent substantial bias, which offers a false impression of the reality of society, stems from the fact that 'news' by definition focuses on the unusual. But that ignores the equally important role of the media to offer up a mirror on society so that people are better able to understand what is going on around them. Media practitioners are more aware than many that perceptions are often more powerful than facts. By following an agenda that distorts perceptions of young people, the media does a disservice to both children and the wider society.

International coverage

Negative stereotypes of children are replicated in the media all around the world and when anyone bothers to ask young people they are quick to point this out. Journalists Sarah McCrum and Lotte Hughes interviewed children from Barbados, Canada, England, Israel, Northern Ireland, Palestine and Romania as part of a Save the Children project almost a decade ago.⁴ The children told them they disliked being represented by stereotypes - whether as lovable or amusing adjuncts to the adult world or as ignorant, aggressive and out of control '*outsiders*'.

⁴ Sarah McCrum & Lotte Hughes, *Interviewing Children: a guide for journalists & others*, Save the Children, 1998& 2003

Research by Glocalyouth⁵, who accuse the media of failing to focus on young peoples' civic engagement, have detected similar trends among mainstream media across the Europe:

'Young people are usually seen as synonyms of problems, delinquency, violent suburbs, drugs and rave-parties, especially if we are talking about young immigrants. These images appear especially in some documentaries and magazines (both printed and audio-visual) that portray urban culture.'

Studies of the press in East, West and Southern Africa, with which MediaWise and the International Federation of Journalists were associated, illustrated another telling feature of the media's peculiar relationship with children: if they are not victims, tearaways or child soldiers, they are invisible.

DISCUSSION

There are a number of ways in which the rights of children may be violated by inappropriate exposure and media stereotyping. Indeed, although few would approve of state interference with independent media, the need to protect children has invited intervention in some areas. Issues about the inappropriate exposure of children in the media are being discussed in Thailand where, in October 2005, Watana Muangsook, Thailand's Social Development and Human Security Minister called in news editors to discuss coverage of child abuse cases, after a 14-year-old rape victim had been identified by the media.

Under s.39 *Children and Young Persons Act 1933*, UK law prevents the identification of young people involved in court cases. This law recognises that young offenders deserve an opportunity to reform out of the glare of the media and public stigmatisation.

However, in some circumstances even these safeguards have not been enough as the media have substituted direct identification of children with stereotypical labelling of offenders; referring to them as Blip Boy, 'Rat Boy', 'Spider Boy', the Singing Defective – evocative but potentially dangerous labels. The 11-year-old 'Balaclava Boy' would spend his short life trying to live up to the media image foisted upon him, dying alone of a drug overdose aged 18.⁶ Further, week after week local newspapers successfully challenge attempts to prevent them from disclosing the identity of young people with Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). They cite press freedom and the public interest as the reasons for letting the neighbours know who has been impinging upon their rights (as if they didn't know already), even though, until very recently, the law prevents them from identifying children who are the subjects of legal proceedings for breaching an ASBO.

It is important that children's rights are protected in all aspects of their lives and that it is recognised that they are not always competent to consent to their own participation in the media. Editors are affronted by criticism from those who are upset by the media's apparently cavalier attitude towards children's rights: witness the uproar about schools refusing access to local photographers. However, they need to begin addressing the issues and consider the arguments, for example, by thinking twice about relying on pictures supplied by so-called 'citizen journalists' (anyone with a digital camera or mobile phone), and agreeing sensible practices about the representation of children. BBC and Ofcom guidelines lay great stress on protecting the rights of children, as does the newspaper industry Code of Practice policed by the Press Complaints Commission.⁷ They acknowledge that media professionals have a duty of care to ensure that media practices

⁵ www.glocalyouth.net

⁶ *The Guardian* G2, 15 May 2000, Chronicle of a death foretold, by Emma Brockes

⁷ www.pcc.org.uk

do not impinge upon children's rights. The problem is that editors and journalists do not always seem to get the message.

The relationship between the mass media and children is a thread that runs through the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*, to which the UK is a signatory. It recognises in Article 17 the vital role played by the media in alerting the public to abuses of children's rights, but also places a responsibility on them to promote the '*development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being*'. The *UNCRC* also asserts in Articles 12 and 13 that children and young people have a right to be adequately informed, represented and heard. Further, a child has the same right as anyone else to respect for family and private life under Article 8 *European Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

However, the pandemic of programmes such as 'Boot Camp', 'Little Angels', 'Supernanny' and 'Wife Swap', and 'sell your story' magazines like *Chat* and *Take a Break*, have ushered in a new age of voyeurism. Access to the private lives of children is now seen as 'infotainment', raising questions about the extent to which the adults (on both sides of the camera) have balanced human rights against the dubious benefits of short-term media exposure. The vulnerability of some participants may even be exacerbated by such publicity.

There must be some balance made between a child's right to participate and right to protection from harm. While scheduling conventions limit the use of imagery in TV broadcasts, because children can be traumatised by images of violence and death, children are still exposed to the violent and sexually explicit images used to market magazines and newspapers.

This apparent conflict between what is expected of the media and the way they represent children was the theme of a conference organised by the charity Quarriers, in partnership with MediaWise, held in Bath on 11 November 2005.⁸ 'Children's Rights vs Press Freedom: Who wins?' was an attempt open up dialogue between young people, the media and those with a responsibility for protecting children and promoting their human rights. Tessa Jowell, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Lynn Geldof from UNICEF and Bob Satchwell of the Society of Editors all insisted that the conference title offered a false dichotomy.

Bob Satchwell challenged the view that children and young people generally receive a 'bad press' pointing out that no editor would want to alienate future readers.

However, Lynn Geldof argued that this market-based approach is contributing to the democratic deficit.

"The print and broadcast media has the double function of holding those responsible for transgression or neglect to account and to be, themselves, accountable to society for the trust placed in them to inform truthfully," she said. "Yet whole sections of the UK print and broadcast media have colluded in the dumbing and numbing of British society by a diet of reality TV and tabloid fodder at the behest of market forces. People, children, are devouring the equivalent of fast-food and becoming flabby of mind and spirit."

Not enough was being heard from children themselves, "as citizens with additional rights and protections commensurate with their age and maturity," she insisted.

⁸ *Children's Rights vs Press Freedom: Who wins?* The Forum, Bath 11 Nov 2005. For details see www.quarriersforum.net

She saw the failure to teach modern media criticism as 'the biggest missed opportunity in education', a view apparently shared by Tessa Jowell who suggested that media literacy, combined with effective media regulation, was the best way to empower children in their dealings with the world as represented by the media.

CONCLUSION

This is an important debate. The reasons why the media, and society, should rethink their approach to coverage of children and young people – away from stereotyping with all its consequences – and promote media literacy go right to the heart of participative democracy. A new generation is growing up, disenchanted with depressing news and their misrepresentation, but with communications technology at their fingertips.

The mass media need to learn how to engage with children and young people in a more meaningful and equal way, especially if they wish to retain their legitimacy. As Rupert Murdoch warned an *'unaccountably complacent'* media industry earlier this year, there is a *'revolution in the way young people are accessing news'*.

'They don't want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information', he told US editors adding, with perhaps unconscious irony: *'They don't want to rely on a God-like figure from above to tell them what's important. And to carry the religion analogy a bit further, they certainly don't want news presented as gospel.'*

A survey by the Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics⁹ revealed that 92% of nine- to 19-year-olds have access to the Internet at school, and 75% at home, where 79% of young people use the internet without parental supervision.

According to a detailed ICM poll conducted for *The Guardian* in September 2005,¹⁰ as many as one third of young people aged 14-21 in the UK have created their own 'blog' or website. They spend almost eight hours a week online, downloading the music they want to hear for free, sharing information through their own chat networks, publishing their own views of the world, and making and distributing their own films. There has also been an upsurge in youth media production projects and global networks, like the Media Activities and Good Ideas by, with and for Children (MAGIC)¹¹ website which MediaWise helped to produce for UNICEF four years ago. Dissatisfied with what the mass media produce for them young people are outflanking conventional media and setting their own agenda. This could have a significant impact on future voting patterns – if it hasn't already – as well as on mass media and on conventional (commercial) popular culture.

No doubt media professionals will rush to their own defence and claim that the picture painted here is partial and unfair, but then that is precisely what young people say about the media's misrepresentation of children. It is the time to create a two-way communication platform between young people and the media industry and for sensible dialogue to commence about an issue which has been taken too lightly for too long.

⁹ www.children-go-online.net

¹⁰ <http://technology.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,16559,1586891,00.html>

¹¹ www.unicef.org/magic