

It was in Johannesburg, South Africa, that the fifth World Summit on Media and Children took place from 24 to 27 March – a great jamboree where a thousand or so delegates from around 86 countries congregated together with 300 young people between the ages of 13 and 16.

The summit provided the forum for the exchange of perspectives on the media between professionals, regulators, researchers, those civil society

groups concerned with children, and, importantly, young people themselves.

It was organised by the Children and Broadcasting Foundation for Africa (with Firdoze Bulbulia as primary organiser) with support from the SABC, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, the Department of Communications, and the Media Development and Diversity Agency.

This summit followed four previous World

Summits on Media and Children held in Australia, England, Greece and Brazil. Since its inception in Australia, these meetings have aimed to foster “the growth of a global movement for collaboration, policy development and exchange in the world of children in the media”, according to Patricia Edgar who was instrumental in the founding summit in Melbourne, Australia.

If it was Africa’s chance to host this event, what

Giving children a voice

But does allowing and encouraging “voices” amount to taking children seriously or to “empowerment” as the liberal discourse might have it?

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was remarkable was the extent to which there was an African presence among the delegates, achieved as a result of a number of pre-summits organised in several countries, but notably in countries such as Egypt, Mali, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Libya. This African flavour was then enacted in the organisers’ choices of music and entertainment (including Yvonne Chaka Chaka) and cultural activities that ranged from the daily welcoming of guests by a praise poet and the inclusion of traditional chiefs or kings on the stage for the morning plenary sessions¹.

The organisers had also succeeded in including many young people for whom a host of media-related activities and workshops were organised on the lower levels of the convention centre. Some of these were highly interactive and the young participants engaged enthusiastically in these activities. Their involvement in the main programme was arguably more problematic.

Under the broad theme of “Media as a tool for global peace and democracy”, the topics ranged from media regulation, media literacy and education, productions for children, and productions by children in various media including puppets, radio, print, TV and new media. Concerns with cultural identity (and its flip side, cultural imperialism), with children’s well-being (and HIV), with marginalisation, and with war, informed the presentations. Themes for panels were intriguing, for example “Producing for toddlers”, “Reporting peace”, and “Sport as a peace-builder”. Producers were present, but I was surprised that there were so few broadcasters and producers from the industrialised countries. (At the summit I attended in Greece they were more visible.) One exception was the opening and keynote address by Roy Disney, nephew of Walt and representing the Disney Empire. I did not understand why there was no real space to interrogate the politics of the Disney world. Needless to say the cartoon illustrations received enthusiastic responses from the young people – and the adult delegates.

I was repeatedly struck by how little space there was for critical engagement, whether with the producers and regulators or with those producing media with children. People reiterated a concern for “quality” children’s media yet what might constitute “quality”, and what this might mean under some of the very different circumstances that were described (from Palestine, Liberia, Colombia to New York or Mitchell’s Plain), was never adequately debated. The lack of any critical rigour was disappointing and in some ways it became a “show and tell” space and the critical questions, when asked, did not get the time or space to be explored.

However, the theme of the conference with

■ its focus on peace and democracy ensured that serious issues were addressed. Certainly the hegemonic idea of childhood as a time of innocence and joy perpetrated in much kiddies' media was subverted by the presence of children from across the globe but particularly from countries in the south, from war zones and where economic deprivation has resulted in grave social problems.

I was profoundly moved in one plenary session when a former Liberian child soldier shared the platform with Ian Stewart, former correspondent for Associated Press in Sierra Leone, a posting he chose out of his deep personal concern for the phenomenon of child soldiers and his desire to publicise and influence their plight. Ironically he was shot in the head by a child soldier. (In a subsequent conversation he recalled a particular incongruous detail that remains an image in my mind – the child at this road block was wearing a bowler hat.) Unsurprisingly perhaps, there was nothing light about the former child soldier who now participates in a radio project and spoke of the ways in which such children are forced or enticed to take up arms, of their abuse and their struggles to reintegrate into their social worlds. Perhaps surprisingly, the former correspondent (author of *Ambushed*), with no bitterness directed at the child soldiers, continues his concern with them in spite of being disabled.

The voice of this child was one of the youth delegates who spoke in plenary sessions. The young teen delegates were expected to attend plenary sessions. At times they sat through discussions that must have felt irrelevant to their worlds. The determination of the organisers to have children's voices heard resulted in children being nominated daily to say what they wanted in the media. Yet it is precisely this notion of "voice" that is problematic. Allowing and encouraging "voices" does not amount to taking them seriously or to "empowerment" as the liberal discourse might have it. And it runs the risk of being perceived as patronising.

Certainly one young Pietermaritzburg school boy who approached me was feeling powerless and angry, and experienced being given voice as tokenism. He questioned me as to whether I thought that the children's voices had been heard. Certainly they had spoken and I had heard him say what he thought the media should address at the previous day's plenary. In spite of this he clearly did not feel heard in any meaningful sense.

An arguably patronising attitude to giving children voice disallowed the notion of real dialogue, of both speaker and listener engaging. The approach to children's voice presumed children as both canny and innocent, as having an authentic voice with little recognition of the fact that children have specific historic contexts and are socialised, sometimes also as racist chauvinists. At its most extreme edge this construction of the child as all-knowing was articulated by a delegate from the SABC in her proposal that children should be consulted at every stage of the production process! Rather than debating what children might contribute, and when and where their contributions would be valuable, the childish voice was constituted merely as beneficent.

If being given space to say what you think on a public stage was not specially effective, the summit provided delightful and poignant moments of children speaking in media made of or by children. One such moment is recorded in the video made by the Nomadic Children's Project. Vinay and Meenakshi Rai record their young daughter (perhaps nine or 10 years old) interviewing nomadic desert children. She (as children tend to do) asked questions outside the normalised frame of professional documentaries and which defy the assumed authority of the interviewer. She was curious about how they lived and asked the small group of nomadic children how often they washed. They replied "about once a month". When asked why they didn't do so more often, they responded that they would be beaten if they did. Turning the question back on her, she replied she bathed daily. Their response to this was slightly horrified. "Don't you get cold?" they demanded. This little cameo of children learning about each other gestures precisely to the possibility of media-making by children that works against the usual structural hierarchies and learning of the realities of others.

For me there were a couple of surprising gaps in the programme. First, the really exceptional, interesting or controversial South African youth media were not show cased. The Soul City, LoveLife, TshaTsha interventions were absent as were the pressing debates of production approaches and assumptions. Then, in line with this, little time and few presentations actually focused on what actually is in the media for children.

While I have included aspects of the summit that both pleased and troubled me, I must hasten to add that beyond the confines of the formal sessions in the many restaurants around the Convention Centre and in Mandela Square, the discussions continued late into the night. Here other issues were debated and certainly one found common ground with those seeking more critical debate and discussion of the media practices. Here, other projects were dreamt up and international research projects instigated. No doubt they will reach fruition by the next World Summit on Children and the Media in Sweden in 2010.

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