

young and
MEDIATED



Each year on the 16th June we celebrate Youth Day and I wonder what the day means to young South Africans. Countries all over the world celebrate Youth Day as a way to highlight the importance of young people in society. In South Africa, it is this and much more. Here this specific day was chosen to commemorate the Soweto Uprising of 1976, when young South Africans rose up against the inequalities, atrocities and injustices of the apartheid government.

Born Free

WITHOUT A CAUSE?

By Vanessa Malila

These were young people that we now consider the heroic ‘young lions’ – who defended their rights and helped to bring about the end of apartheid (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006). They are seen as the social force behind the political struggle, urging change and having “intensified and led the internal struggle from the early 1970s until victory in the early 1990s, and have, in the person of Steve Biko and hundreds of others, given their lives to the cause” (Abdi, 1999: 157).

But what of the young people of today? They live in a country with a democratic government, albeit one that is still finding its feet. They have access to all the rights that their parents were denied – the right to education, the right to freedom of expression, the right to protest publicly, and the right to vote in multiparty elections. The parents of the Born Frees¹ had a ‘cause’ against which to protest politically and with which to engage at the political level. This new generation, however, is imagined to have been given all the things they need to succeed by the new democratic government – education, employment opportunities, a racially inclusive society, and much more. They should be engaging politically to improve democratic processes rather than to protest against their situations. The term the ‘Born Frees’, itself epitomises the expectations placed on these young people. They are expected to be free of the burdens of the past, to be free of racial, political and economic prejudice and to flourish in a country which offers them so much.

There are no official limits to where they can go, work or live, or on whom they

“It’s all the same, if you vote or not, because nothing improves. Your vote does nothing.”



82%

Likely to vote in the next national elections



78%

Likely to vote in the next municipal elections

Figure 2: Proportion of respondents surveyed who would vote in forthcoming elections

may date or marry. They have experienced a series of peaceful democratic elections that increasingly turn on new issues and personalities with diminishing links to the past. They consume news provided by a reformed public broadcaster, and have increasing access to privately owned radio and television broadcast news, as well as to increasing amounts of private and international news on subscription satellite television (Mattes, 2012:5).

Of course, the reality is far different. The inequalities that many of the parents of the Born Frees faced continue to be faced by young South Africans. The question is how are young people engaging with the issues that affect them, and what political activity are they engaging in to change their situation?

Images of Youth Day usually depict young people helping others in their communities, volunteering their time and celebrating the freedoms that previous young generations fought for. The Mellon Media and Citizenship Project² has conducted research with young people to find out more about how they think about, feel about and engage in political and civic activity and how this informs their identity as citizens. There are some interesting results which paint a picture of a young person that does help in their community, does volunteer their time, but is also disengaged, distrustful and distanced from political activity and politics. When asked what activity they had participated in over the last 12 months, most young people had ‘helped a neighbour’ (79.1%), been ‘involved in a social group’ (67.4%) or been ‘active in a religious activity’ (64.9%). Here we see a young person who gets involved in civic duty and has an active social life.

On the other hand, political activity and engagement is significantly lower. Only 16.6% had been active in a political party and only 21.9% had attended a public demonstration in the last 12 months – which is hard to believe if one considers the daily reports of ‘service delivery’ protests which plague the country. (See Figure 1: Activity undertaken by youth surveyed in the last 12 months)

Despite low levels of political engagement, many of the young people we spoke to had voted and would vote again in both municipal and national elections – though to varying degrees. (See Figure 2: Proportion of respondents surveyed who would vote in forthcoming elections)

What is worrying however is that many of the young people that we spoke to directly had very negative perceptions about voting, many echoing the findings by Mattes (2012) that the Born Free generation are “less committed to democracy than their parents and grandparents” (2012: 143). Our focus group discussions with unemployed youth in both urban and rural areas of South Africa revealed that they had a particularly negative attitude towards voting, with many stating that they do not vote as a result of feeling let down by this political activity in the past.

“No it [voting] is useless. I’m not going to vote anytime soon.”

“Ja, I think most people feel that way when it comes to the vote, because some parties make promises, they promise



Figure 1: Activity undertaken by youth surveyed in the last 12 months

heaven and earth... And then after the election, they don’t do any of that.”

“It’s all the same, if you vote or not, because nothing improves. Your vote does nothing.”

“It certainly improves the party that is in power or that person who is in power at the time, otherwise not service delivery.”

This picture shows a young South African who is politically disengaged and apathetic towards their ability to do something about the situation they find themselves in. We often complain that young people are disengaged and that they aren’t active citizens – but what does this actually mean and what are we doing to help them become better citizens?

Researchers have long argued that the education system is a key tool for teaching young people to be responsible citizens in a democracy. The education system is key in developing active and responsible citizens (particularly in post-conflict societies) because young people are often regarded as the future of a nation (Giddens, 2000), as not having the baggage that the older generations have, and because they may be more open to new ideas of citizenship (Jansen, 2009; Jarausch & Geyer, 2003). In South Africa, the curriculum is cognisant of the need to provide an enabling environment to build active citizens. However, those who developed the curriculum were also burdened with a legacy where racist nationalism and citizenship were easily interchanged during apartheid, and are fearful of imposing those same kinds of ideals on the future of South Africa. This means that the education system, which should be a key space for developing one’s citizen identity, is falling short in South Africa.

The other key institution where young people should be learning what it means to be an active and responsible citizen, what it means to engage and participate in political activity, is the media. The media has been argued to play a positive role in creating

a link between marginalised citizens, and political discussions and participation (Hartley 1996, Hermes 2006), and in doing so playing a key role in citizenship. The media has for a long time been regarded as central to individuals' construction of citizenship, and it is argued that through consumption of media audiences are influenced in their participation and engagement with democratic processes. Indeed, within a normative framework the very purpose of the media is to provide useful and relevant information for citizens to ensure they are informed about issues within the public sphere which affect them. In a country like South Africa, where the media has made a significant shift in its role in society and has in one way or another been central to the ideology of 'nation building' after the end of apartheid, this need is perhaps even greater.

Despite this, our research shows that the media are failing dismally. (See Figure 3: Media coverage vs youth interest of crime and health)

Despite extremely high levels of trust in the media (79.5% of young people trust SA TV news, and 78.3% trust radio news), young people are not getting information that is relevant to their lives. Not only is the kind of information they are looking for (education, crime and health) not appearing in the media they consume, but they are also not hearing their own voices in the stories they consume. (See Figure 4: Education coverage in South African media)

In research I conducted around education reporting which consisted of a content analysis of 420 articles in three South African newspapers (*The Daily Dispatch*, *The Mail & Guardian*, and *The Grocott's Mail*), I found that most stories were void of the voice of the youth, preferring instead to quote school or university management (23.8%), the public (18.3%) and government officials (19.5%). In addition, research conducted by Media Tenor of 8736 articles across South African media (Malila, 2013: 35) shows that media coverage of youth issues is either largely neutral or negative.

Our focus group discussions confirmed that young people picked up on this negative coverage and were influenced by it.

"The media only tell us about the problems. That is what makes me apathetic."

"It depresses me. I get angry - I get so angry and so sad. I would like to see more positive coverage."

"90% of the news is focused on violence."

"They must give us something we can learn from and leave us with the strikes. We are not learning anything from the strikes."

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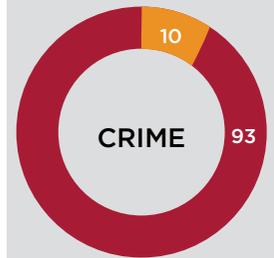
Endnotes

1. The Born Frees are those South Africans born after 1994.
2. The Media and Citizenship: Between Marginalisation and Participation project began life in 2011. The project, led by professors Herman Wasserman and Anthea Garman, is based in the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University, and critically examines the ways in which the South African media realise their potential to contribute to the reconstruction and renegotiation of citizenship.

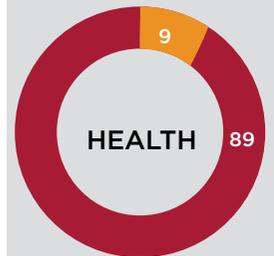
We expect a lot from our young South Africans. But are we giving them the tools they need to fulfil those expectations? Dahlgren (2009) argues that citizenship entails engagement and participation, civic and political identity, and being able to negotiate these concepts in a way that one moves beyond thinking about citizenship to doing citizenship. The articles in this section of *Rhodes Journalism Review* on the Youth, Identity and the Media interrogate many of these concepts, and the institutions that I've discussed above – education, the media, the government – and in doing so give us some insight into the complexities of being a young person, and developing an active and responsible civic and political identity.

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Media coverage
Youth interest



Media coverage
Youth interest

Figure 3: Media coverage vs youth interest of crime and health



Media coverage is about education



Is reported in a positive way

Figure 4: Education coverage in South African media