

Don't harm the children

We are all outraged when bad things happen to children, but the very reporting of these outrages can violate children's rights to be protected, say Gemma Harries and William Bird.

Three key issues can be identified in relation to the representation of children in the news media:

1. children are minimally represented,
2. children are often negatively represented, and
3. children are stereotypically represented.

The Media Monitoring Project (MMP)'s Empowering Children and Media (ECM) project, as well as numerous other pieces of research (both by the MMP and by international researchers) supports these three findings.

The ECM found that stories about children comprise only 6% of the total news coverage, which seems inequitable when it is considered that children comprise 44% of the South African population.

The media's representation of children as victims of war, poverty, disaster, death, and disease is ironic, given that children are afforded special protection throughout the world.

Special protection

Children are protected by international conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which all but two countries in the world are signatories. In South Africa they are also protected by numerous pieces of national legislation, special offices and bodies, such as the Office on the Status of the Rights of the Child, policies, guidelines, and cultural practices.

So how can the poor representation of children in the media be explained?

To begin with, good news tends to be bad news; newsworthy content tends to be negative rather than positive in nature. So, on one level, it can be understood that stories about negative things that happen to children are more likely to be newsworthy.

But there is more to the newsworthiness of children than simply negative news content. The special protection afforded to children adds an additional dimension; crimes against children are often represented as being more extreme than crimes against other members of society. For example, a man assaulting another man is seldom as newsworthy as a man assaulting a child. Similarly, a man who rapes his child is seen to be more extreme than a man who rapes his wife.

As a consequence, stories about child abuse often tend to focus on the brutality, details of the incidents, and tend to further victimise the children concerned by emphasising their status as victims, rather than as survivors of the abuse.

In addition, broader questions surrounding the causes, contexts, and prevention of the abuse are not addressed.

While some of the most extreme details about children's experiences are often revealed in the media, their stories are rarely told.

For example, there are numerous images of starving children, children affected by conflict and HIV, and countless stories of children who are abused.

In most instances, however, there are seldom any follow-ups or conclusions to the stories provided.

As a result the stories on children appear to exist

in isolation and their resilience is ignored.

Positive values

The representation of children has a further dimension founded on some of the most positive values associated and attributed to children.

Children are also commonly associated with hope, innocence, purity, and happiness. The binary opposites of hope and despair that are associated with children highlight not only the extreme nature of the representation of children, but also the emotions and power inherent in the representations of these extremes.

Thus, while children are afforded the greatest protection, the violation of these protections can, and does, lead to some of the most powerful stories and images in the news. It is common for starving children to be used as the face of famine, and for emaciated, sick children to be used as the face of HIV and other diseases.

Perhaps most powerfully, images of children have been used to demonstrate the horror of war and conflict. For example, the image of Hector Peterson being carried during the 1976 uprisings, or of Kim, running naked down a street during the Vietnam war.

Not only are some of these images among the most powerful news images; they have also become iconic of war and conflict.

The power inherent in images of children presents media with an ethical dilemma. Does the power of the image outweigh the potential harm to the child, and the best interests of the child, as outlined in the UNCRC?

With the exception of some of the stories in the daily tabloids, all of the crimes against children that make the news do actually happen and should be reported.

It is at this point that the majority of media in South Africa fail to consider the special protection afforded to children.

Special protection means that not only government, family members, churches, and civil society bodies need to ensure that children are afforded protection, but so too must the media.

Basic ethics

Often the application of the basic ethical principles not only ensures that children are afforded the special protection that they deserve, but also that the resulting news stories are better.

The basic principles which should guide journalists, according to the Poynter Institute, are:

1. Seek the truth and report it as fully as possible,
2. Maintain your independence, and
3. Minimise harm.

In addition to the further violation of children's rights through the naming and/or identification of children in cases of abuse, for example, the powerful representation of children can also serve to further reinforce negative stereotypes.

The ECM project found that one in every 10 stories on child abuse identifies the children concerned, which is an explicit violation of the child's

rights to privacy and dignity, and a contravention of South African law.

Frequently, stereotypes are most powerfully perpetuated through images. While images of children in times of conflict, poverty, and disease are powerful and evocative, they can also be problematic because they not only undermine and demean children, but in many instances, also perpetuate negative gender, racial, and health stereotypes.

Stories and images of starving children, children being abused and violated, children as "Aids orphans", and victims of wars and natural disasters, have clear racial and gender dimensions.

Often these serve to perpetuate stereotypes of African children as poverty- and HIV-stricken, and girl children in particular, as helpless victims.

Many media claim to reflect or hold up a mirror to society, to raise and challenge issues, to give voice to people's concerns.

By and large, the media achieve these aims. So, for example, if the media does a story on government, a government spokesperson or representative is asked to comment or supply an opinion.

Children's voices

However, the same is not true for children. In most instances, the media fails to ask children what they think in those news stories that are specifically about children and children's issues.

The "bad" news stories, such as stories about child abuse, need to be told.

The MMP's work with children during the ECM project demonstrated that children want to know about instances of abuse.

Participants told us:

- "I think it is good to have these articles about abuse and rape, as then grown-ups are made aware. Mothers can warn their children. They will be more careful about sending them out at night in the dark."
- "I don't think most people realise they have to do something about it [abuse]. Parents must stop abusing children because we are the leaders of tomorrow. We need courage from the parent. They must do something and stop abusing us."

It is essential that the media play their part in affording children the special protection that they deserve and which is their right. By asking some of the following simple questions, the media can help to protect and further the rights of children:

- First, do no harm; does your story cause potential harm to the child?
- Is the story in the best interests of the child?
- Does your story meet your usual standards of professional and ethical criteria?
- Have you considered the possible consequences of your story? Children will have to live with it long after you're gone (World Health Organisation Guidelines).
- Are children's voices and perspectives included?

For further information on these and other issues relating to children and the media, see the MMP's website on www.mediamonitoring.org.za