

Absent voices

Children in the media

Representing children in the news is one of those areas riddled with contradictions, complex issues and ethical dilemmas so challenging they make rocket scientists' jobs look easy. But why is this? How does our media report on children, what could be done differently, and why should we care? This article offers some answers to these questions.

By William Bird

Let's consider how children are represented. Media Monitoring Africa's most recent research¹ indicates the following. Stories that mention or are about children account for nine percent of all news items. Children currently account for 39% of South Africa's population, and given the additional constitutional protections that they are afforded, it is clear that not only are children under represented, but their issues are further marginalised as a result. If we look at how often we hear the voices of children, their portrayal is marginalised still further. Their voices are heard in five percent of stories. In other words, less than one in ten news stories we see/read will mention or be about children and of those only one in 20 will access the voice of a child. Given these results it is unsurprising that the roles in which children are represented are similarly limited, with the top three roles, Child 27% (where the child is identified only as a "child" in the item) Victims and Learners both at 19%. The top three roles account for 65% of all roles attributed to children, which indicates minimal diversity in representation. The roles are also gendered with girl children more likely to be portrayed as victims than boy children, and boy children more likely to be shown in positive active roles than girls.

Perhaps one of the most positive results of the monitoring indicates that only two percent of stories



Sydelle Willow Smith

young and
MEDIATED

further violated the rights of the child. Such stories would be instances where a child was identified where he or she should not have been, or where reports were clearly not in the best interest of the child. While this is a significant improvement since 2003 (where 10% of stories violated the rights of the child) it means approximately 155 stories of the sample monitored still violated children's rights.

While dramatic there is little to suggest that these results are unique to South Africa. MMA's research in other parts of our continent indicate similar trends. However, given the high levels of child abuse, where SAPS figures² indicate just over 2 children murdered each day and just under 135 children sexually or physically assaulted and abused each day, the media's marginalisation of children and children's issues should be of extreme concern.

One of the fundamental reasons we don't hear as many voices of children as we should is because getting their voices can be hard. It's hard, because unlike adults journalists need to spend time with children to get quality answers, it's hard because they usually also need informed consent. It's hard because journalists need to be especially careful about what questions

We can fix our justice system, we can have better policing, we can pass more matric learners, we can have job subsidies or unemployment grants, all have value, but unless children are a core component, it will be like treating a deadly infection with a plaster.



Sydelle Willow Smith

they ask and how they ask them and ensure they are age appropriate, and it's hard because in addition to all these considerations journalists also need different interview techniques.

It isn't just the interviews but the laws and policies, and until recently the general ethical guidelines, that were difficult to find and adhere to. As an NGO that advocates for increased children's participation in the media, we find both us and the media professionals are forced to deal with some basic contradictions, where we say use more children's voices, but at the same time avoid and do not interview children as it may cause them harm. The contradiction arises precisely because reporting on children requires nuance and certain knowledge sets. For example, it would be very interesting to hear children's views on how best to combat child abuse, but it would be highly harmful to out of the blue ask a child who has been abused to relay her/his experiences of the abuse.

While the laws around children and media are still slightly confusing and located in different places, for example some in The Children's Act, The Criminal Procedures Act, as well as the Child Justice Act, guidelines are now available to help ensure better ethical choices and reporting on children.³ In addition however the new Press Code adopted by the South African Press Council now has a dedicated section focused on reporting on children.⁴ The section emphasises the importance of the Best Interest of the Child principle⁵ which is not only a useful element in resolving ethical dilemmas, but the section now provides a solid basis for newsrooms to make better decisions. It also enables audiences to help hold media accountable if they err.

The representation of children raises a more basic question, why should we care, after all aren't children's issues simply another interest group vying for media space among others?

The short answer is no. There are three core reasons why media need to radically shift the manner in which they engage with and report on children. The first is a rights based argument. Like adults children also have the right to freedom of expression, and the rights to receive and impart information. Children also have a right to participate in matters that affect them. The exclusion of children and children's voices is a denial of these fundamental rights. But more critically Section. 28(2) of the South African Constitution goes further than South Africa's international obligations by stating that, "A child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child"⁶. Even if we were to consider arguments that mainstream media do not as a general rule target children as audience as some justification, it is difficult to imagine how children's exclusion and marginalisation can be seen to be in their best interests.

The second reason relates to our nations future. Children matter, not just because they have rights and our constitution tells us they do, but because our tomorrow depends on how we treat our children today.

Unless we place children at the centre of addressing our most pressing challenges, any and all of them will be exponentially larger. If we are serious about reducing poverty, unemployment, crime, gender based violence and inequality, children are critical to any long term solution. We can fix our justice system, we can have better policing, we can pass more matric learners, we can have job subsidies or unemployment grants, all have value, but unless children are a core component, it will be like treating a deadly infection with a plaster. Unless we address the challenges in our education system from birth. Unless we stop setting our children up to fail before they enter school, by addressing critical early childhood development needs. Unless we stop exposing our children to violence, and unless we challenge gender and its construction with our children, we will continue to merely treat symptoms and not their causes. Clearly most of our crucial challenges require systemic change, and are the responsibility of the state as well as all citizens, but media have the power to help shift the core issues in our society and how they are perceived. There is as such an overwhelming public interest argument when it comes to reporting on children and children's issues.

Perhaps the most basic reason relates to news media's future. Children that the MMA work with highlight how they don't often read newspapers or watch the news, precisely because they feel excluded, or scared or potential victims, or because they simply don't hear themselves. Given the common representations it is therefore hardly surprising that children don't consume news; but they should. Not just because it will help inform them and help shape their views and debates, but because news media, and print in particular are losing audiences and their financial models have been thrown into disarray. The idea that nearly 40% of the population are excluded simply because they are underage – or not part of the media's "target" defies common logic, and suggests a huge missed opportunity. Anyone with children in the home will attest to the power that children have in determining what gets purchased. Multinationals have not only cottoned on to the power that children have long ago, but also the value of building life long consumers. Social media and access to the internet (despite these still being limited in South Africa) mean that children have a plethora of information sources available to them, which means traditional media will need to work hard to get children's attention. If they don't, the chances of them starting to read when they fit an adult profile are that much smaller, and chances of them going for a particular brand for which they have negative connotations are even smaller.

Media marginalising children and their issues not only denies them their rights, it violates a basic tent of journalism - to act in the public interest. It is also bad for business.

While reporting on children and children's issues is arguably one of the most challenging areas of journalism, sustainable shifts can be made and a few

Like adults children also have the right to freedom of expression, and the rights to receive and impart information.

Often the best stories, as is clear from investigative journalism, are those where the hard work is done, in researching, checking, thinking and being ethical. The same holds true for reporting on children.

practical steps can have a significant impact. Three of them can be remembered as: Pink elephants, Get down and Take the hard way.

Pink elephants. If a person is asked not to think of a pink elephant, the person will think of one none the less. The first recommendation is to make children the pink elephant of each story, or to think of the aspect that people may not think of, or is present but not seen. To ask, for each story, if there is a children's angle or how the story will impact children. We know for example that transport strikes can impact commuters, but how do they affect children? Children we spoke to about this raised issues of vulnerability of having to walk further, longer travel times, or greater cost, which meant deciding in some cases to eat or get transport. What does corruption mean to children and how do they experience it? What does it mean for children to have a public broadcaster in crisis? There are very few issues that don't impact children directly. By thinking of the pink elephant, some of these angles can be explored and offer fresh stories.

Get down. Perhaps not straight off dancing but in addition to thinking of children's angles to mainstream news, it is critical to include children's voices where it is in their best interests and where reasonable to do so. The parlous state of our education system has received widespread coverage, but despite children being most effected only a handful of stories seek children's views on the issues. It is not only critical to speak to children but to get down to their level. Approaching children requires different interview techniques it also requires more time and explanation. Children are often very perceptive and need to feel that they are taken seriously. Spending the time and resources will ensure their views are heard, and not just the views they think adults may want to hear.

The hard way. Reporting on children is incredibly challenging. There are extreme ethical dilemmas, as well as practical concerns and considerations. The additional protection afforded to children in the constitution means that not only do journalists need to do their job properly, but that the standard has to be higher than it is for any other group of people. The

most recent version of the Press Code is very useful in this regard not only because of the inclusion of the Best Interests of the Child Principle, but because it also includes the ethical principle of minimising harm. This applies in general terms to reporting, but especially so where children are involved. So it may comply with the law to run a story about a child who has been raped and not name or identify the child, but it is a clear violation of the principle of minimising harm to interview the child about her/his experience. The process of telling the story exposes a child a secondary trauma and can deeply undermine the child's well being. Not only do such practices harm the children, the information gleaned is often of little journalistic value beyond potential shock and horror. It is critical that in every instance where children are concerned the child's best interests are paramount. There may be some exceptions to this but they will be exceptional. Often the best stories, as is clear from investigative journalism, are those where the hard work is done, in researching, checking, thinking and being ethical. The same holds true for reporting on children. Reporting well on children is extremely hard, but it is equally rewarding.

While the results continue to highlight the marginalisation of children it is also clear that our media is getting more right more of the time. Given the substantial challenges our media is facing this is a significant achievement. We now have a dedicated children's section in our press code and a growing awareness and respect of children's basic rights to dignity and privacy. Media do sometimes get these things wrong, and when they do they can have devastating impact, but these are increasingly the exceptions. We also have some excellent journalists and media are giving greater coverage to issues of education. Joan van Niekerk, from Child Line said, "children are the future but where is the investment?" She was referring to the state and private sector at the time but it is clear that those media that report well on children and children's issues are not only living up to their audiences rights and needs, but are also investing in their own future.



William Bird is the director of Media Monitoring Africa and is both an Ashoka and Linc fellow, both in recognition of his work focused on children and the media. William has been monitoring the media for 16 years, and has been working with media to entrench human rights values. William has two boys, both of whom have been introduced to the joy of media monitoring. williams@mma.org.za

Endnotes

1. See: http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/index.php/resources/entry/promoting_childrens_rights_coverage_of_children_in_south_african_and_zambia/ accessed 6 June 2013
2. See: http://www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/crimestats/2012/downloads/crime_statistics_presentation.pdf accessed 06 June 2013
3. See: http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/images/uploads/mma_editorial_guideline.pdf accessed 6 June 2013
4. See Clause 8 <http://www.presscouncil.org.za/ContentPage?code=PRESSCODE> accessed 6 June 2013.
5. See Section 28(2) Constitution of the Republic of South Africa
6. See: <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons2.htm#7> accessed 06 June 2013