Media portrayal of children has a profound impact on attitudes to children and childhood, and is an important influence on adults’ behaviour towards children.

Media depictions provide role models for young people, influencing their attitudes and expectations. The way in which the media represent, or even ignore, children can influence decisions taken on their behalf, and how the rest of society regards them. The media often depict children merely as silent ‘victims’.

According to the International Federation of Journalists, the media’s portrayal of children perpetuates a collection of myths:

- Families in developing countries, children living in poverty and victims of war and disaster lose their individuality and humanity. They are often portrayed as helpless sufferers, unable to act, think or speak for themselves.
- Coverage of children’s issues tends to focus on the sensational while ignoring the broad array of issues confronting children, as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Media reports about children are often once-off stories, with little or no analysis or follow-up.
- Children’s confidentiality is not always respected.
- When children do feature in the news, they are often portrayed as stereotypes such as ‘starving children in Africa’ and ‘irresponsible teenagers’.

Stories of child abuse, children involved in crime and street children tend to dominate, while the broader issues of children’s rights, such as the right to play, recreation and sport, or the right to be free from discrimination, are often not regarded as newsworthy. The result is an unbalanced impression of ‘children as victims’, or ‘children as dangerous’.

Children’s Express, a British organisation that involves children and young people in media production, and in writing and editing news stories themselves, monitored national newspaper output for one week in 1998. The researchers discerned “seven deadly stereotypes”. In order of frequency, these were:

- ‘Kids as victims’: 31.5 per cent
- ‘Cute kids’ (gratuitous images): 26.7 per cent
- ‘Little devils’ (children being ‘demonised’): 10.8 per cent
- ‘Kids are brilliant’ (exceptional children): 9.7 per cent
- ‘Kids as accessories’ (i.e. the property of parents): 8.4 per cent per cent
- ‘Kids these days!’ (adults’ nostalgia for the past): 7.5 per cent
In 2003, the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) investigated the representation of children and children's rights in the South African news media. The key research findings were:

1. **Children are under-represented in the news media** Children feature in only six per cent of the news items according to adult monitors, while the child monitors found that only 26 per cent of their monitored stories contained children.

2. **Children are predominantly represented as victims** In the adult monitoring, more than 25 per cent of the items portrayed children as victims. On the whole, children are portrayed most often in negative terms and in limited roles. The children's monitoring confirmed these trends. The children commented that the media should make an effort to represent children in more positive roles.

3. **Children are represented mostly in negative stories** Both the adults' and children's monitoring revealed that news stories in which children appeared were predominantly negative. According to the adult monitoring, one in two stories featuring children related to negative topics such as crime, violence, abuse or disasters.

4. **Male and female children are equitably represented, but are still stereotyped** Despite this apparent equality, further analysis showed a perpetuation of gender stereotypes in how children were represented. Girls were more likely to appear in stories about child abuse, while boys appeared mostly in sports-related stories. This reinforces the stereotypical portrayal in the media of women as victims and men as empowered.

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### Discrimination

This view of children may reflect a universal perception of childhood as a time of innocence, or of risk. 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 sympathy and moral outrage. Alternatively, they are viewed as either potentially corrupting, or already corrupted – fledgling lives who may grow up into dangerous adults if they are not properly policed, or demon offspring who are already a danger to society. As a result of these stereotypes, children are accorded a status somewhere below that of citizenship.

Portraying children as victims or ‘cute’ appendages of adults, or portraying children as corrupting influences, gives a limited and false impression of them – and also feeds discrimination and prejudice.

Evidence of stereotyping is provided in a study conducted by MORI (Market and Opinion Research International) for the British magazine *Young People Now* in 2004. The study noted: “These groups [of young people] perceive negative stereotyping in the press and feel that it affects their everyday lives in terms of how adults view them
when they are out in public places with their friends. They also believe that journalists are quick to take a moral high ground in terms of assessing young people's behaviour.” They saw this as a hypocritical stance, given that they believed journalists were prone to exaggerate in order to sell papers and make money: ‘They'll get anything to put in there if they're short of something to write. They don't care if it hurts someone's reputation.’

Gabriel Kessler, sociologist and researcher at Argentina’s National Scientific and Technical Research, says: ‘The media give scant thought to the important role they play, to how they can generate fear among society. I wouldn’t say that the media’s largely irresponsible coverage of juvenile delinquency is the primary cause of the excessive punishment meted out by the police. But it seems to me that the press outlets operate through hypotheses, completely discredited by scientific studies, that in some way lend support to that legitimation. They report from the perspective of the lost youth, hooked on drugs, unemployed, a career offender, and this can legitimate – even it is not explicitly mentioned in the coverage – the perception that the offending youth needs to be removed from society.”

Examples

A study in Hungary, called ‘Latent youth deviance’, reported in this online magazine (insert link), concluded that a lot of teenagers believe that "aggression is somehow a way of having fun". This conclusion may be the result of research – but what if you were to substitute either the word ‘youth’ in the title, or the word ‘teenagers’, with ‘black’, ‘female’ or ‘gay’? Would we even question the discriminatory and negative nature of such an article?

This article from a local US newspaper highlights how reports often depict youths as a ‘nuisance’, with little or no balanced view from, say, a young person or perhaps a local youth group:

The Sun newspaper in the UK, among others, has conducted a long-running campaign against ‘hoodies’ - these are teenagers, or even younger children, who wear hooded tops. In this case, the paper reports how visitor numbers at a shopping centre have apparently risen following a ban on hoodies – although there appears to be little proven correlation.

Another article, which is accompanied by a threatening image of a teenager, declares that the UK Prime Minister “backed a ban by Kent’s giant Bluewater shopping centre on teens who skulk in chav-style gear.” The “chav-style gear” is a derogatory term used to describe hooded tops and other clothes worn by some sections of British society – often poorer and more excluded groups.

Racist assumptions and attitudes towards women in the UK who were culturally-specific clothing, such as veils to cover their faces, or religions symbols, have provoked outrage and national debate from a wide cross-section of British society. But objections to the stigmatisation and targeting of teenagers, children and young people from, for example, child rights groups, have in contrast received limited coverage in UK media.
‘Dangerous’ boys

Of all the stories about young people in UK national and local papers during one week in 2004, 71 per cent were negative, 14 per cent positive and only 15 per cent neutral. In 48 per cent of the stories about crime and violence, young people were depicted as the perpetrators. A total of 70 per cent had boys as the offender and only 32 per cent had boys as the victim. Girls were the offenders in only 10 per cent of the stories and the victim in 91 per cent.

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.

Race and ethnicity

A critical deficiency identified in a discussion on rights and justice in a study of the Latin American media was the limited inclusion of issues relating to Race/Ethnicity. Only 0.27 per cent of the pieces on the universe of children and adolescents made reference to factors involving Race/Ethnicity.¹

The coverage of Gender was virtually non-existent, appearing in only 0.07 per cent of the analysed content.

A key issue for the majority of the countries in the Latin American study was the indigenous question. In nations such as Bolivia and Guatemala, indigenous communities make up a majority of the population. UNICEF's State of the World’s Children 2006 reports that indigenous children are subject to cultural discrimination and economic and political marginalisation.

In addition, they have less chance of being registered at birth and are more susceptible to health problems and to abuse, violence, and exploitation. In this context, argues the report’s authors, investigative work by the press could effectively contribute to promoting awareness of the difficult circumstances these populations confront. According to UNICEF, “Information on the extent to which indigenous children are denied their rights to survival, health-care services and education relative to the national average is limited. Case studies in individual countries suggest that infant and child mortality rates are higher among indigenous groups than in the national population.” (p.19)

Minority languages

In many states the access of minority communities to the media is seriously limited or in some cases completely restricted. A lack of linguistic plurality within the media environment has been described as a form of ‘soft assimilation’ in that the only available media is the language of the majority and does not reflect a content which is sensitive to minority needs, preferences and issues. Article 17 of the Convention on the Rights of the child, paragraph (d), insists that States “encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority

The Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, of the The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, as produced a set of guidelines on the use of minority languages in broadcast media. Read them [here](#).

### Reporters' role

Despite efforts by organisations such as the International Federation of Journalists, which launched in 1998 its own initiative to encourage responsible coverage of children, this pattern of stereotyping children remains evident on every continent. However, coverage of children rarely features in journalism 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 affect 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. News is regarded as something primarily for and about adults.

A new generation is growing up, disenchanted with depressing news and misrepresentation of them; with new technology at their fingertips, they are creating their own media online and bypassing traditional methods of media production. We have already seen the creation of online communities and broadcasting channels in Bebo, Youtube and MySpace. And, in 2007, US vice-president Al Gore launched a new cable channel for young people, Current TV, for which the content is entirely produced by young viewers. Mr Gore said it would let viewers “engage in the dialogue of democracy”

Journalists subscribe to a code of conduct, published by their media union, professional association or employer. However, in practice most journalists have a hazy idea of the detail in the codes and rely on a general understanding of their principles. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has integrated child rights in the professional code of ethics and runs programmes in awareness-raising. It supports an international exchange of best practices between unions, countering the commercial pressures on journalists and media for “sensational news” and enabling children to be seen and heard. The IFJ guidelines, *Children's Rights and Media: Guidelines and Principles for Reporting on Issues Involving Children*, were adopted by journalist organisations from 70 countries at the world's first international consultative conference on journalism and child rights, held in Recife, Brazil, on May 2nd 1998. These guidelines will help children to see that journalists do take their issues and views seriously. The guidelines include, for example, the requirement that journalists avoid the use of stereotypes and sensational presentation to promote journalistic material involving children;

By providing children and young people with opportunities to speak for themselves – about their hopes and fears, their achievements, and the impact of adult behaviour on their lives – media professionals can remind the public that children deserve to be respected as individual human beings.
Media and the rights of children

There are a number of ways in which the rights of children may be violated by inappropriate exposure and media stereotyping. Article eight of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) promotes the right to respect for the family and private life; Article 14 ECHR promotes the prohibition of discrimination.

Children’s rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) include:

- Article 2 prohibiting discrimination
- Article 12: the child’s right to express views freely in all matters affecting them
- Article 13: the child’s right to freedom of expression, which is restricted by law when necessary for the protection “of national security, or of public order … or of public health or morals”
- Article 16: protection against interference or attack on “privacy, family, home or correspondence … honour or reputation”
- Article 17: recognition of the importance of the media, and encouragement of the dissemination of material “of social and cultural benefit to the child” and “the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the

These articles clearly establish rights for children that could be violated by irresponsible media practices. In particular, CRC Article 17 lays down that the media are responsible for promoting the welfare of the child.

Violation of children’s rights includes insensitive reporting and misrepresentation, or denial of space for their opinions on various issues. As such, paragraph (e) of Article 17 says that States must: “Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18.”

General Day of Discussion on children and the media:

Source: Children’s Rights and Journalism Practice – a Rights-based perspective Syllabus commissioned by UNICEF Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) © UNICEF - Dublin Institute of Technology 2007

Rights, Childhood and the Public Agenda: A comparative analysis of Latin American press coverage (Redandi, 2006)

International Guidelines for Journalists (link)

Media toolkit
As the above examples demonstrate, the use of language can be crucial in perpetrating myths, stigmatising children, and inciting prejudice. In the same way that people with disabilities have called for the use of terms such as 'handicapped', or 'retarded' see CRIN's guide to disability language for more examples to be rendered redundant, so reporters should also be wary of using derogatory language to describe children. As the examples above suggest, 'hoodies' in the UK, 'deviants' in Hungary, or 'delinquents' in the US and elsewhere are used with apparently acceptable frequency.

Privacy laws and press codes

Laws on child privacy in different countries vary, with often discriminatory results. For example, in the Czech Republic, child victims have much less protection from media exposure than children convicted of a criminal offence. When an underage boy recently killed his schoolmate his name, his address and private data were carefully concealed from the press.

Meanwhile, an eight-year-old who had been abused by his mother in the worst possible manner had no such right to privacy, and details of his identity and the abuse he suffered were reported in newspapers. Child psychologist Alena Černá says that being constantly reminded of what happened prevents children from healing:

“The ability to forget is a deeply rooted safety mechanism in children. If you have a traumatic experience as a child this is one of the very simple ways of coping with the situation. But if you are open to publicity you are reminded of that trauma over and over and hurt over and over and can’t do anything about it.” Read more here.

Similarly, in Pakistan, the picture and name of a nine-year-old female victim of child prostitution, recovered from a brothel in Swat district, was splashed across different newspapers. Read more here.

It should be noted that media guidelines usually recommend that children convicted of a criminal offence should not be identified either, although press complaints guidelines frequently prioritise the 'public interest', and freedom of information, over the privacy of children. So, for example, in the view of the Australian Press Council, having a “law to the effect that it would absolutely forbid the publication of the name of a deceased child, the victim of a notorious crime, would be difficult to justify. The public there would presumably be rightly interested in the trial of any person charged with the commission of that crime. The Council believes that, in the absence of exceptional circumstances, the public has the right to be informed as to the names of persons appearing before the courts, especially in criminal matters.” No further mention of children is made.
Indeed, press complaints bodies are often simply self-regulating, and guidelines usually support the reporting of legal proceedings, since this is deemed to be in the public interest. Laws, however, may restrict which information is permitted to be published, for example, the identity of the accused before they have been found guilty.

In fact, press codes are often non-existent, or are fairly superficial and do not mention children other than in the context of privacy, such as in Sri Lanka. Discrimination is rarely a consideration.

The United States' Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics asks that journalists merely 'avoid' stereotyping by race, gender, religion...but there is no mention of age or children

In the UK, the Press Complaints Commission code of practice includes sections on both children and discrimination, yet does not link the two.

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**Checklist: What makes media child friendly?**

The Children's Rights Centre, South Africa, has produced a check list on child-friendly media.

The organisation notes that child-friendly media helps with children's development. “They produce programmes or reports that prove how capable young people can be and provide positive role models that the children and young people can not only emulate but also identify with - role models from their own life-situations”. The questions to be asked are as follows:

**Do They Help Raise Awareness on Children's Needs and Rights?**

- Do they report on the deeds and omissions of others, and act as the eyes, ears and voices of civil society - a society that includes children?
- Do they produce news stories that help people to understand the world of children? That imparts ideas about the rights of children give good coverage to a wide range of children's issues? Especially vital issues such as the effects of state policy, and in particular economic policy, on children's lives?
- Do they explain the background to experiences they write about, so that the story illustrates a truth about children?
- Do they know the laws and conventions that exist to protect children, and investigate any breach of these rights?

**Are They Careful To Protect Children' Right To Privacy And Dignity?**

- Do they not name or identify in any way child perpetrators of crimes? Do they not name or identify child victims of abuse as this may put them at risk and give them a poor image?
• Do they not make any reports or show any photographs that may humiliate children now or in the future?
• Do they not invade the privacy of a child or his or her family in order "to get a good story" as this causes anxiety and distress?

Do They Project A Positive And Realistic Image Of Children?

• Do they provide images of children to show a variety of human beings deserving of respect, who happen to be young?
• Do they provide realistic images that children can identify with, of children from a variety of communities?
• Do they provide images that encourage respect and pride in self-identity, in all children and young people - without bias in favour of the younger “pretty” girls or the expensively-dressed child nor discrimination by race, gender, culture or ability?
• Are they careful not to stereotype children into the usual sensational categories of “Innocent little angels”, “helpless, passive victims” or “lost-generation young devils”?

Useful resources
