Children, discrimination and the media
CRIN is a global network coordinating information and promoting action on child rights. More than 2,000 member organisations and tens of thousands more activists from across the world rely on CRIN for research and information.

CRIN presses for rights, not charity, for children and is guided by a passion for putting children's rights at the top of the global agenda by addressing root causes and promoting systematic change. Its guiding framework is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
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. 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.
- Media reports about children are usually one-offs, with 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’.

As well as the representation of children as a group, different children may be portrayed by the media in different ways. For instance, boys are often portrayed as ‘dangerous’, even though official crime statistics show boys are more likely to be victims of violent crimes than girls.

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

Meanwhile, 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.” (State of the World's Children 2006, p.19)

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.
Examples

A study in Hungary, called 'Latent youth deviance', reported in this online magazine, 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.

Bahrain's Gulf Daily News reported on the 'invasion of dwarfs and ankle biters' over a summer period. The article reads: "Children were everywhere this August, screaming in restaurants, running around in cafes, messing up shop shelves."

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.

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**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.”

Source: Children’s Rights and Journalism Practice – a Rights-based perspective
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Further information
- Rights, Childhood and the Public Agenda: A comparative analysis of Latin American press coverage (Redandi, 2006)
- Media toolkit

Language

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.
Checklist: What makes media child friendly?

The Children's Rights Centre, South Africa, has produced a checklist 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

- Journalists Talk About Media Violence Against Children (Save the Children Norway)
- The Media and Children's Rights: a Resource for Journalists by Journalists (UNICEF)
- Interviewing Children, A Guide for Journalists and Others (Save the Children UK)
- Children's Rights Centre, South Africa - has produced a check list on child-friendly media
- Reporting on children in the context of HIV/AIDS - a journalist's resource (Various, South Africa)