

# Prime time for children: media, ethics and reporting of commercial sexual exploitation<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

*Children aren't considered "hot topics" for the media, not unless children figure in a scandalous or heart-rending story or in some shocking data or statistics.*<sup>2</sup>

This conclusion by media and child experts in the United States holds as true today as ever. If child abuse and exploitation have figured prominently in the mainstream media in recent years, it has invariably been in the context of horrifying evidence from court proceedings, or better still, the involvement of some well-known (adult) public figure. American researchers have found that although children under 10 made up almost 20% of the US population, they represented only one in every 60 characters on primetime TV. Children's voices are not heard - especially not by the rest of the community. But then *the world of television is not like the real world. Its demography reflects its purposes: to produce audiences for advertisers. Looking at it through the prism of age reveals a population curve that, unlike the real world, but much like the curve of consumer spending, bulges in the middle years of life. That makes children and the elderly relatively neglected.*<sup>3</sup>

This analysis of the impact of the free-market is one aspect of prevailing currents of control of media and information sources. Another is the tendency of some governments and state authorities to manipulate information, usually through tight state controls of broadcasting media, to meet political imperatives which often do not reflect the considered needs and rights of abused sections of the population.

It is in this context that media coverage of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, like the other aspects of children's lives, takes place. The media industry is either a commercial undertaking which exists to produce profit, never more so than today with the growth in media outlets, achieved through new technology, bringing ruthless competition for limited markets, or it may be subject to political and state controls. In either case, journalists and media workers struggle to maintain a professional centre of gravity. In reality, it is futile for them to ignore the economic and political conditions in which they work.

Yet media are, unarguably, a major influence on cultural development throughout the world; with a responsibility, many believe, particularly in sectors like public broadcasting, to inform and to educate. The challenge facing media professionals, whether they own newspapers or broadcast media or whether they are employed to gather, edit and disseminate information, is to define rules and regulations by which they work and to articulate principles of performance which are transparent and can be tested in a public manner.

But how? The question, as this paper tries to consider, requires serious examination of the way media work, of how existing principles of accountability apply, and how media must be freed from reins of political and economic control which limit professionalism and undermine ethical standards.

The media's role in the evolution of commercial sexual exploitation is complex. On the one hand, they tell the stories of abused and abuser, through news reports, photographs, documentaries, and drama. But on the other, they can themselves become the exploiter, for instance by creating sexually provocative images of children in news or advertising, or, at worst, as the vehicle for child pornography, or sources of information for paedophile networks and sexual tourism.

Furthermore, the way the media portray children has a profound impact on society's attitude to children and childhood, which also affects the way adults behave. Even the images children themselves see, especially of sex and violence, influence their expectation of their role in life.

This paper does not seek to provide easy answers to complex and difficult issues nor to ethical dilemmas. But there are standards to be set and guidelines which media can adopt themselves in addressing the need for a public information policy which provides people with extensive, reliable and ethical reportage about the way children are treated in society. Some suggestions are made in this direction throughout this report and in its conclusions.

Finally, although there is much that can be improved in media performance, the conclusions are not only intended to make media more accountable and journalists more responsive to systems of complaint and public scrutiny. It is also a question of encouraging debate within media about the portrayal of children and their exploitation. This is an issue which defines the good health of a just and decent society and is, therefore, a matter of profound professional concern for all who work in media.

## 1. MEDIA, CHILDREN AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

The international legislative and regulatory framework relevant to the role of media and the commercial sexual exploitation of children is ample, but not specific. These clauses do not constitute an exhaustive list, but offer some important pointers on the role and responsibility of journalists, and the media in general. For example:

**The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989) enshrines children's right to freedom of expression (Article 13); to protection of privacy and against attacks on his/her *honour and reputation* (Article 16); and also calls on the mass media *to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child* (Article 17). Articles 34 and 36 commit governments to protecting children from all forms of exploitation, including pornography.

**The European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights** (1996) also emphasises children's right to express their own views in decisions affecting them, and calls on national bodies to provide information on children's rights to the media.

**The Council of Europe Recommendation 1286 on a European Strategy for Children** (1996) introduces the call for a change in the way children are viewed in society. The media should *promote children's right to a healthy and balanced development*, and all professionals who come into contact with children should have special training on children's rights (Article 8).

*The publicising of children's rights is a first step to increase public awareness and promote change in the traditional view of the child*, declared the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly<sup>4</sup>. It highlighted the negative effects of the media on children, and wanted to see more controls over new information and communications technologies.

The Council of Europe's **Recommendation No.R (91)11, concerning Sexual Exploitation, Pornography and Prostitution of, and trafficking in, Children and Young Adults**, is an important one. It highlights the media's role in reporting this issue by inviting them *to contribute to a general awareness of*

*the subject and to adopt appropriate rules of conduct.* It also warns against the abuse of children's images and voices in an erotic context. On the matter of law, it judges that while the public should be informed about the conviction of child pornographers, the identity of victims and alleged offenders should be protected. And it demands an end to publicity for sex tourism.

The Council of Europe **Recommendation No.R (85)11 on the Position of the Victim in the Framework of Criminal Law and Procedure** draws attention to the interests of the victim, and the need to protect him/her *from any publicity which will unduly affect his (sic) private life or dignity.* And **Recommendations No.R (92) 19** and **No.R (89) 7** focus, inter alia, on the use of new information technologies for the distribution of pornography.

European Union legislation also refers to the issue in its 1989 **Television without Frontiers Directive**, (Article 22) which bans programmes which might *seriously impair the physical, mental or moral development of minors, in particular those that involve pornography or gratuitous violence.* Yet it provides a get-out for broadcasters who select broadcast times or use technical measures to ensure that minors would not *normally* have access to the programmes.

## 2. RAISING AWARENESS OR SENSATIONALISING: A TWO-EDGED MEDIA KNIFE

The important role which media can play in raising public awareness of the abuse of children and in combatting all forms of criminal and sexual exploitation is well understood. But the issue is not as clear cut as many would like; media coverage can shine the spotlight on those directly responsible, but the victims all too often are also caught in the glare of publicity.

In the report of the Council of Europe's Committee on Crime Problems<sup>5</sup>, the experts emphasised *the responsibility of the media and their potential contribution to any policy aimed at preventing the sexual exploitation of children and young adults. The term media denotes here any means of expression transmitting a message for individuals or groups. In its broad sense therefore, the term covers means used for conveying information, such as the printed press, books, radio, television, videograms and advertisements; it also includes the "producers" who use such media (publishing firms, radio and television companies and advertising agencies etc).*

The Committee of experts warned:

*Often the mass media function as a two-edged knife in this area of concern. The unravelling of sensational sex and crime cases involving children and young adults tends to overemphasise the issue and to blur the picture. Sometimes, though, it is the media which help to uncover cases of sexual exploitation and to raise awareness of the problem.*

*But it is also the media that generally infiltrate the public with liberal and tolerant attitudes towards child pornography and prostitution or provide the ways and means (for example advertisements) by which this sex gratification may be achieved. Therefore, their co-operation and their orientation towards safeguarding the rights and the dignity of children and young adults is extremely important.*

In February 1996, the **Guardian** newspaper printed a two-page article by the award-winning reporter Maggie O'Kane. It described the life, and death, of girl prostitutes on the streets of Bradford, in England. It was a sensitive, perhaps overly-emotive, yet gripping piece of writing; accompanied by a useful set of proposals for supporting the 'street kids'. Next to it, was a sizeable photograph of an anonymous 13-year-old prostitute, with her shirt open to her waist.

This was the angle which alarmed Eva Aurland, Youth Coordinator of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which has launched a major campaign against child labour. She condemns the picture as sensationalist and unnecessary. Her view is shared by Rachel O'Brien of the Children's Society in the UK, which helped with O'Kane's investigation. Child abuse victims in homes would not be photographed, their identity would be protected, she argues. Yet once on the streets, although they are -- in the law's eyes -- suffering assault every day, they are 'fair game'.

It cannot be denied that the media play a crucial role in bringing the horrors of child exploitation into the public arena, and can be extremely influential. American research reveals that 72% of the public obtained knowledge of child abuse from newspapers, 56% from radio and TV. In 1992, a Swiss journalist arranged a child sex-tour through a travel agent. He wrote such a devastating account of the agent's operation, that the subsequent public outcry forced the agent out of business. At the same time, media coverage of prosecutions under laws against sex tourism, now in operation in at least 12 countries, also helps to warn off men who might be tempted by the idea.

There can be dangers in saturating the public with too much exposure of the issue, thereby creating acceptance and indifference. Many observers have warned of the public's "famine fatigue" when exposed to persistent, harrowing images in television coverage of recent disasters in Africa. The same problem may arise if coverage of children remains singular in its focus on the plight of the victim or the salacious nature of the offences involved.

Media researcher Nancy Signorielli sees two sides to sensationalism:

*Although child advocates may argue that sensational coverage distorts and exploits a serious problem - perhaps doing more harm than good - sensationalism solves several **editorial** problems; that is, it can be the response of reporters and editors trying to fulfil the responsibility to cover serious social issues, while continuing to turn a profit. Sensationalism permits an important but unpleasant topic to be covered in such a way that it still captures the readers' attention - and sells magazines.*

Eva Aurland would like to see the media place more emphasis on the role of the police, politicians, and other authorities in protecting the children, rather than the children themselves. Her colleague at the ICFTU Elsa Ramos agrees, urging more analysis of the social causes: the pimps, the drug culture, the parents in poverty who are proud to have sold their daughters for a sum which will enable them to support the rest of the family. "Media should not be so shy about putting the blame on the individuals responsible for the exploitation, and the governments who condone it", she says. For example, newspapers which uncovered the activities of a Bolivian lawyer who, they alleged, paid kidnappers US\$40 for a boy whom he sold to a Belgian couple for US\$10,000.

But media organisations must invest more time and effort into investigating such stories, if they want to avoid falling foul of defamation laws. It is easier to interview the children, who are hardly likely to sue. In a time of down-sizing and falling editorial expenditure on training and investigative journalism generally, the outlook for more in-depth media coverage is bleak.

Nevertheless, media need to broaden the scope of reportage. The story of child sexual exploitation in general and its commercial aspects in particular is not being told in full. To examine how this can change requires a look at the professional freedoms which journalists require to work effectively, a summary of the principles or guidelines journalists and programme-makers should follow, and the pressures -- legal, financial, or cultural -- which are standing in the way.

### 3. SETTING STANDARDS FOR MEDIA

The work of journalists, broadcasters, and media organisations is regulated at four different levels:

1. **Codes of Conduct:** Most journalists usually have their own professional code of ethics, formulated by trade unions or professional associations. Usually a form of self-regulation;
2. **Guidelines:** Media organisations themselves, especially in the public service broadcasting sector, may draw up guidelines for professional conduct. Usually a form of self-regulation;

3. **Structures for Regulation:** certain regulatory bodies, such as press councils, may be established each with different powers and responsibilities and which may, or may not, have the force of law to support them;
4. **Legislation:** the law may be used to underpin notions of professional journalism and the systems set out above. The law may also support structures for licensing journalists and regulations providing penalties for breach of ethical conduct.

Legislation circumscribing the media and commercial sexual exploitation of children includes laws for the protection of children, such as the withholding of information identifying children in court cases, in care, or as victims; laws to protect children from moral corruption; laws restricting pornography; and general laws on freedom of expression.

The Canadian Criminal Code, for instance, makes it an offence to publish anything that depicts a child performing a sexual act or assuming a sexually suggestive pose while in a state of undress. In Norwegian law, on the other hand, there is no general protection of public morals, except for a ban on pornographic material.

With regard to codes of professional conduct, we have found no journalists' organisation which offers a specific code of good practice for covering the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

It must be said that although journalists are conscious of a values-related system in which news and information is reported, many of them are ignorant of the form and exact content of the codes of conduct to which they work. There are no clearly established international standards, although the **IFJ's International Code of Principles on the Conduct of Journalism**, agreed in 1954 and now under review, contains the key elements of a journalist's ethical responsibility. Any code will reflect standards of journalism according to understood values within society. It will also deal with questions of enforcement and disclosure, often accepting that openness enhances accountability, credibility and, ultimately, freedom.

Inevitably, the role of codes of ethics in journalism, which begin with sweeping generalities, becomes important when resolving the ethical dilemmas which will arise in particular cases of reporting. In the area of reporting on children and commercial sexual exploitation, there are four closely-allied ethical dilemmas surrounding professional conduct and investigation of the subject:

- Confidentiality of sources;
- Undercover journalism and use of subterfuge to obtain information;
- Co-operating with, and making information available to law enforcement agencies; and intervening in events under observation;
- Identification of individuals.

#### a) **Confidentiality of Sources**

The right to safeguard the anonymity of sources of information is crucial to the journalist's ability to investigate. In Sweden and other Nordic countries, this right is enshrined in law. An Act passed in 1993 in France laid down that:

*Any journalist who appears as a witness concerning information gathered by him in the course of his journalistic activity is free not to disclose its source.*

The law also controls searches of media premises, which must not obstruct journalists in their work. However, in most countries journalists have to fight to defend this right, often risking fines or imprisonment in the process. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in its Journalistic Standards and Practices, for instance, upholds the principle of freedom of information and considers the protection of a journalist's sources to be an important element of this principle, but it reminds journalists that 'protection of sources is not a legal right'. CBC says it will not advise employees to defy a court order, but will provide legal counsel.

Lars Bruun, in his review of ethical codes, found that 42 journalists' organisations around the world made mention of professional secrecy. For instance the Nigerian Union of Journalists' Code of Conduct reads: *It is against the ethics of the profession to divulge information received in confidence, no matter what the consequences.*

This principle was given backing in law in 1981, when the High Court of Lagos State ruled that the Senate of the National Assembly had exceeded its authority in summoning a journalist to disclose the confidential sources of an article. Often, the court's decision as to whether a journalist may legally withhold the identity of sources depends on the circumstances surrounding the case. In Japan, for instance, the Sapporo District Court interpreted the Code of Civil Procedure as allowing journalists to treat sources as 'an occupational secret', unless the information was required to ensure a fair trial:

*A journalist alleged that parents were complaining about child abuse in a local nursery school. The owner of the school sued the journalist for erroneous and defamatory reporting. Under questioning, the journalist refused to identify his sources. The courts upheld his privilege on the ground that, when a fair trial is not at issue, compelling disclosure of confidential sources would improperly impair the reporter's pursuit of his profession.*

Journalists recognise that betraying sources not only inhibits their own ability to investigate; it also makes it more difficult for every journalist to work, and may even put their lives at risk, as well as the safety of the informants. The exploitation of children is such a sensitive issue that many abuses would never be revealed unless the people who provide the information: children, prostitutes, carers, and many others, could be confident that their anonymity would be preserved. Strengthening the journalist's rights in this area should be an element in any strategy aimed at creating the best professional conditions in which to examine the process of commercial sexual exploitation of children.

## **b) Undercover Journalism**

Ethics codes are useful and they work most of the time. But sometimes genuine conflicts arise between values, and ethical decision-making is required. This difficult skill is like other skills of journalism: it takes training, time and effort to become good at them.

The classic conflict of values comes when a journalist believes it is necessary to abandon the rule of truth-telling, by telling lies or using subterfuge in order to obtain or confirm information, especially about illegal activities. In her review of 28 codes of ethics in 26 European Countries, Tiina Laitila found that 86% made reference to the use of fair means in information collection. However, the definition of 'fair' is open to debate. Clause 5 of the Code of Conduct of the National Union of Journalists (UK and Ireland) states :

*A journalist shall obtain information, photographs and illustrations only by straight-forward means. The use of other means can be justified only by over-riding considerations of the public interest.*

Deciding when the public interest becomes 'over-riding', and what 'other means' are permissible, is left up to the conscience of the journalist, or often to the employer. This clause affirms that journalists are *entitled to exercise a personal conscientious objection to the use of such means.*

But the conditions in which "other means" apply need to be carefully monitored. It must be borne in mind that the pressure of commercial competition, and the consequent imperative to be first with sensational news, often contributes to a climate in which subterfuge and 'cheque-book' journalism become standard practice, not for reasons of public interest but primarily for reasons of circulation and commercial advantage.

The challenge facing journalists and those who support high standards of journalism is to create the conditions for sound professional judgement. Sometimes decisions may coincide with commercial advantage, often they will not.

Most ethical guides would acknowledge that it may be ethical to lie, but any journalist who faces such a dilemma must be convinced of the relevance and weight of the public interest, conscious of the harm it might do to credibility, and willing as soon as possible to face a "publicity test" -- public scrutiny of the circumstances. Journalists investigating the commercial sexual exploitation of children, should consider carefully whether it is justifiable to lie to, or deceive, either the exploiters, or the victims, in order to uncover the facts.

In her analysis of honesty in investigative journalism, Jennifer Jackson calls for an 'emotional' *allegiance to truthfulness*: a hatred of lies.

*Yet our allegiance to truthfulness needs also to be in part rational; it needs to be reflective, judicious. While it will not normally even occur to people of honest disposition that the end they seek might justify telling a lie, such people can recognise that in quite exceptional circumstances, the end they have in view does justify their lying. They will, of course, reach such a decision reluctantly and with caution...*

Journalists can apply the 'publicity test' in advance of an investigation by assessing whether the public would regard the deception as justified. But they should also ask themselves whether there is no alternative route to the story, which does not involve lying.

It is unlikely that the public would object to the subterfuge employed by Dutch programme-maker Aart Zeeman who used a hidden camera in order to track down the makers and vendors of child pornography in Amsterdam. Jackson herself concludes:

*It may be suggested that investigative journalists who are prepared to lie to get their stories (and the editors who print their stories) are hypocrites, lying in the name of truth. Yet...lying in order to detect and expose lies is not necessarily hypocritical; sometimes it may be morally necessary or permissible for a journalist to lie, and then the journalist's lie will (when revealed) appear justified even to those who are really honest, who genuinely care about truthfulness.*

Nevertheless, an assumption that media are *always* licensed to deceive in order to get a story, undermines the moral authority of journalistic ethics. In the context of the commercial sexual exploitation of children there are important distinctions to be drawn, particularly because it is not just the pimps and pornographers who are involved, but the children themselves.

A researcher who interviewed children working the streets in British cities, for a Channel 4 documentary *The Care Connection*, remembers: "For the first 10 or 20 seconds they were very suspicious. But as soon as they realised we were not the police they immediately relaxed. They just opened up completely. They saw that we were not going to take anything from them - or give anything to them. And once they started talking they wouldn't stop. They came to trust us."

But there *are* times when the media do take something from the children. Their exploitation by media professionals in pursuit of a 'good story' or an award-winning documentary can damage, even unintentionally, the dignity and self-esteem of children.

There is an ethical line to be drawn between subterfuge required to uncover the largely illegal activities of exploiters, and investigation of the children themselves. This may not be easy, given that working 'undercover' generally means total secrecy. But the fact that so many of the children are eager to find someone they can trust and who will listen to them, underlines their vulnerability. Experience of deception will further damage their self-esteem, and their relationship with others.

Journalists and media organisations need to apply the highest possible standards of honesty and openness when dealing with exploited children.

In practical terms, this means a greater emphasis on ethical questions in journalists' training, to encourage 'a more finely tuned moral sense'. This should focus on concrete examples of specific dilemmas, including the coverage of children's exploitation. It also requires a constructive and supportive debate within newsrooms about these issues, as well as a greater awareness and sensitivity within the media about public attitudes on child pornography and exploitation.

### **c) Co-operation With The Authorities**

Just as journalists are committed to "truth-telling" they are, as citizens, called upon to respect notions of community. Should journalists work hand-in-hand with the authorities and law enforcement officers in reporting on child exploitation? It is a complicated question, on which little guidance is given by formal ethical codes.

Aart Zeeman's team followed the Amsterdam police for a year while making their documentary. However, this can also be a dangerous strategy. In Taiwan, one of the major television stations recently broadcast film of reporters accompanying police on raids of bars and brothels. It included scenes of young men and women being questioned, apparently without any special regard for minors, and with only token efforts to avoid filming their faces. (It is important to recall that there is a newspaper tradition behind most ethics codes and sometimes this does not address the problems of broadcasters. Occasionally journalists involved in "live" coverage may, unthinkingly transmit material which causes harm. In such cases, the technology may rob a television producer of the time for reflection which is vital to sound ethical decision-making.)

It is vital that journalists do not become identified in the public mind with security forces, for exactly the same reasons which apply to the protection of sources. But does this mean that journalists who discover evidence of illegal trafficking or exploitation of children, for example, should not pass it on to the authorities?

Again, this is not an unusual dilemma, but it is one of the most difficult to resolve. Convincing arguments can usually be marshalled for and against almost every case. It is a dilemma which depends upon the circumstances, and the conscience of the individual journalist. Aart Zeeman believes the media should not behave as 'the third or fourth arm of the police', and would not want to pass on data outside that broadcast in the programme. His view is that anything which serves to link the media more closely with law enforcers, in the minds of those supplying information will make them more reluctant to talk to journalists in general.

However, other professionals we spoke to did not find the issue so clear cut. The BBC's Chief Advisor on Editorial Policy James Boyle said the Corporation would allow supplementary material to be taken away only if it were clearly in the public interest, and that no danger to any member of staff would result.

Brazilian journalist Roberto Mader judged that he would pass on information only to help the girl prostitutes he interviewed in Latin America. In general, media professionals agree that criminal investigation itself is the job of the police and should be clearly separated from the exercise of journalism.

But in countries suffering first-hand from the effects of sex tourism and growing exploitation, it is perhaps natural that journalists' associations and media themselves should feel justified in taking a more proactive role. The Vietnamese Journalists' Association, for instance, states that the media do cooperate with authorities such as police, drug agencies, and families, to prevent the commercial sexual exploitation of children; and that some offenders have been brought to trial as a result.

In Taiwan, in 1990, a child prostitute in the Huahsi Street red light area left a note for passers-by appealing: 'please save me'. The *China Times Weekly* took up her case, and pressured the Wanhua District police into searching for 'Little Chen', as she signed herself. At that time, says Cheryl Lai of the Association of Taiwan Journalists, the authorities paid little attention to child prostitution. But because of the media publicity, the police finally tracked down 14-year-old 'Little Chen', and she was returned to school. This is one case where the police were forced to act by media intervention.

This example raises the question of the role of media in taking up child exploitation cases. Journalists see themselves as neutral observers, but there may be times when the offences they see being committed are so appalling that they must intervene. Again this is a question for individual conscience, bearing in mind all the factors referred to above, but it may be a legitimate role for media to play in certain circumstances. For instance, many journalists reporting the war in Bosnia have witnessed atrocities, but only two of them have agreed to take part as witnesses in the war crimes trials in the Hague: British journalists Martin Bell, and Ed Vulliamy. Bell recognises that he would be a Serbian target if he returned to Bosnia as a reporter. Both journalists accept that "Many colleagues think that to have given evidence is bad professional ethics."

However, Vulliamy draws a distinction between 'objectivity' -- a journalist's duty to report the facts -- and 'neutrality':

*At a certain point, the perpetration of atrocity crosses a line, and breaches not only international law but the bases of civilisation.*

Beyond this point, he argues, 'neutrality' becomes complicity. The same criteria can very well be applied to child exploitation. The International Federation of Journalists -- although respecting the rights of conscience of individuals -- notes that by taking sides, journalists not only endanger their own safety, they can put their colleagues at risk.

#### **d) Identifying The Victims**

If journalists have a duty to the truth in their reporting and to independence in their work they also have a responsibility to minimise harm from their actions, particularly to people who are themselves the victims of injustice and abuse.

The *Guardian*, which generally adheres to a high standard in its news coverage, is not alone by any means in publishing photographs of child prostitutes, even under arrest. This is particularly true of western media images of children in developing countries, although the technique of obscuring part of the face is now sometimes used. However, more often it is the adult -- the suspected abuser -- whose identity is hidden. In Taiwan, however, there is now a law whereby the names and photographs of convicted pimps and clients of underage prostitutes, and the hotel where the violation occurred, "should be published" after conviction.

Interpol confirms that many countries have legislation protecting the identity of children involved in court proceedings, children in care, or children who are subject to abuse, but laws vary according to who they protect, and under what circumstances. They generally apply to young people under the national age of majority. There is also some controversy about how energetically they are enforced. The Council of Europe's Committee of Experts emphasises this aspect:

*The disclosure, during administrative and judicial proceedings, of information which may serve to identify the victim, is a particularly important aspect of secondary victimisation. The psychological consequences of such disclosure may be particularly serious for the children and young adults concerned and are liable to deter the parents or those responsible for the young person from lodging a complaint.*

*...The dissemination of such information by prosecuting authorities, courts or administrative authorities may cause harm to the young victims of sexual exploitation. The Committee strongly emphasises that cases must be handled with due respect to the victim's privacy.*

Despite widespread international understanding of this question, in South East Asia, a newspaper printed the names of two children who had given evidence in the prosecution of a foreign paedophile. Child protection agencies believe legislation should allow offenders to be prosecuted without children being required to testify against them, to avoid any risk of identification or publicity. In Norway, a similar law means women do not have to give evidence in cases of domestic violence. Otherwise, there is a danger of what the BBC calls 'jigsaw identification':

*This happens when different news organisations give different facts associated with the victim which can be pieced together.*

It advises staff:

*Take care not to give an address, any link with another person in the story, or any link between the victim and the scene of the assault...One way or another, we must not complete the jigsaw.*

Victims in general cannot be sure that their identity will not be made public. For instance, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation guidelines recognise that:

*Broadcasting the identity of a crime victim most often only adds to the person's grief, anguish and trauma.*

The CBC tells staff not to broadcast the names of victims, especially of crimes against the person, such as sexual assault. Yet alleged victims of assaults that have not been proved in court are not offered the 'privilege of anonymity'.

Child prostitutes are often afforded even less protection than other young abuse victims, creating an understandable reluctance to report their exploitation. This perception that once children are working on the streets, in bars, taking drugs, or otherwise participating in the world of adult vice, they forfeit the rights of 'innocent' children, is shared in some quarters of the media as well as the law enforcement agencies.

In a survey of five Taiwanese daily newspapers, Chi Hui-jung discovered a general hostility to young prostitutes. Out of 133 news items about arrests for offences involving underage prostitutes, 34.% used unsympathetic headlines, and 35% were unsympathetic in content, using language such as *childish; selling herself; deflowered; doesn't study but sells her body; and slut*. She concluded that crime reporters do not see the juveniles involved as minors, but use adult standards to judge and blame child prostitutes, and rarely see them as victims. On the other hand, the same reporters are very tolerant towards the clients. Only 4% of

the headlines were negative about them, and 91% did not mention them at all, in common with 71% of the reports.

Rachel O'Brien believes such figures reflect a lack of recognition around the world that a crime is being perpetrated by an adult. It should never be the children who are cautioned or condemned.

One interesting conclusion to emerge from the Taiwan study, highlighted by Cheryl Lai, is that ethical standards vary widely between reporters covering different beats:

*Most media reports on this issue originate in arrests and thus from the police, and are filed by reporters on crime beats, who are generally less likely to consider the interests of the children involved, or make serious efforts to protect their identities. Journalists covering disadvantaged groups in society who are generally sympathetic to the movement to abolish child prostitution, take greater care in their reporting not to add to the harm already suffered by the children.*

Where children are not specifically protected by law, it is the journalist or editor who must take the decision on whether to identify them. There are some who are even prepared to flout the law for the sake of a 'sexy' or sensational story. This is particularly damaging in countries with strict contempt of court rules, where the media revelation of unauthorised details in advance of a court hearing can lead to the case collapsing. Even when children themselves are not named, details may be given which endanger them. One newspaper, for instance, which interviewed an 11-year-old boy, boxed out his face in the photograph, but went on to name his 'sugar-daddy' and the streets he worked. He remained at the mercy of a dangerous, violent street culture which has, in the end, as much to do with power and money as sex.

The issue of identity is at the heart of journalistic endeavour. It is in the nature of journalism, from the first lesson in journalism school onwards, to provide facts, including personal details about whoever is involved in a story. The decision to suppress information has to be carefully considered, but the nature of commercial sexual exploitation of children should always encourage a journalist to respect, above all, the rights of the victim. Sometimes, this may not be easy. June Kane, UNICEF's Media Coordinator for the World Congress, calls on documentary makers to think twice before using footage of bar girls in Asia, for example, but will a producer working on a programme about bar girls, be able to alert viewers to the real tragedy of sex tourism, without picturing the girls at work, or telling individual children's stories?

#### **4. MEDIA MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES**

In the material provided for the World Congress there is a call to the media to avoid exploiting and victimising the children in their coverage, and to depict them in a way which maintains their dignity. It is a brave, but challenging call. To achieve this, media professionals need to re-examine their old habits.

Peter Almond points out that a collection of myths 'contaminate' the public's, and the media's, perception of children.

*The media cling to these myths; they are familiar, convenient, easily adapted to conventional formats of news and entertainment. In short, myth is easier to report than the more subtle and complicated reality.*

Such myths can lead journalists to mould exploited children into typecast roles as sinners or victims. Families in developing countries, people living in poverty, or victims of war and disaster lose their individuality and their humanity. Victims are portrayed as helpless sufferers, unable to act, think, or speak for themselves. Whole countries and communities become categorised under generalised headlines.

In Thailand, the portrayal of girls from the north of the country drifting into prostitution has become so pervasive that a special project has been launched to protect some of those at risk. Quoted in *The Nation*, one 13-year-old protests: “*I get angry every time I hear people say that many northern girls are engaged in prostitution. I have not the slightest intention to become a prostitute*”.

In 1995, Dr Magda Michielsens of the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands analysed the portrayal of victims, in the news output of seven TV channels across Europe. She concluded that victims generally are given low status. Victims of violence, disaster, and human rights abuses in developing countries, (she collected examples from Africa), are much less likely to be identified as individuals and offered the chance to speak, than those from Europe. This form of racism reinforces the sense of distance, of ‘otherness’, experienced by the European or northern viewer.

In a survey of magazine coverage of child abuse in the United States, Nancy Signorielli found that victims were rarely reported to react to their abuse. Women’s magazines covered the issue more frequently than news and business magazines, but in a more sensational way. As a result, men were less exposed to the problem. Gerbner also discovered that a high proportion of children on TV appeared as victims.

*Disproportionate preoccupation with even sympathetically presented or “accidental” victims in an underrepresented population, relative to exhibiting their own share of numbers and exercise of power, diminishes and degrades that group.*

Fierce commercial competition is one factor leading the media to exploit victims, suggests Dr Michielsens. The exposure of emotions and sensationalisation of events attract audiences and sell news. Cash-conscious media organisations apply greater pressure on news teams for productivity. Journalists, therefore, sometimes take the ill-considered, easy route to news-gathering, perpetuating -- whether consciously or unconsciously -- the sorts of myth and stereotype identified by Peter Almond. In this process individuals and groups are not treated with respect and their needs and views are not properly appreciated. ~~Some~~ media organisations are becoming aware of the danger of dehumanising victims in far-away places. James Boyle says the BBC now has clear rules, which apply even to dead bodies. “*Human beings have the same dignity all over the world*”. There are a range of approaches being developed, to avoid stereotyping and victimising exploited children, while at the same time telling their story accurately and vividly.

Roberto Mader felt that all the programmes he saw about children’s exploitation in Latin America and other southern countries, while strongly denouncing important human rights abuses, left the impression that nothing could be done. “*All you feel at the end of the programme is depressed. Now all my work is about trying to show, not that life in Brazil is wonderful -- we have our problems -- but I work in areas where I know there are people doing very positive things to change the reality in which they live. That is the most important thing: to show how people are getting empowered.*”

In search of a ‘strong movement’ in the Brazilian cities, Mader settled on the *Casa de Passegem*, a half-way house for girls escaping prostitution. “*It was the only project I found where the girls were having a say about the running of the programme. That was very important. There’s one interview where one of the girls says: ‘These people used to make me feel so ugly, but now nobody needs to say I am beautiful, because I know I am’.* The girls were shown in a very positive light. Everybody is tired of seeing the negative side”.

Tony Dowmunt, the producer of *Casa de Passegem*, says all the girls interviewed were over the age of consent, and spoke about their past lives. “*We wanted to show that it was possible to get off the streets*”. He believes the media should investigate more of the racist and imperialist dynamics behind sex tourism, which is ‘*not just a few dirty old men going abroad*’.

*“In the 1980s, these issues were just starting to be aired. We are still in a backlash, where some of them are considered too difficult to deal with. It is very difficult to find thoughtful discussion about them.”*

Roberto Mader believes language is another obstacle to the documentary format. Subtitles are expensive, and often unpopular with audiences. Broadcasting organisations tend to avoid them. *“It’s an excuse not to listen to people at all - you just have a voice-over soundbite. Yet people are amazed when they see ordinary people speaking”.*

Aart Zeeman traced children back to Hungary, the Czech Republic and the Philippines, but avoided identifying the former victims he interviewed. *“I don’t think it adds anything to show their faces, unless they are grown up now and choose to tell their story. Children don’t understand the impact being on TV can have. I think you have to be very careful to protect the children -- the film might be shown in the countries where they are living and could easily get them into trouble”.*

Altering the names of people and places is one obvious answer for newspaper journalists. But for the documentary maker, the dilemma between using images which will keep the audience’s attention, and not endangering or victimising the children, cannot be easily resolved. For ***The Care Connection***, programme makers ‘invented’ different ways of getting round the problem. Cameras were positioned at unusual angles - above interviewees’ heads or by their ears -- or shots were cut away to focus on the movements of their hands, which also registered the emotional impact of their words. The technique of “pixilating” -- blurring a small portion of the screen -- was rejected.

*“It’s always associated with criminals, or somebody who deserves what they get”*, explained researcher Simon Cooper.

Other broadcasters have sought different, less controversial approaches to the topic, such as a dramatisation, followed by a studio debate. Belgian director Gil Verhaert proposed the fictional formula for a six-part series ***on La femme, l’enfant, et la prostitution***, in Africa, Asia and Europe. *“We have a lot of information, but we cannot feature the real people because they are all either afraid of the Mafia, or are involved in court cases”*, he explained. *“Audiences are interested in dramatic events. But it does not have to be sensational. If you keep to the truth, it’s more than dramatic enough.”*

Many of the journalists reporting on commercial sexual exploitation of children are committed to uncovering what they regard as a profound social evil: *“We have a role to play in increasing awareness”*, says Aart Zeeman. *“It’s such a disgusting thing”.*

The work of such media professionals not only acts as a counter-weight to media indifference and lack of awareness, it adds to the resources available to campaigners. The material produced may be linked in with campaigns on the issue by local NGOs, or destined for educational use -- as in the case of Gil Verhaert’s project. He hoped his work might be used in the Philippines among families who sell their own children into prostitution. In Bangkok, a campaign has been launched to show parents the horrors their daughters would face in the sex trade.

## 5. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE CHALLENGE OF SELF-REGULATION

Journalists tend to be wary of regulators. They have much evidence to support the view that intervention in the affairs of journalism inevitably leads to forms of censorship. However, it is a legitimate question whether media self-regulation is a sufficient answer to public concern over standards of journalism in an

age when the changing media landscape, and particularly the growth of global media enterprises appears, in theory at least, to put media beyond the range of national public accountability.

Effective self-regulation, by which the errors of media professionals are dealt with by their peers, may not be so convincing when media organisations appear to use professional codes to support their particular interests, which in a commercial system of mass communication by no means necessarily coincide with those of journalism or the public interest. There has been in the past criticism that self-regulation has been used to provide what might be called a “social alibi” for the mass media industry, that is to prevent society from taking more definite (legal) measures.

This argument goes to the heart of the uncomfortable balance of interests which prevails in today’s media - that ethical standards are being sacrificed in defence of commercial interests. One of the principle problems lies in the implementation and enforcement of rules. Very often even regulatory bodies lack the power to enforce sanctions which bite. In Canada in 1990, the CBC’s Equity Task Force found that, with regard to equitable employment and portrayal, *self-regulation and incentive measures have failed to accomplish desired and anticipated results.*

Some professional codes aspire to the very highest moral standards, as in Chile,

*Journalism and journalists must be in the service of truth, social justice, human rights and the ideals of the improvement of society and of peace among peoples.*

And there is no doubt that many individuals, like those quoted above, are committed to exposing and condemning sexual exploitation. Sadly, many more choose to reflect the commercial or political interests of advertisers, proprietors, or political parties.

*This control seldom takes the form of direct intervention or censorship, but far more often of self-censorship by the media professionals themselves - who may not even be aware that they are exercising it.*

In an Indiana University School of Journalism study in the 1980s, 88% of the journalists questioned said they acquired their ethical values from the newsroom itself. Aidan White identifies several extra factors which encourage "the tendency towards self-censorship and self-denial of social responsibility" among media professionals, including:

*the growth of new technologies, which threaten to overwhelm existing regulatory structures, or the unaccountable nature of transnational media corporations which evade terrestrial control of media standards, or the increasingly insecure working environment in which journalists work.*

Journalists’ unions who have tried to enforce their own ethical standards through disciplinary proceedings, have found themselves in the tricky if not impossible position of attacking individual workers they exist to support.

Despite all this, codes and guidelines still have a crucial role to play, in raising awareness and providing a model of good practice. In Spain, in 1993, for example, regional and national broadcasting organisations joined with the national and regional Education Ministries in agreeing ***Self-regulation Principles for Television Channels concerning the specific content of their programmes with regard to protecting children and young people.*** The document recognises *‘the significant role which television plays in Spanish society and its influence on society, particularly children and young people’*. Specific guidelines on reporting child abuse could be drawn up by professional associations to accompany their general ethical codes, along the lines of guidelines for reporting AIDS published by the NUJ (UK and Ireland).

In the final analysis, the support of media employers and regulators is crucial to improving newsroom values as highlighted by Cheryl Lai: *Much of the biased or sensationalist coverage, especially headlines, is created by editors, and it will be difficult to gain improvements given Taiwan's patriarchal society unless high-level media editors and managers implement such a policy from the top down.*

Attitudes to censorship and freedom of expression vary widely from country to country and culture to culture. In all countries, broadcasting tends to be more highly regulated than newspapers and magazines. The importance of the right to freedom of expression cannot be under-estimated, yet it is not without boundaries. Both **the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights** and **the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms** draw attention to the responsibilities accompanying this right, including 'respect for the rights or reputations of others'.

The question of freedom of expression is relevant in particular to child pornography. Can there be a distinction between pornography, and the justifiable portrayal of 'childhood sexuality' in works of art? Amy Adler argues that the US Supreme Court, in its anxiety to protect children, has thrown out '*important speech-protective features of the law*', including '*the traditional protection afforded to artistic expression*'.

But American lawyer Andrew Vachss, a specialist in child abuse cases, believes that the controversy over art is a red herring thrown up by the paedophile community.

*The issue is not "what is art?" but "what is victimisation?" I can no more accept a child pornographer saying he is a victim of censorship than I could a mugger claiming his field of activity was performance art.*

The issue of rights to freedom of expression cannot be ignored, but should be turned around to focus first on the rights of the child to freedom from fear and exploitation. As June Kane points out, '*Journalists should, as always, look at the facts, and have at their fingertips the medical and other evidence to prove that the commercial sexual exploitation of children cannot be justified.*

## 6. BUILDING IMAGES OF CHILDREN, SEX AND VIOLENCE IN THE MEDIA

There is increasing alarm in a number of countries that the way children are portrayed by the media today may increase the risks they face. Controversy continues internationally about how far children's behaviour is influenced by what they see on television - particularly with regard to violence.

The loudest recent public controversy about the portrayal of children has focused recently on the American film *Kids*, directed by Larry Clark. Some critics condemned the film as voyeuristic, and expressed disbelief that the young actors, mostly amateur, who enacted the film's brutal sexual encounters, were themselves above the age of consent. The film raised worrying questions both about the exploitation of increasingly youthful actors, and about the impact on young audiences who might regard the characters as role-models. In some countries, the film was barred to under-18s. The crucial question is whether adults themselves are encouraging children to become prematurely sexually active, or to seem to be so.

This question is particularly relevant to pop music and modelling which are two of the most influential industries among young people today. In fashion, it is the "woman-child" who now rules the catwalk.

*Gianna Albertoni Vicente is 5ft 10in, with long blond hair, wide-apart eyes and wonderful bones. Oh, and she's only 13.*

The recent revelation that a 12-year-old schoolgirl had been signed up by an adult modelling agency in the UK, with the approval of her parents, caused widespread soul-searching in the media. Was it a harmless bit of fun, or the symptom of a dangerous trend? The commentators disagreed, but most expressed alarm.

Even the girl's mother admitted that there was a 'sexual angle'; expanded upon by psychologist Dorothy Rowe:

*There is something intriguing about the young girl who is just discovering life and is beginning to wonder what it's all about. It is the kind of titillation in which a virginal girl intrigues a man. In areas of sexuality intended to intrigue, it is especially dangerous because the child is being presented with issues that they are not really ready to deal with, no matter how precocious they look.*

British Member of Parliament Ann Winterton judged it to be a "trend almost verging on the paedophilic". The fear must be that, the more grown-up women are persuaded to aspire to having a childlike body, the more the distinction between adults and children, also with respect to sexuality, will become blurred.

Then, in May, the watch-manufacturer Omega announced that it planned to withdraw advertising from a major fashion magazine, *Vogue*, in protest at the use of waif-like models. Within a couple of weeks, Omega had obtained more publicity - all of it free and much of it highly complimentary - than a year's worth of advertising in magazines. Ironically, the threat was withdrawn on the instructions of the chairman Nicolas Hayek, ostensibly in the interest of press freedom. Omega's brand director Giles Rees wrote to *Vogue*:

*I would hope that the tremendous support and encouragement that we have received from the media and particularly from the public would urge you to consider addressing these issues with your editorial staff.*

If it can be demonstrated to companies that they have something to gain in terms of public approval and financial return from rejecting sexually exploitative images, this might have a major impact.

The impact of public pressure on the media, on this issue as any other, should not be underestimated. Parents and educators in France, for instance, have been urged to react when TV stations show material lacking in respect for children, whether or not it is intended for young viewers. In Australia, a national campaign to improve the portrayal of women in the media included the distribution of information packs telling audiences how to complain about what they heard or saw.

Jennifer Rowe, former editor of the Australian Women's Weekly, commented:

*In the end, all media are driven by their ratings or their readership, and if they can see that they are losing that, by persisting in an attitude that is outmoded, they will change.*

The most fascinating aspect of the model controversy is how it was handled by the newspapers themselves. The girl's first appearance, according to Alexander Chancellor, was on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph*.

*The next day she was taken up by the tabloids. She was pouting and smouldering in the photographs in an alarmingly grown-up way. The tabloids were thrilled of course, but also censorious.*

Indeed, its professed outrage did not stop the *Daily Mail* from reprinting a full-length picture of the girl in her 'smouldering' modelling pose, under the heading "Who on earth would allow a child of 12 to pose like this?" It might have queried, more relevantly, who on earth would publish a picture of her doing it. And as if to reinforce the sexual message, the feature was placed next to a small beauty item giving advice on how to achieve 'a perfect pout'. The morally self-righteous stance adopted by some sections of the media is directly contradicted when it come to stories and images that make money.

For the popular music industry, international TV channels like MTV, where pop videos make up a large proportion of output, are a very significant means of reaching young people and children - even those too young to attend concerts or buy CDs. Professor Monique Remy analysed the images of young people in these videos. She found:

*...stereotyped masculine and feminine images, sado-masochistic scenes, Asian exoticism, fetishist female garments, women as bloodsuckers and trouble-makers, both men and women grotesquely made-up, with an element of androgeny.*

Women appeared as child-like, asexual yet provocative, dangerous, yet also victimised. In their analysis of 166 videos broadcast by MTV, WTBS and NBC in 1984, Barry Sherman and Joseph Dominick drew attention to the provocative style of dress, and the portrayal of young women as either aggressors or victims.

The Council of Europe's experts also warned of the 'insidious' exploitation of children's and young people's bodies in show business and the media, and the use of children's pictures or voices to create an erotic atmosphere.

*'Lolitas' (both male and female) seem to have come back into fashion in the cinema and show business, appealing to the unwholesome taste of a certain section of the public.*

Certainly some media commentators have perceived this as evidence of a 'widespread phenomenon... of confusion over the boundary between adults and children', in which parents have colluded in the sexual exploitation of their children.

*We inhabit a culture which makes a great deal of money out of the mass premature sexualisation of children. Their music, their clothes, the TV and films they watch and the teen magazines they read envelop them in a miasma of sexuality ....Children who are glued to the set have been turned into voyeurs at the peepshow of adult behaviour.... Popular culture presents to them as normal a brutally crude, mechanistic world in which sexual gratification is another commodity, available not just to adults but to them, along with the clothes, CDs and cosmetics.*

Little wonder then, the argument goes, that if the media consistently present young and old audiences alike with images of children in a sexual context, some adults will believe that children are ready and able to participate in sexual activity.

*Our society panics about an apparent epidemic of child sexual abuse. Doesn't it ever occur to anyone that maybe there is some connection with the multinational business of precocious child sexuality?*

Rachel O'Brien believes it is dangerous to view these developments as 'armageddon' - a catastrophic loss of innocence about which nothing can be done. But she does perceive a widespread confusion about what childhood means, and points out that the definition of childhood itself differs from community to community, and age to age. Children *are* aware of their bodies, and *do* need to explore and learn about sex. But this should be done gradually, in a tolerant, safe environment; through natural contact with other children, and with the support of parents.

The problems, she says, arise from adults looking at young people in a certain way: appropriating them for their own use. They create exploitative and, in extreme cases, paedophile images. The image of pre-pubescent children offering themselves for sex allows adults to claim that they are responsible for the provocation. "*How do young people themselves consume these images? On the one hand, many children are denied sex education, while on the other there is a glorification of children in provocative poses. It seems that either we want our children to be totally innocent, or to be prostitutes. And the whole question of their **rights** as individuals gets left out.*"

All this makes the notion of a 'youth oriented society' into a slogan of little substance, concludes George Gerbner. The media are oriented towards 'markets and power' rather than youth. Advertisers focus on consumers and potential consumers - and we will look at advertising specifically later in this paper. But in

television output children have no power. They “*take on the characteristics of a social minority with less than their share of attention, values, and resources, and consequently diminished life chances.*”

The solution may be simple to see, but not so easy to achieve. That is, to give a voice in the media to children themselves, to *listen* to their views and aspirations. And to educate them to be knowledgeable and critical about how the media work. International conventions and recommendations already emphasise the right of children to have a say in decisions affecting them, and call for a change in the way children are regarded. The Draft Declaration from this Congress also emphasises that children have a right to express their views on matters affecting their lives, and calls for children’s participation in action (Article 6). Why should children not also have more say in the media? Dr Ulla Björnberg proposes documentary programmes on young people’s lives in different countries, with the aim of giving children aged from 7 to 18 - including poor and migrant children - an opportunity to air their opinions.

**Washington Post** journalist Tom Wilkinson points out the importance to all newspapers of ‘sources’. Children are not regarded as sources because they are not trusted to distinguish accurately between fact and fiction -- a belief that also applied to children giving evidence in court until recently. New means of giving children access to the media as sources should be investigated, perhaps through the mediation of child helplines, with reassurance that information offered would be strictly confidential. Wilkinson also makes the crucial point that:

*child abuse does not fall squarely into a specific area of reporting. Is it part of the police beat, medicine, sociology, or government? **The Post** doesn’t have a child abuse reporter per se, and I doubt that any major newspaper does.*

We have already seen, in Taiwan, the difference in approach when the topic is reported by journalists with a broader awareness of social issues. Maybe Wilkinson has hit on the answer. Given the size of the constituency and its importance for the future, should not news media have specialist ‘children’s correspondents’, with a brief covering all aspects of children’s lives, and specific training to enable journalists to express the child’s point of view? Maybe this would do most to ‘promote change in the traditional view of the child’. In its report on implementation of the Council of Europe Recommendation No.R (91)11, the British government suggests the sort of training that would be appropriate for ‘all professionals who come into contact with children’, including:

*self-awareness, children’s sexual terminology, child growth and development, child abuse, risk factors, the law, interviewing techniques, communication with children, and video recording.*

The British Home Office also decided to produce a ‘good practice’ video for judges and lawyers. Governments or NGOs might consider making good practice videos for editors and journalists. Another measure to assist journalists in covering children’s issues seriously and accurately would be for NGOs in each country to compile a directory of reliable experts on different topics, which could be available on every news desk.

International bodies have called for more information to be given to children - both through the media and at school - about the dangers and risks of sexual exploitation, and how to defend themselves. But children, from primary school upwards, also need media literacy training, to help them understand and decode the messages they receive from both programmes and advertising, so as to become critical and well-informed media consumers. In Canada, for instance, the organisation Mediawatch and the Federation of Women’s Teachers’ Associations have developed a curriculum for schools on stereotypes and gender issues.

*Media education can play a crucial role in counteracting the impact of these messages. Helping children to understand that media construct - as opposed to reflect - reality; that they communicate implicit and explicit values; and that they can influence the way we feel and think about ourselves and the world, are vitally important lessons.*

In France, an initiative aimed at implementing the UN Convention, proposes ‘associating adults and children to analyse and explain the programmes on television, “the only medium generally accessible to children of all socio-cultural backgrounds”.’

The ultimate objective is best summarised by George Gerbner again, who calls for media professionals to ‘break the constraints that now bind them to markets that use but have little use for children’:

*The need is for action towards creating a culture, and television system, that can afford to address itself to the nation’s future, its children....Citizens, writers, actors and producers must work towards a system of popular storytelling whose culture-power cannot devalue and hurt children any more.*

## 7. ADVERTISING AND THE IMPACT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

As this paper has already stressed, strongly commercial motives, primarily the need to win audiences and advertisers, influence the content of mass media communication. Advertising is also subject to a combination of legislation and self-regulation in the way it appeals to children. The Council of Europe experts noted that :

*Advertisers, in particular, have recently begun to rely on the impact of juvenile seduction, using it in the same way as “conventional” erotic advertising. In so doing, they may have the effect of encouraging those who wish to widen the choice of sexual partners by means of overtly paedophile propaganda.*

Some notorious cases have sent shock waves through the advertising world, such as the Calvin Klein jeans advertisement, which President Clinton is said to have personally intervened to have withdrawn.

In Europe, legislation focuses largely on banning pornography or protecting children. In Denmark, radio and TV advertising must respect ‘decency’. Far more detailed are the self-regulatory codes, which tend to guarantee freedom of expression while at the same time affirming the responsibilities of advertisers.

Henry Danthan, Executive Manager of the World Federation of Advertisers, which represents national associations and multinational advertising companies, says the concept of self-regulation is largely European and North American, with mechanisms now existing in other countries such as Japan, Australia and South Africa. He believes that an ‘anti-advertising climate’ is being fostered in some parts of Europe because of a misguided moral panic about its influence on children. In other countries, says Danthan, children’s role in society is so different that it is not perceived as a problem. “It’s a question which is less at the forefront of regulators’ concerns than, for instance, tobacco or alcohol”. Nevertheless, these days the advertising industry is, without doubt, sensitive about allegations over its use of children. A report on ***Children and Television Commercials*** commissioned by the European Advertising Tripartite last year, condemned much research on children and advertising as ‘politically motivated’. It concluded that advertising actually had positive effects on children, partly because it contained ‘*virtually no aggression and many examples of prosocial behaviour, breaking down stereotypes*’.

The European Advertising Standards Alliance, which brings together the self-regulatory bodies across Europe, carried out its own survey on the self-regulation of advertising and children, and in particular the use of naked children in adverts. It found that in nine of the 15 European Union countries, the screening of

naked children (including sexual organs) was permitted. In Austria, Germany, Ireland and the UK, children had to be partially clothed. And in several of the other countries restrictions relating to taste and decency, and the age of the child, applied.

The survey asked whether self-regulatory bodies had received any reaction from viewers to the use of naked children. Only four: Ireland, France, Portugal and the UK, reported any specific response, with viewers in the UK in particular complaining that such images would be regarded by paedophiles as erotic titillation.

Henry Danthan believes advertisers now understand the need to adopt high standards in advertising for and by children. Yet the fact remains that shock adverts, like the Calvin Klein example, attract massive extra publicity.

In the end, there are two other problems with the concept of self-regulation, highlighted by Simon-Pierre De Coster, a legal advisor with the Belgian broadcaster RTBF. The first is that mechanisms are only equipped to deal with grave breaches of regulations. But it is not the grave cases that are the main problem, he points out. It is the accumulative effect of banal stereotypes that are used everyday without sanction.

Secondly, advertising codes rely on notions such as 'good taste', 'bad taste' and 'decency'. But how are these terms to be interpreted and implemented? 'What is the broadcaster to make of these texts? They should be defined somewhere'. Both media workers and the public have a crucial role to play in indicating where the bounds of acceptability are drawn, and consumer boycotts of products can have a powerful effect: *The mere threat of such action is already effective insofar as a television station is very reluctant to risk seeing a source of advertising revenue diminish or disappear.*

But while efforts continue to try to set standards in the existing world of media technology, the development of new forms of communication such as the Internet has opened up new opportunities for paedophiles and pornographers which have brought international concern. Men exchange pornographic accounts of their exploits as sex tourists, for example, supplying details of bars, brothels, and prices.

In 1995, Thailand's Tourist Authority tried to take action to delete graphic details of sex venues and massage parlours from *Netscape: The World Sex Guide*. The Internet contributor was identified as a 50-year-old American, Bruce Cassirer, who had also written a 'travel guide' on where to find young prostitutes. Cassirer was declared *persona non grata* by Thailand, and a warrant issued for his arrest.

Governments have now discovered that the major problem in controlling material on the Internet, is that nobody controls it. In France, net providers went on strike to obtain an assurance from the Ministry of Telecommunications that they were not to blame for child pornography. The Association of French Internet Professionals demanded a legal debate to establish who *was* responsible for the material. In the United States free-speech campaigners have won in recent days an injunction against officials attempts control content on the Internet.

Whatever media strategies may emerge in the campaign for children's rights, they will have to be linked to this rapidly-changing media environment, and one that offers much less scope for control and regulation than before.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The International Federation of Journalists, in its proposed amendment to the Draft Declaration of this Congress, called for action to ***encourage media professionals to develop strategies which strengthen the role of media in providing information of the highest quality, reliability and ethical standards concerning all aspects of the commercial sexual exploitation of children.*** The following recommendations are designed to strengthen the key role of journalists in revealing instances of abuse, and also in monitoring the performance of national and international bodies, both in honouring their commitments and working to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

There are some simple but practical points to bear in mind here. The media can, without doubt, influence the decision-makers. But to do this effectively, media professionals must choose how and when. For broadcasters, for example:

*Time is critical... First, the reporter needs enough air time to present the subject properly. Second, the story must be broadcast at a time when the people who ought to see it will see it. Finally, a sense of social timing is essential. Just as some entertainment shows will sell one year and not the next, so too with news stories; audiences are not static in their responsiveness to social issues.*

Matters relating to children have traditionally featured more often in women's magazines and programmes. If children's exploitation is to be given the priority it demands, it must be highlighted in all media, particularly those which reach opinion formers and people taking decisions. This is an issue which touches on the economy, society, education, development, and the environment and it is one occasion when editors must, as American journalist John Mack Carter admits, '*strive to present material that not only captures the imagination but also prompts action*'.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION**

### **1. Training for journalists**

- a) Ethical questions should have a higher profile in journalists' training, particularly with regard to standards of conduct in reporting issues like children's exploitation.

### **2. Codes of Conduct and Self Regulation**

- a) While codes of conduct and guidelines appear not to be effective, they can be useful in demonstrating that something needs to be done. Such codes are weapons in the hands of journalists and campaigners who can use them to take up issues with editors, publishers and broadcasters.
- b) Specific guidelines on reporting child abuse could be drawn up by professional associations to accompany their general ethical codes.
- c) In preparing this report, the Confederation of Asean Journalists suggested that further study on this issue, by media professionals in the regions. Such further activity is highly recommended.

### **3. Media organisations and Media Professionals**

- a) Journalists and programme-makers have a duty to increase public awareness of the dangers of the commercial sexual exploitation of children. However, reporting needs to be carried out with enormous care.

- b) Journalists and programme-makers should adhere to the highest standards of professional conduct when confronted with dilemmas such as professional secrecy, the use of subterfuge, and the identification of victims, in the course of their duties.
- c) They should avoid, or challenge, the myths and stereotypes which surround children, and particularly children from developing countries. For instance, the myth that parents in developing countries do not value their children; that girls are inferior to boys; that children are drawn into vice through their own fault; or that sex tourism alleviates poverty for the victim, or the host nation.
- d) Media professionals should recognise that freedom of expression must go hand in hand with other fundamental human rights, including freedom from exploitation and intimidation. They should give careful consideration to the facts when weighing up the relative merits of the different claims, and not allow themselves to be swayed by commercial or political considerations.
- e) Journalists should never publish details which help exploiters to find their victims, or which undermine the safety of child victims. Journalists should take particular care not to reveal information which could lead to the collapse of criminal proceedings against exploiters.
- f) Journalists and programme-makers should look for innovative ways to respect the dignity of child victims, and avoid identifying them, while at the same time telling their stories in a compelling and newsworthy way. For instance, by consulting them on the content or showing ways in which they can escape from their situation. They should try to focus attention not only on the victims of commercial sexual exploitation, but on the perpetrators and clients.

#### **4. The Need for Newsroom Debate**

- a) A constructive and supportive debate should be encouraged between media professionals, about how this issue should be investigated and reported.
- b) Media organisations should consider appointing specialist ‘children’s correspondents’, with responsibility for covering all aspects of children’s lives. Specific training to help journalists to express children’s points of view. This might include: child growth and development, child abuse, risk factors, children’s sexual terminology, the law, interviewing techniques, communication with children, etc.
- c) New means of giving children access to the media, as ‘sources’ or commentators, should be investigated. Children should know that information or opinions offered in confidence will be protected as such.

#### **5. The Role of Management**

- a) Media editors and managers should implement -- from the top down -- a policy which makes clear their opposition to biased and sensationalist coverage of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, and their support for high ethical standards among journalists and programme-makers. This could be done through the elaboration, in consultation with media professionals, of ethical guidelines on this and other issues, which should be seriously implemented and monitored.

#### **6. Governments and NGOs**

- a) Governments or NGOs should support efforts by media organisations and journalists' associations to raise awareness. In this regard, good practice videos for editors and journalists would be useful.

- b) In particular, support should be given to national women's media associations, such as those existing in many African countries, which are taking up the issue of media coverage of violence and violations of the rights of children.
- c) National NGOs should consider compiling a directory of reliable experts on commercial sexual exploitation of children, and related topics, to be distributed to media. Such information could also be accessible on computer data banks.

## 7. Children and the Community

- a) Children, from primary school upwards, should undergo media literacy training, to help them understand and decode the messages they receive from both programmes and advertising, so as to become critical and well-informed media consumers.
- b) The public should recognise and use their power, as audiences and consumers, to affect media policy, for instance through lobbying and consumer boycotts.

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<sup>1</sup> Submitted by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) for UNICEF. The document is dated 15 June 1996.

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<sup>5</sup> COUNCIL OF EUROPE, Select Committee of Experts on sexual exploitation, pornography and prostitution of, and trafficking in, children and young adults.

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<sup>8</sup> SIGNORIELLI Nancy; Magazine Coverage; in *Child Abuse, an Agenda for Action*, Gerbner et al.

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<sup>11</sup> LAITILA, Tiina; *The Journalistic Codes of Ethics in Europe*; Dept of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Tampere, 1995.

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- <sup>22</sup> GERBNER, George; op cit.
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