

Stockholm Congress Panel Report: Role of the Media

The panel on the Role of the media heard contributions from the Chair, Aidan White, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists (Belgium); Thomas Hammarberg, Member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Sweden); Gilbert Dimenstein, journalist (Brazil); Chi Hui-jung, Chief Executive Officer (Taiwan); Eric Kearley, MTV (UK); Roger Moore, UNICEF Ambassador (UK). The panel Rapporteur was June Kane, Congress Media Advisor (Switzerland).

Discussion of the current situation/problems and challenges

"You are bloodsuckers who don't respect kids," a journalist on the panel was told. His reaction? "That's not totally true. It's not totally wrong either."

The importance of the role of the media was not questioned, but the nature of that role remains a topic of discussion. The love/hate relationship most of those working in the field of child rights have with the media, however, is based on expectations which often are out of step with what the media themselves believe their task is and commonly shows a misunderstanding of the way the media work. Ultimately, the media's responsibility is "to steer a course which allows them to provide reliable, ethical, accurate reports without being at the bidding of any interest group". This independence is fundamental to free, democratic media and consequently therefore to protecting the rights of children. *"Without the press you are nothing," one journalist said. "If you want to change the agenda, you have to do it on the pages of a newspaper."*

But the constraints under which the media work are significant and growing. In some countries, the media have to work in the face of pressure from governments and authorities to control information, and in most countries the media face increasing commercial pressures from advertisers and big business to temper reporting to the demands of the marketplace.

These pressures and the way the media work affect the way children's issues and indeed the image of children are reported and presented. The image of the child is most often that of a vulnerable, faceless, helpless innocent victim who has no rights but who, around the age of 11 or 12, turns into a problematic, incomprehensible teenager who poses a threat to the adult world which cannot penetrate the teenage mind. This is true not only of the news media but also of the entertainment and advertising media.

In these, too, the image of child sexuality is an issue of concern. The line between children and adults is blurred by media who use children's bodies in overtly sexual poses to sell consumer goods. And the blatant use of sex to sell product in the music and video industries is particularly worrying.

And yet it is acknowledged that these are the channels of information that children themselves choose. *"Comic books, music television and the Internet are the newspapers of the new generation"*. The choice -- and voice -- of the child are the key to not only knowing how to talk to children but also to learning how to talk about children.

The work of press and information offices of NGOs and humanitarian agencies is also instrumental in constructing an image of the child which impacts upon child rights. Too often the child's image is distorted in the interests of fundraising. Facts and figures given to the press are inflated or sensationalised to prompt the press to cover a story.

But imposing laws and regulations on both those who work in the media and those who work with the media can be a two-edged sword. The example of music television, which is a powerful source of images for young people but which is constrained by law not to talk to these same young viewers about their sexuality and related issues which might help them to deal with such concerns clearly points to self-regulation, increased professionalism, greater awareness and formal and informal monitoring mechanisms as potentially more effective in improving media coverage of children and children's issues.

Despite concern about the harmful effects the media can have on understanding of children and children's issues, there is also no doubt that the media can and do play an active role in reporting violations of children's rights and exploring issues of concern to children. The media also have a major role to play in education and advocacy and in this respect particularly it should not be forgotten that the term "media" encompasses not only newspapers, television and radio but also books, magazines, films, billboards, computer games, music, theatre, film and other performing arts.

All of these are not only powerful tools, they are also something that young people and adults can share. The responsibility of adults in supporting children's access to the media, helping them to interpret the media critically and to use the media to make their voices heard must be taken seriously and reinforced.

The future role of information vehicles is being determined by new communications technologies, which are providing challenges and threats to democracy. While information networks like the Internet provide new and exciting opportunities for people to communicate, there is also deep concern that they are also providing new means for the proliferation of socially unacceptable messages from child pornographers and those interested in sexually exploiting children. It is clear that freedom of expression and opinion can be maintained and enhanced through these developments but that new standards and forms of regulation are necessary to ensure that there is not widespread abuse of these new opportunities by groups such as producers of child pornography and child exploiters.

Finally, the potential for re-exploitation of children in the telling of their story was noted. Helping the child to maintain dignity and identity while reporting the facts of commercial sexual exploitation is a sensitive and complex task.

Recommendations

- 1 The "best interests of the child" as embodied in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* are the ultimate test of appropriateness in the work of both the media and information professionals in agencies concerned with child rights. If this is internalized, then many of the problems will be solved. UNICEF and NGOs have a responsibility to promote understanding of the Convention by media professionals and to help them to integrate it into their work and into the ethical conducts they apply to their professional activity. News media organizations should consider appointing specialist correspondents with a specific responsibility for children's issues.
- 2 Codes of Ethics, rather than imposed regulation, are the key to improving the output of the media in reporting and presenting issues concerning and of concern to children. UNICEF and NGOs can work with media professionals to ensure that children's issues are integrated into the personal and professional ethics of those in the media professions. Such cooperation can take the form of collaborative training courses, training materials, workshops, meetings and ongoing discussion. Children themselves should be included in such cooperative work.
- 3 Access of children to the media is also vital. Not only must their voice be heard, they must also be helped to become critical audiences of the various media. It is the responsibility of adults both to facilitate access of children to the media and to help children to interpret the messages of the media.
- 4 Media professionals and the associations which represent them must focus on the need for ethical conduct. This is best done by self-regulation and the flexibility which allows each individual case to be the basis for ethical decision-making. Mechanisms such as Codes of Ethics, professional associations, press councils and children's ombudsmen should be promoted in order to underpin self-regulation and monitor its effectiveness.
- 5 Those who work in the arena of child rights must learn how the media work in order to understand

the constraints media face and ensure that these do not stand in the way of appropriate reporting and image-building. This is the responsibility of UNICEF and NGOs who wish to tap the potential of the media. Increased professionalism can be encouraged by such projects as ongoing training of information and press staff, guidelines for dealing with the media, identification and training of spokespersons who face the press, careful formulation and monitoring of the messages and improved collection of reliable data being given to the press.

- 6 NGOs and UN agencies must provide accurate, verifiable information and not distort in order to “sell” a story to the press. By proving themselves to be reliable sources of information with an agenda for truth rather than self-promotion, organizations can build solid working relationships with the media based on a shared concern for reporting the facts. It is time for UNICEF and NGOs to critically review the image they give of children to readers and viewers of diverse media. A well understood and circulated Code of Conduct for dealing with the press could be used for in-house training and policy guidance.
- 7 Civil society must demand accuracy and ethical behaviour not only from the press but from children’s organizations. The media, NGOs and UNICEF must be accountable for their work in informing about children’s rights. In this respect, mechanisms such as encouraging appointment of a children's ombudsman could be explored.
- 8 More serious research is needed to analyse how children are described in the media, what underlies such description and how it can be positively influenced in the interests of children. The issue of stereotyping of children in general and vulnerable children in particular should be further explored.
- 9 The media can not only advocate on behalf of children but contribute to providing support services to help children help themselves. Services such as telephone help lines, educational programmes and awareness-raising campaigns are only possible with the support of other organizations and consequently the media, UNICEF and NGOs must work together and identify or commit resources to providing these services.
- 10 Parents must take responsibility for providing support to their children as consumers of the media. Parents can not only guide children as they develop as media consumers but provide additional context, explanation and diversity of sources of information to balance the impact of media and help the child to grow in understanding.
- 11 The potential of all media -- not just the news media -- must not be forgotten. Books, films, comics, posters and other entertainment and performing arts can also be used in the promotion and reinforcement of child rights and children’s issues. Organizations working for and with children should explore such avenues for promoting their message and as an outlet for children to make their voice heard.
- 12 There must be internationally agreed standards of regulation governing the use and abuse of new communication technologies. These must cover the source, format, transmission and reception of information and must clearly define what is public and private space and provide nations with guidelines for the elimination of materials which are exploitative of children or likely to encourage such exploitation. Such an approach will require the establishment of a single international agency to coordinate activity in this field. The UN agencies, including UNICEF, must address the potential establishment of such an agency within the UN system as a matter of urgency.