

# Children and the media: Voices worth hearing?

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Drawing on the work of two organisations, this essay outlines how children's participation can make a significant difference in how children are represented in the media, and in realising children's rights to participate in matters that affect them. In particular, the essay will address the following questions:

- Why is it important for children to participate in the media?
- How are children portrayed in the media?
- What are examples of children's meaningful participation in the media?
- What can be done to enable children's participation in the media?

## Why is it important for children to participate in the media?

An unnamed learner, videotaped in a school classroom in her uniform, speaks to a television news reporter after writing the first matric exam of the year. She is given 10 seconds on the nightly news to express her views on the exam questions she found easy, and not so easy. Her short statements, positioned

next to those of two other learners, support the overall tone of the news report that suggests that this year's exam-takers were ill prepared and nervous about their performance.

In viewing the clip, it is easy to imagine the television producer's instruction to the journalist: "Can you get a child on camera to speak about today's exams?" While journalists are getting better at showcasing young people's perspectives in their reports, there is a tendency still to use the voices of children to pepper their pre-conceived (or already written) stories. Children, in this scenario, are enlisted as characters to enrich and confirm the journalist's take on the situation, rather than brought in as active participants in creating their own representations. Here children are speaking through the lens of adult experience rather than through their own.

Journalists often argue that children are difficult to access, and that the practical, ethical and legal protections<sup>i</sup> in place make it difficult to bring out youth voices<sup>ii</sup>. Yet, in treating children as "quick and easy" contributors, journalists often miss the opportunity to engage ethically with children and to get responses with greater depth and nuance.

<sup>i</sup> For example children who are accused, victims or witnesses of a crime may not be named and/or identified. Legal protections also extend to child care as well as family law matters. These issues are covered by the Criminal Procedures Act, the Children's Act and the Child Justice Act.

<sup>ii</sup> These arguments are frequently presented during training conducted by Media Monitoring Africa with journalists as well as from participants of the MMA and University of the Witwatersrand journalism course on reporting on children in the media.

Ethical and practical concerns over accessing children can be addressed by putting in place structures for sustained youth involvement. Such structures help ensure that children's participation rights are upheld (see the essay on pp. 22 – 29), and that children enjoy and learn from the process, thus enhancing their development as young citizens (see the essay on pp. 30 – 35).

The aim of children's participation in the media is to provide young people with a platform to express their views, influence decision-making and achieve change. Involving young people from diverse language, class, religious and education backgrounds and with diverse abilities is also critical. It ensures that journalists consider differences in childhood experiences, and do not opt for the easy stereotypes.

Children's participation should be shaped through conversations between adults and children. Supporting adults are there to ensure that all children involved have opportunity to give an opinion or define topics, and that the environment is child-friendly.<sup>1</sup> More than anything, young people should feel empowered to shape how young people's worlds of experience are represented, and be given the necessary skills and tools to do this honestly, ethically, and accurately.

### How are children portrayed in the media?

While news media are only a portion of the full media spectrum, they are key in providing information to citizens, and shaping people's opinions. It is not that the media tell us what to think, but they do tell us what to think about – in other words, the media help frame issues and discourses for society. An analysis of the enormously powerful and popular social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, Mxit, and SMS) falls beyond the scope of this essay, but it must be noted that social media have a crucial role to play in engaging children and helping build meaningful children's participation. Recent research<sup>2</sup> by World Wide Worx has highlighted the spread and use of social media by children and adults in South African private and township schools. It is clear that a platform like Mxit is a great leveller and its use by millions of young South Africans highlights its potential for meaningful participation.

Children account for 39% of South Africa's population,<sup>3</sup> and a host of laws, conventions, special protections and policies are focused on them. Realising the rights of children is key to South Africa fulfilling its commitments to the Millennium Development Goals. Clearly, if children's rights are to be realised, protected and enforced, and if the state is to meet its goals, the media as a key opinion shaper can and must play a critical role.

Despite these factors, children seldom make the news. Media Monitoring Africa's (MMA) most-recent research on how children are portrayed in 13 major South African newspapers revealed that children feature in only 12.7% of news stories monitored.<sup>4</sup>

The media monitoring also shows that while audiences may now be hearing a little more about children in the media, audiences continue to hear very little from children themselves. Only 13% of the stories in which children were mentioned quoted children either directly or indirectly. This means that children's voices were only heard in 2% of all news stories monitored in the 2010 study.

Furthermore, when children do feature in the news they tend to be shown in very limited roles: The 2010 study found that around 18% of children were identified as victims. The *Sunday Times*' story "Men, women set fire to girl, 16"<sup>5</sup> and the *Daily Sun*'s "Evil mum dumps two kids on the doorstep"<sup>6</sup> are examples where children are clearly portrayed as "victims". Over a third of children were identified merely as members of a family unit.

The research also shows that 7% of stories monitored violated the rights of children by either directly or indirectly identifying a child when it was clearly not in their best interests. Examples include naming a child abuse victim, a child witness to a crime or a child offender.

While each story needs to be analysed on a case-by-case basis there are some common core ethical principles for reporting on children. These focus on ensuring that the story is in the best interests of the child. Most commonly this means ensuring that a vulnerable child's identity is protected and not revealed. This is also in line with general legal requirements, where a child who is a victim, witness or accused in a criminal matter may not be named or identified. The ethical principles also extend to speaking to children. While largely aimed at preventing harm to a child, common ethical principles also seek to encourage the media to give children a voice.<sup>7</sup>

People rely on the media as a source of information about the world, yet the way in which children are portrayed in the media is often misleading and problematic:

1. Given that so few children feature in the news, audiences could be forgiven for thinking that children are a small minority of the population. This is a disturbing conclusion, given that children in South Africa account for more than a third of the population.
2. It may also reinforce the belief that children are not important or active members of society, as in most instances they don't seem to do much at all and are commonly non-descript, or described as victims of abuse, war, disease and poverty.
3. It may support assumptions that it is common and "natural" that girls are victims of abuse, while boys more commonly commit crimes and are more active members of society.

Such reporting does little to oppose attitudes that see children as mere objects with little to say. There can be no doubt that children are often the most vulnerable to the effects of war and disasters, and that the media need to report their stories. At the same time, the media also need to consider how children

fulfil diverse roles in society; they are also sports players, heroes, achievers, winners, nerds and learners. These roles should be reflected in reports.

### What are examples of children's meaningful participation in the media?

Media monitoring plays an essential and ongoing role in helping to assess and analyse how the media portray children, and also provides valuable indicators of how the portrayals are changing over time. This enables an analysis of whether strategies aimed at improving the portrayal and participation of children are having the desired impact. Children's radio is another powerful tool that equips children to produce their own media, and ensure that their voice is heard by a wider audience.

#### Media Monitoring Africa

MMA<sup>iii</sup> has developed an Empowering Children and the Media (ECM) strategy to improve the media's portrayal of children and achieve meaningful children's participation. ECM achieves these aims through promoting the respect, protection and promotion of children's rights in both media coverage and practice.

Central to the ECM strategy has been the incorporation of meaningful children's participation in all phases and project activities. Children's participation in media monitoring activities is a South African first. With the aim to ensure that children's participation is meaningful and not mere tokenism, MMA and its partners work with children in an ethical way that respects, protects and promotes children's rights throughout the project:

- Children participate in all stages of the project – from helping design the media monitoring materials, to presenting the results of their media monitoring, and posing questions to journalists and editors.
- Children from various race groups and socio-economic backgrounds participate in the project. And an equal number of boys and girls participate.
- Measures are taken to minimise harm against the children; for example, those who do not wish to be named or identified are protected.
- The children are free to respond as they choose; neither the facilitators nor the activities guide or prompt them in any way.
- The children benefit from their involvement in the workshops, with the knowledge that they are consulted, their views taken

into account, and that they gain critical media literacy skills.<sup>iv</sup>

- The children are informed at all times about the project; there is feedback between each of the workshops and follow-up correspondence.
- The children are given the opportunity to make their own presentations to journalists and the media.

The children's participation and contributions are mutually beneficial for the MMA, the children's caregivers and the children themselves. The MMA benefits directly of course from the children's contributions, and from fulfilling the project's objectives. Caregivers also benefit as a result of the children asking them to watch the news, buy newspapers and consider how children are portrayed. At an evaluation workshop held in 2010<sup>v</sup> children said they have benefited in the following ways:

*Before I was not reading newspapers and now it is fun and reading about what is happening in the world makes me want to know much more.*

Evaluation workshop, Gauteng, 2010

*I read news more often now and I understand better. I can also see and hear the journalist mistakes that they make. And I concentrate on children's rights.*

Evaluation workshop, Gauteng, 2010

*I want to listen more about the media even if I am not media monitoring next year. I may be able to monitor the newspaper that I read.*

Evaluation workshop, Gauteng, 2010

Asked what they had learned, some of the children said:

*I learned to watch something and understand it.*

Evaluation workshop, Gauteng, 2010

*I learned how to monitor the media and ask important questions.*

Evaluation workshop, Gauteng, 2010

*I learned to fight for my rights.*

Evaluation workshop, Gauteng, 2010

*I learned how to give [my] viewpoint [and ask] questions which are thought-provoking.*

Evaluation workshop, Gauteng, 2010

<sup>iii</sup> MMA has been promoting human rights and democracy through the media since 1993. MMA aims to promote the development of a free, fair, ethical and critical media culture in South Africa and on the rest of the continent. MMA's children's programme has been working with children to improve children's portrayal and participation in the media since 2003. See [www.mediamonitoringafrica.org](http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org).

<sup>iv</sup> Media literacy skills ensure that children are able to engage critically with the media, that they are able to distinguish between the content of a story, and how it is reported. While essential for the project, such skills are useful for any further media consumption and analysis, ensuring that children benefit in the future.

<sup>v</sup> An annual workshop with children who monitor the media where children evaluate the project and what they have learned. This one took place on 3 December 2010.

## The Children's Radio Foundation

The Children's Radio Foundation<sup>vi</sup> (CRF) partners with organisations to build youth radio initiatives by creating child-friendly spaces for young people to participate, ask questions, reflect, learn, and share with their community via radio broadcasts. While the emphasis is placed on community-based reporting, the youth-produced reports are often shared with local, national, and international media as first-hand accounts of young people's experiences.

CRF works with community radio stations and community-based organisations to enable young people to broadcast weekly radio shows for their peers. By training facilitators and creating local ownership of the initiative, CRF teaches community partners to create the conditions for a balanced and sustainable youth-focused project. For example, partners learn how to select a diverse and representative group of youth participants, how to grow an audience, and how to reach out into the wider community.

In a series of training workshops, youth reporters learn how to develop an idea, to interview, to structure a debate, and in general are taught to report honestly, accurately, and ethically on issues relevant to a youth audience. The workshops are child-focused, and young people drive the agenda. CRF's community-based youth journalism initiatives allow young people to speak for themselves and to speak with nuance about issues that they deem important, thereby carving out a crucially important youth-affirming space in the wider media landscape.

In South Africa, CRF has a weekly radio show on SAfm, called the Radio Workshop. The broadcast contains a mix of content that reflects the concerns, aspirations, and experiences of young people who have participated in the radio production workshops, and also content that is produced by adults for a youth audience. Recent topics have ranged from school-based reporting on the effects of the teacher strikes on learners, personal narratives about social media usage amongst teens, and audio diaries about experiences of xenophobia.

In addition to positioning youth-produced stories of youth experience in the media, CRF training and production workshops build young participants' communication and critical-thinking skills. Parents, caregivers and teachers often remark on increased levels of confidence among participants, and are often surprised that the young reporters are able to articulate their views in a clear way. The entire enterprise is a reminder that young people have opinions to offer, experiences to share, and stories to tell, and that, with a little help, they are capable of doing it themselves.

Youth involvement in media is a rewarding initiative that benefits children's participation in society, but it is not without implementation challenges:

- Training in media is a long-term process that often requires significant resources, committed staff, and infrastructure (technical equipment, and a broadcast outlet) to ensure the success of a project.
- As media training is often done with small groups of young people in specific locations, youth media initiatives are sometimes guilty of showcasing the views of a smaller, less representative group of youth at the expense of tapping into the diversity of youth perspectives.
- Emphasis needs to be placed on ethics and consent in reporting, and on ensuring that youth journalists are aware of the effects of their representations.

Meaningful youth participation in media requires sustained involvement, training, and youth-driven processes. It also relies on creating the belief in young people that they are capable of doing it themselves. And they are.

## What can be done to enable children's participation in the media?

There are a number of different strategies that can enhance children's participation and representation in the media. In presenting its recommendations for journalists and editors at the South African Press Council,<sup>8</sup> Media Monitoring Africa has shown how working with children to evaluate the media can realise positive change in media practice. The Children's Radio Foundation's work with children from Maitland High School in Cape Town shows how children can play an active role in producing their own media and messages. Both cases speak to the importance of building long-term relationships with children.

There are simple activities that organisations working with children can do with children to help build critical literacy skills:

- *Lobby the local media:* Contact your local radio station and ask them if they have a programme dedicated to children's issues and giving children a voice – if they don't, ask them why not. Draw on your organisation's resources to assist them if they don't.
- *Lobby schools:* Check if schools you work with, or are involved in, have a school newspaper, and, if not, think about starting one. It is cost effective. It develops writing, reading and analytical skills, and, best of all, it enables children's voices to be heard.
- *Do the DRIVE:* Not only could it change a child's approach to the media but you may be surprised at how much children can teach you! Watch, listen or read the news with children. Count how many stories involving children can be found in the news, and look for the following:

<sup>vi</sup> Working in several sites across Tanzania and South Africa, CRF-trained youth journalists produce a wide range of audio formats and host weekly youth-oriented shows on local radio stations. See [www.childrensradiofoundation.org](http://www.childrensradiofoundation.org).

- *D = Diversity of children*: Are there boys and girls? Are the stories set in urban and rural areas? Who are the children and what are they doing?
- *R = Rights respected*: Is the story in the best interests of the child?
- *I = Issues*: Are there a range of children's issues in the news? In other words: Are the stories about children all about bad or sad or tragic things that happen to children, or do you see children doing different and exciting things?
- *V = Voices heard*? You may see children but how often do you actually hear their voices?
- *E = Ethical coverage*: How would you feel if it was your child of if you were the child? Would you want the story reported that way?

Then ask the children what they would like to do about what they see. Write to the media and let them know. If the media are not told what audiences want, how can they change?

- *Mainstream children's participation*: Whenever there is an opportunity to highlight a critical issue in the media, be it the outcomes of a workshop with children, or new research, always ask if there is a way of including children, or having their perspectives heard. Not only will children bring a fresh perspective, they will also demonstrate children's abilities to speak on important issues. That said, when working with vulnerable children always consider the potential harm that may be caused to them by appearing in the media. It is up to adults to act in the best interests of the child.

What can media professionals learn from meaningful children's participation? They can learn that direct engagement with children results in more informed stories and that children can add valuable insights on key issues. These can range from views on politicians, education and child abuse through to high level policy matters. For example, children from MMA made a submission to a public hearing of the South African Press Council. Children who had been monitoring the media were able to identify problems and develop recommendations on how the South African media could improve its work with children. The children felt that their rights were continuously being violated and called on the media to respect children's rights. They recommended:

- less stereotyping girls and boys in "traditional" gender roles;
- that the media should access children directly when covering issues which involve children, provided that it is in their best interests to do so; and
- that a child's identity should be protected in every way when it is not in their best interests to make this public.<sup>9</sup>

These recommendations are all the more important considering that the only reference to children in the current South African Press Code comes in the definition of "child pornography".<sup>vii</sup>

## Conclusion

While social media directly facilitates interaction between producers of media and receivers, more "traditional" media such as newspapers, television and radio need not be simply passively received and consumed. Activists – members of civil society, educators, parents and caregivers – need to engage with journalists and editors, assist them and challenge them. The media help to frame debates and highlight issues that are considered to be important, so it is essential – for the children's sector, for children's rights and for children themselves – that children's voices are heard in the media, and that they are portrayed fairly and accurately.

The media are a key tool that is ours to use, no matter what our age, to access knowledge, share opinion, and re-frame who and what is considered to be important. We cannot however ignore the power imbalance and realities we face – that it is difficult for children especially to contribute to and have influence over the production of the media – all the more reason why adult and child participation partnerships are so essential.

## References

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- 8 Singh R & Hilton T (2011) *Children Championing Best Practice in the Media*. Johannesburg: Media Monitoring Africa.
- 9 See no. 8 above.

vii See [www.presscouncil.org.za/pages/press-code.php](http://www.presscouncil.org.za/pages/press-code.php) for the current text of the South African Press Code. It is important to note that the code may change, as a result of the review undertaken by the South African Press Council.