

Children and the media

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A new handbook recently launched by UNICEF seeks to set and - in some instances - reinforce the standards for reporting on or about children in Guyana. The ethical guidelines outlined in the publication can and should in fact be used for reporting on any group. Indeed, any journalist worth his/her salt should already be using these guidelines in his/her daily work.

However, the handbook was necessary since in spite of training or maybe as a result of a lack of it, many journalists are guilty of not employing ethics when going after stories.

One of the rules frequently broken, and which has legal implications, is the naming and sometimes photographing of child offenders. Children under the age of 17 should not be identified if they have been arrested and charged with crimes, yet this is flagrantly disobeyed and the judiciary seems to ignore the lapses that have somehow become common.

Children who are complainants in abuse and rape cases should also be protected, even if it means not naming the alleged offender. Some journalists also break this rule, seemingly with impunity. These constitute a lack of respect for children's privacy. According to the handbook, which examines children's rights in media from both sides, children should have access to the media to have their views portrayed, but at the same time there should be no exploitation as a result of this.

The handbook, which should be widely disseminated in the media and which UNICEF should also give practitioners permission to photocopy, gives a list of responsibilities that must be observed with regard to children: access; faithful portrayal; respecting privacy; non-exploitation and the consequences to the child once the story is published/ broadcast. A crucial international issue, which was not explicitly addressed in the handbook, but which has surfaced in Guyana though it is not as rampant as it is elsewhere, is the exploitation of children through child pornography. Though this might not be an issue for mainstream media practitioners, it has appeared in the mass media locally and should therefore be taken cognizance of. Given the reach of technology today too, one can never assume that there is immunity from anything that can be accessed via the internet.

At a forum on child exploitation and the media in Westminster, England in 1997, stakeholders debated two difficult but interlocking issues: how to protect the victims of child abuse and exploitation, while also seeking to improve public understanding of the problem. Some 35 papers were submitted dealing with topics such as confidentiality, innocence and how to protect children, and at the end of the forum, a list of recommendations was issued; not just to the media, but also to teachers, policemen, lawyers, social workers - people with whom both children and members of the media would have contact.

The recommendations included giving more opportunities to children to express their views in all disciplines concerned. The forum noted that even the most responsible reporting of child abuse could have a dramatic and lasting effect on children, including coverage that might appear years after. It called on the media to ensure that abused children are referred for counselling, even if it meant paying for it. Accuracy in media coverage was also urged as well as protection of children who might have been abused or exploited.

The forum condemned the tendency to juxtapose news or feature stories about sexual abuse alongside sexualised images of young girls and naked women, or use such stories on pages that carry advertisements for sexual services, especially those featuring adults dressed like schoolgirls. It is not just writing, publishing or broadcasting the story that must be done responsibly, but editors have to be discerning about where the story is placed in the newspapers, online or on television. Indeed, any advertisements on pages in a newspaper that target children must be carefully vetted beforehand, same goes for advertisers who are approached to sponsor children's programmes on television or radio.

The UNICEF handbook is a good start to re-establishing the guidelines necessary for reporting for and about children as there was evidence of a blurring of these. It is by no means the be all and end all of it. Members of the media need to also work on opening with children lines of communication, which flow both ways and developing relationships based on trust. These could best be achieved by protecting children as well as, or in some cases better than they protect their sources.