

# Children and the media

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## Background

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Increasingly children have come to rely upon mass communication – the use of words, sounds and images by a few to inform, educate, entertain and persuade the many – to learn about the world they inhabit. Even the poorest, most remote communities can now be touched by radio and the printed word. With the advancement of telephony, satellite and cable technology, along with opportunities for travel, the world is being turned into a global village. Mass media’s potential to inform, educate, nurture, entertain and encourage children and young people is enhanced by its diversity – television, radio, film, advertising, the Internet, print products, music, telephony, theatre and so on.

‘Texting’ has become the communication system of choice among young people the world over, because it is cheap, quick and private. It has created truncated language systems, brought thousands on to the streets during the ‘second revolution’ in the Philippines, facilitated impromptu ‘rave’ parties all over the United Kingdom and galvanized anti-capitalist protestors to demonstrate whenever and wherever world leaders gather.

The Internet, developed to serve military, industrial and academic purposes, has become the latest adventure playground for children and young people with access to the technology – offering them opportunities to explore the information superhighways, unmediated by adults.

Yet despite these developments, when UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy conducted an Internet chat with some 70 young media activists from 17 countries at the start of the new millennium, the unanimous

message she received was that the media is not responding to the needs of the young.

Mass media not only supplies factual information, it also expresses cultural preferences, promotes value systems and fuels commerce through advertising and product placement. It can be a unifying force and a celebration of diversity as well as a propaganda machine causing division. It has the capacity to exploit, abuse, misinform, exclude and corrupt children through on-screen violence, pornography, lack of access, misrepresentation and marginalization of minorities.

Adults in richer countries fret about the amount of time their children devote to media products, bemoan the costs of meeting the demands of a more technologically sophisticated generation, and worry about the peer-group pressure that has made mobile phones and computer games status symbols in the playground.

While some adults argue for greater control of the media, children and young people have demonstrated that, if respected, consulted and engaged, they can help professionals produce better media as well as producing amazing projects themselves. Children have a vital contribution to make to the debate – as consumers of media and as contributors to the production process – and young people's viewpoints are being increasingly solicited, through alternative media, community publications and national broadcasters.

### Best practice

- In Haiti, *Our Own Voice*, a PLAN International initiative, helps young people produce their own radio programmes which are broadcast locally. This material is then transcribed, and distributed to national media, as a means of encouraging them to include children's issues and perspectives in their programming. The material is also available on the website and to other countries.
- In Bangladesh, a child-friendly selection process for participation in a youth television programme, *Mukto Khobor*, ensures that all sectors of society are considered. Not only are schools contacted to supply candidates, but also organizations that may be working with children who have no access to education. The production team is a mixture of privileged children, working children and some who may not have even basic literacy skills. The programme is an accurate reflection of Bangladeshi society and as such appeals to multiple audiences, making it a ratings success.
- The US-based Center for Media Literacy has produced an interactive CD-ROM programme, *Between the Lines*, that allows young people to experience the decisions faced by media producers, with guidance on how to edit TV news and design a public service announcement.
- In recognition of the fact that more and more young people are making their own films, MediaRights, a not-

for-profit organization concerned about the limited representation of young people in popular media, offers distribution and exhibition venues for youth-produced media. It provides online workshops to help young people involved in media activities to make videos, find each other and share their experiences.

- The MAGICbank on this site provides many more examples of good practice.

Children and young people themselves are making the most of opportunities to get their voices heard and communicate with other children – and adults – across the world. Children from the northern and southern hemispheres are contacting each other through school-based links on the Internet; young people in rural Tanzania are learning about the lives of people in other parts of the world by visiting video cabins in local markets; street children in India are making radio programmes about their lives; urban youngsters in Brazil are using the airwaves to find out more about their counterparts in the Amazon rainforest; Inuit children in Labrador, Canada, are telling their stories to the rest of the country in the same way; while children in the Pacific Rim have used the media to alert the world to their abuse by tourists. In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, young people from Pakistan and Afghanistan joined forces with children from western countries to develop programmes on the theme of 'tolerance and understanding among peoples'.

Meanwhile the mass media industry is developing strategies to capture young audiences through children's programming with a particular emphasis upon animation. According to *Screen Digest*, "Animation is an attractive investment because of its longevity, its ability to travel, and the potential to create revenue from home video, publishing, toys and other licensing activities."

In the Asian subcontinent, where children's programming comprises less than 5 per cent of broadcast output, nearly 50 per cent of it is of foreign origin and most of that is animation. Foreign-produced animation also dominates the output of children's programming in China.

### A question of access

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The enormous disparities in access to electronic media demonstrate that we are still a long way from being the global information village that many pundits from the northern hemisphere like to imagine.

The *Global Media Atlas*, published by the British Film Institute in 2001, paints a picture of a world in which all forms of communication are in the hands of conglomerates or under state control. The poorest countries are the least well-served.

If mass media is seen as an engine of change, the economic and cultural dominance of the North is assured. Countries where communications technology is at its most sophisticated and accessible include Canada,

Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States. Those where it remains the most remote of public facilities include the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Gambia, Haiti, Mali, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal and Somalia.

However, global awareness of the inequality between North and South has been made possible by a communications revolution that allows a person in sub-Saharan Africa to describe her circumstance to the world by satellite phone, even though she may have little prospect of seeing her children grow to adulthood.

The delivery of television services to a society riven by war, disease and poverty may, rightly, rate low on the scale of a government's priorities, but the technology now exists to make communication with the outside world more feasible than ever before for those in the bleakest of circumstances.

Indeed, warring factions in different parts of the world have paid special attention to mass communications – for example, the murderous output of the notorious Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines in Rwanda; the media war conducted by the western allies and Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War; the propaganda battle during the Kosovan crisis; and the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine. The events of 11 September 2001 were played out for the mass media, and in the 'war against terrorism' that followed, the media has played a crucial role for all parties to the conflict, even though the latest figures indicate that barely one in 10 Afghans has access to a radio set.

Even in parts of the world where mass media flourishes, access is likely to be restricted, by economic circumstances and parental controls, for instance. Recent studies of media use by children in the United States and India indicate that affluent, urban dwellers have greater access, and that boys have access to a broader range of media products than girls. Children from minority groups within both societies are less well-served.

Where media products are at the most dense – in the Nordic countries and North America – children have a greater variety of products to choose from and increasingly have unlimited access in the home, with their own personal computers, Internet connections, electronic game sets, radios, CD players and televisions.

Since many of the games, programmes, music and related merchandise are common across national boundaries, it could be argued that the communications revolution has opened up shared interests among young people. Globalization could be said to have created a youth culture that is recognizable in every corner of the world – cartoon characters, music styles, fast foods, fashion brands and media celebrities.

Ironically the public service ethos – guaranteeing universal access – which has underpinned the develop-

ment of mass media in many western countries, has opened the door to what many now regard as a dissolution of cultural identities. Mass production of media products for huge markets means sales at lower prices than those produced in smaller markets. Those who dominate the global media scene are therefore also able to define the supposedly uniting 'global culture'.

When the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the world's best known public service broadcaster, announced plans for two new digital television channels entirely devoted to young people, and allowing their own participation in the process, it faced opposition from global commercial competitors, who feared the loss of an important share of the market.

This is an indication that importance is attached to children – especially as a potential market in western democracies. However such competition offers little consolation to the millions of children who have never seen a television set.

Just as they object to being treated as passive consumers, children also recognize that their own identity is being sold short by media promotion of alien or anodyne cultural values, and they appreciate the irony that so much of the merchandise associated with global media output is manufactured by children in the poorest countries.

Children and young people's rights to participate in society are hampered both by a lack of communication infrastructure and by competition for market domination. These are major issues that have to be addressed by governments, but children and their supporters can apply pressure by demanding greater equality in the distribution of media and opportunities for self-expression.

## Decoding the messages

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Mass communication has given birth to an industrial sector that has become all-encompassing. Vast media empires are significant players in the global economy, shaping the political, cultural and economic development of nation states.

Appreciating how and why mass media constructs and distributes information, requires skills that are not readily available to adults, let alone children and young people. Such knowledge – acquired through disciplines like media literacy, media education, media studies or vocational training – has now become an important life skill.

Very young children may find it difficult to differentiate between what is 'real' and what is fictional, but even adults can have difficulty truly understanding the coverage of events by media which may be pursuing a variety of goals. Media companies have business interests in a variety of industrial and service sectors, and links that may not be immediately obvious to their consumers.

And since such corporations may have a very different economic and political agenda to the individuals who purchase or rely upon their products, issues of equity and editorial integrity can be at stake.

Product placement, programme and product sponsorships and cross-media marketing have blurred conventional lines between journalism and advertising. Our attitude towards a book review, for example, changes if we are made aware that the item has been produced by the same media company that is publishing the review, and that it may be obtained at a special rate if it is purchased through the company's website.

There may be a debate about where and how the ability to interpret communication techniques should be learned, but there can be little doubt about why it has become so important. Unless everyone recognizes the influence of the media, and learns how to engage with it, their ability to participate in society is curtailed.

Developing media education within schools curricula, media awareness projects and practical opportunities for media production are invaluable methods of ensuring that young people are well equipped to tackle the complexities of adult life and to contribute to public debate about the type of society in which they want to live.

Media professionals have a role to play in developing media literacy programmes within schools, as well as a vested interest in ensuring that future generations trust the mass media as a source of reliable information.

This is part of the rationale behind the Newspapers in Education scheme, operated by the World Association of Newspapers, which encourages children to produce their own or contribute to existing newspapers. In the process they learn about the role of the media, and how it constructs meaning from events rather than just recording them.

Opportunities for children to become involved in media production – and learn about how the media operates in the process – can be seen in projects such as Children's Express and UNICEF's Voices of Youth initiative. These collaborative projects increase mutual appreciation between children and journalists.

## Media for education

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Mass media provides the most constant and open system of public education. The prevalence of radio, even more than television, in most societies, brings information not just to households, but directly to individuals, including children and young people.

This allows the transmission of life-saving advice as well as life skills – through news broadcasts, magazine programmes, chat shows, soap operas and publicity campaigns, alerting whole populations to HIV/AIDS, to the

commercial and sexual exploitation of children, to the use of children in armed conflict, and to the human consequences of radical economic and political change.

The use of audiovisual aids, film, video and now the Internet in classrooms has transformed education and teaching techniques, raising the need for new skills, especially the ability to process, test and interpret information.

The prevalence of Internet cafes, and access to the Internet via libraries, town halls, community and health centres, has put a wealth of information at people's fingertips. And it is young people who are most familiar with these communication techniques. While their parents may never have known anything like it, future generations will never have known anything else.

In the meantime, harnessing the power of new media to build networks between teachers and students in the resource-rich North and the resource-poor South remains the best way of bridging the gap and ensuring that children everywhere can benefit from the sharing of experience, techniques and materials.

## Television and the young

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While television has yet to penetrate vast populations of young people, children's television is already big business and a growth industry.

The world's four biggest television channels – Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, The Disney Channel, Fox Kids' Network – are all based in North America but broadcast throughout the world. They have achieved their dominance in less than 10 years.

Much of children's television output is now linked – through advertising, product placement, and licensing – to the retailing of toys, books, electronic games and other items.

American producers benefit from the economies of scale because their domestic market is now so huge. As a consequence, local production of children's programmes elsewhere has begun to shrink, even in Europe. Inevitably the cultural values that predominate reflect those of the producers rather than their diverse markets. Although local production is now being developed to meet the needs of European consumers, it will be some time before this trend reaches less developed markets.

Eastern Europe, once well served by locally produced children's programming, has come to rely on foreign imports. In Latin America, children of parents who can afford access to cable channels have to rely largely on imported programming. In North Africa, where 50 per cent of the population is under 30 years old, there is no indigenous children's programming. And while post-apartheid South Africa has seen an upsurge in the production of children's programmes, like the rest of the

continent, where children have access to television, the schedules are packed with products from the English-speaking world.

The arrival of digital television has increased opportunities for niche marketing, allowing European channels to reach out to international markets that share the same language. The potential of digital could mean that tomorrow's children will be far better served with culturally appropriate material than today's.

However plans by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the United Kingdom's leading public service broadcaster, to launch two interactive digital channels dedicated to young children and teenagers, met with opposition from commercial broadcasters.

The key challenge to be addressed by those who are investing resources in children's productions, or who are engaged in the process, is examining how far the best interests of their young viewers have been considered in commissioning, making and marketing the programme. They should also be aware of those young viewers who do not share their own cultural values.

When conducting market research about television programmes for children, the opinions of children from potential non-domestic markets might also be canvassed, and opportunities should be created for children to express their reactions to programmes directed at them.

The following question should always be asked: is the primary purpose of the programme to persuade children or young people to buy, or desire, a secondary product; or has it been commissioned for its entertainment, informational or educational value?

## Children in media production

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A major impediment to involving children and young people in media production is that it means bringing them into a potentially hazardous workplace. If it is a busy place with lots of people, movement and equipment it will pose particular hazards for them. Natural curiosity and the fact that such venues are not designed for people of lower than average adult height could mean that they are put at risk of harm.

The working culture within high-pressure media institutions is not child-friendly, and what should be a rewarding experience could be both bewildering and risky for all concerned unless careful preparation has been undertaken. Often the real fear is that children might damage expensive or sensitive equipment, rather than the other way round. There are also insurance implications.

There are cost implications to some of the safety measures that are required, but most hazards to children are likely to be hazards to adults too. Making a workplace safe for children should be an added guarantee that it is also safe for adults.

Planning ahead is the key to safe participation of children in any workplace. The following will help as a starting point, but media initiatives will need to draw up their own guidelines to ensure that everyone is put at minimum risk. Many media initiatives will have drawn up their own in-house guidelines, but very often such matters are dealt with on an ad hoc basis. By sharing examples of best practice, industry standards can be established, promoted and monitored. The MAGICmedia section of this site has examples of good practice.

- Spend time preparing the children, away from the site.
- When the children are on site make sure they know about the risks involved, and where they can go for help. Make sure they have clean toilet facilities, access to an appropriately sized room where they can relax and opportunities to take refreshments.
- Most important of all make sure that at least one appropriate adult – whom they know and to whom they go for help or advice – is available at all times.
- Those responsible for the management of children's involvement should ensure that they have checked the health and safety regulations as they apply to children. They need to ensure that the children and their carers have been provided with simple, clear explanations of safety arrangements at the work site, and devise simple means of checking that the children really understand them – for example, by taking part in an emergency evacuation exercise.
- Those who work at the venue need to be informed that children may be present in certain places and at certain times, and have an opportunity to discuss the implications of this, for them and the children.
- Those working directly with the children should be operating according to guidelines that have been thoroughly discussed and agreed.
- Most important of all, checks need to be carried out to ensure that the children will not have contact with inappropriate adults – for example, those who have drink or drug problems, or convictions for anti-social behaviour.

## Children as story sources

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Children are rarely part of the news agenda until something delightful or terrible happens to them. News is regarded as something primarily for and about adults.

The birth of a child to celebrity parents, an outbreak of meningitis among young people, revelations about the sexual abuse of children or children dying in refugee camps may make headlines, but the focus is likely to be on the adult response rather than the viewpoint of the child.

If there is one perennial grievance that children and young people share, it is that nobody listens to them. Yet they have revealing insights to offer adults. They share adults' physical and social environment and also experience, in their own way, the impact of crime or economic and legislative changes. Indeed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely acknowledged body of international law.

Yet where children are catered for in the media, they tend to be ghettoized and patronized. Appointing journalists to specialize in gathering stories and opinions from children about significant 'newsworthy' events is one way that media organizations can begin to adjust the balance. Developing networks of young reporters who can provide a fresh view on the world can also make a real difference.

When young people interviewed the President of Macedonia for state television, the public gained fresh impressions of their leader. In Albania, teenagers reporting about an orphanage achieved changes in the administration. Young reporters working with Children's Express and the BBC's *Newsround*, both in the United Kingdom, have obtained scoops and helped to set the media agenda. In India, Peru and the Philippines children living and working on the street have been able to influence the attitudes of media professionals and the public by recording their own stories through different media such as the musical drama, Goldtooth.

Such achievements are the result of firm commitments by children's agencies and media producers to invest time, energy and training in the next generation of reporters while they are still young enough to fully represent their peers.

## Interviewing children

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Understanding how young people see the world around them and transmitting that vision to the public is one of the most challenging tasks facing journalists, yet they are rarely trained to deal with children. They have a responsibility to portray children fairly, without doing any harm to them in the collection and publication of information.

Balancing the journalistic obligation to tell the truth with the need to protect children is fraught with difficulties and ethical questions. Should reporters intervene in the lives of endangered children? Should journalists interview children after they have been involved in a traumatic event? Under what circumstances is it appropriate to fully identify, or obscure the identity of children?

It is generally recognized that young people's privacy should be given greater protection than adults, but this isn't always the case. In many countries there are no laws prohibiting using the names, words or images of children who have consented to be interviewed in a public space.

When making judgements about how to proceed, the best interests of the child should be an overriding consideration. Journalists should aim to minimize harm to the child, both in the circumstances of the interview and with regard to the likely consequences of what is published.

Safeguarding the welfare of children and young people need not run counter to sound journalism practice. All journalists need to do is ask themselves some basic questions.

- Are under-age children being interviewed with the consent of adults? Is there a legal context in which interviews of children may take place?
- Has the interview been conducted in a child-friendly manner, including allowing sufficient time and a comfortable environment?
- Have the potential consequences of the child's comments, both short-term and long-term, been considered and explained to the interviewee?
- Have arrangements been made to ensure that children are protected after publication, and that support systems are in place should other children contact the publisher?
- Are children told what will be done with what they say and are they permitted to see the finished product?

With the advent of 'realtime' news coverage, simple rules for working with young people are vital for staff working under tight deadlines. The CNN newsroom has developed a list of half a dozen factors to consider when deciding whether or not to interview children for breaking news stories. These include their age and maturity, the degree of violence involved, the child's connection to any victims, the presence of parental permission and whether the footage is taped or live.

Children are used to providing adults and authority figures with what they think they want, which is not always the same as what children might really want to say. Research shows that children provide more accurate information when they are given the time to narrate their stories freely, rather than when they are being asked direct questions. Indirect questions may provide a margin of safety for the child.

While it may be wise to ensure that adults known to the children are nearby when interviewing them, the most authentic information will be obtained when children are in an environment with their peers. Nevertheless, it is generally important to obtain the consent of an appropriate adult (parent or carer) if possible.

- Canada's Media Awareness Network has devised a Media Toolkit for Youth, with a section for young people on Knowing Your Rights, with advice when they are being interviewed by the press.

- The Poynter Institute in the United States has posted guidelines on its website as a free service to all those interested in how to work responsibly with young people.

- Save the Children UK has published a booklet, *Interviewing Children. A guide for Journalists and Others*, and a tape offering sensible guidelines on how to interview children. Researched with children from around the world, it is useful for print and broadcast journalists, newsrooms and other media outlets.

- The booklet has been used in conjunction with the International Federation of Journalists and the UNICEF/PressWise handbook *The Media and Children's Rights* as part of a training module delivered worldwide by the UK-based media ethics charity The PressWise Trust. Notes on interviewing children appear in four languages within modules posted on the homepage of the Trust's website.

## Shocking images

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Some of the most powerful images of tragedy, conflict and hope presented by the media have featured children.

Writing about the power of images of children caught up in atrocities committed by adults, novelist Christopher Hope says that they reveal "the ability, lodged deep within older, taller individuals of our species ... to do serious damage to children, their own and others, when and if it suits them ... What the pictures we cannot forget do is expose the fact that hope has been betrayed again and again. They make us remember how we would have felt. After all we were children once. They make us remember a time when we expected better of people like us."

The destructive force of napalm will forever be associated with nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc running naked along a road in Viet Nam. The dreadful waste of young lives during the second Palestinian *intifada* was brought home by the image of 12-year-old Mohammed al-Durrah cowering in his father's arms moments before he was shot by Israeli soldiers. Similarly, in recent years, the enormity of the Mozambique floods was communicated to the world through the televised helicopter rescue of Rosita Pedro, who was born in a tree above the rising waters.

When film-maker Sorious Samura captured footage of the execution of a teenage boy in his film *Cry Freetown* he summed up the obscenity of civil war and its aftermath in Sierra Leone.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of images like these is that the children are identified, they are real

people with names and histories. Yet identifying children without giving their names can be fatal. The identification of a child soldier in a western newspaper resulted in the assassination of that child thousands of miles away in a war-torn African country, because those who abuse children want no witnesses to their cruelty. During the Kosovan crisis, editors in the Balkans declined to use pictures of children driven into exile because they knew the risks of identifying potential witnesses at war crimes trials. There was no such reticence in other western media, which saw that the power of these images would encourage intervention by the United Nations and NATO.

Using pictures of children caught up in the horrors of war, crime and natural disasters requires delicate judgement. Photojournalists themselves have complained about their pictures being used inappropriately and out of context. Aid workers have complained about camera crews setting up pictures of bereft children in refugee camps, unaware that the children's fear and trauma may itself be the result of sudden confrontation with foreign journalists. NGOs (non-governmental organizations) who are quick to complain about the media's abuse of children's rights may themselves exploit pathetic images of children to raise funds.

This is a complex challenge for which there are no simple solutions. Under what circumstances, if ever, do 'news values' override the best interests of the child? What techniques are appropriate when constructing images of children, especially to illustrate stories where the identity of the child may have special risks attached?

So concerned has the Center for the Protection of Children's Rights Foundation in Bangkok become about the motives of foreign journalists investigating sex tourism that it requires all press callers to complete a detailed questionnaire before affording them access to its project. Greater sensitivity among photographers and camera crews, as well as their editors, may require specialist training, and children's NGOs may need to develop guidelines about the conditions under which they provide assistance to the media, or use images in their own publicity material.

## A taste for music

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The explosion of music as a cultural focal point for young people – through audio and videotapes, CDs, live events and especially now through the Internet, radio and television – has reinforced the gap between the generations. Adults who worry about sexist and violent imagery and lyrics in the variety of musical genres are seen as simply out of touch.

By the early 1990s the music television channel MTV, founded in the United States in 1981, had access to over 20 million households in Central and Latin America (7.5 million in Brazil alone), 1.8 million in Asia and 36

million in Europe. It now has 16 national or regional branches, each delivering a wide variety of programming to increasingly varied young audiences.

Typically, music TV channels for the young feature a fast-moving diet of music videos interspersed with chat, promotional jingles and advertisements. They are essentially lifestyle channels and it is their consumerism that critics find so problematic. They proffer the unobtainable to many who are in no position to afford the goods on display, although, to receive the channels, young people must have access to satellite or cable.

However, those who can switch on to MTV are united through a website that gives opportunities for debate for young people everywhere, under banners like 'Fight for your rights'. The 'Hot global highlights' message reads: "Transcend frontiers by checking out this week's highlights. Find out what makes other young people tick around the planet, and get the scoop on a wide variety of international artists, events and more."

The communication giants have the potential to reach and deliver messages exclusively to young audiences at previously undreamed of levels. They are producing a shared experience. However commercialized the products, the appeal to young people derives from the fact that the experience is theirs.

Industry forecasters believe that annual retail sales for leisure software in the United States will top US\$8 billion by 2005, a figure likely to be matched by sales in Europe, with the Japanese sales figures not far behind.

The spread of the MTV and games culture, bewildering though it may be to parents, represents a new cultural phenomenon that borrows and blends styles, themes and values. It is risky to predict the consequences for future generations and media products, but if young people are given opportunities to contribute rather than just consume, they could have a defining influence on the construction of the global village that communication technology is making possible.

## **HIV, AIDS and the media**

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The particular vulnerability of young people to HIV/AIDS makes it one of the most important health issues for the media to tackle. Media programmes can offer an ideal vehicle for bypassing social taboos which may hinder frank discussion of sexual practices – conveying images of AIDS, promoting informed discussion, dispelling false information, and playing a crucial role in helping to reduce the level of HIV/AIDS among young people.

In Zambia, 100 people a day are dying of HIV/AIDS. Research indicated that a large percentage of Zambian young people were having unprotected sex. At the same time, the young people interviewed expressed a need

for information that was current and more accessible. The response was the youth mass media campaign, Helping Each Other Responsibly Together (HEART), which AIDS specialists believe is responsible for the recent reduction in the HIV rate among the country's young people. The campaign was particularly effective because it was planned and implemented by young people.

Around the world, innovative projects are being launched in an attempt to harness the power of the media to help prevent the spread of AIDS. This requires careful preparation as insensitive programming can reinforce stereotypes and provoke fear. It is vital that the efforts of media professionals should be as comprehensive as possible. Do the programmes/publications respond to the cultural needs of the target audience? Do they offer suggestions and provide contact details about where to seek personal support? Are partnerships between health workers or other groups in society highlighted in the initiative? Do they promote healthy and responsible behaviour as opposed to sanctioning or criticising the sexual behaviour of young people? Are role models used successfully to encourage safe behaviour?

## **Child protection on the Internet**

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As we entered the new millennium an estimated 305 million people were making use of the Internet, including well over 17 million of the world's children.

The World Wide Web is an exciting place for inquisitive young minds and it does not take long for children to pick up the skills needed to go online. However, without proper precautionary measures, cyberspace can be a potentially threatening environment in which children and young people can be exposed to hate messages, sexually explicit material, graphic violence and even predators who roam chat rooms in search of innocent prey.

Young people surfing the Internet are also vulnerable to exploitative marketing. They may be persuaded to engage in activities that could have negative legal or financial consequences, such as giving out a parent's credit card number. Buying and selling of information about children by direct marketers and information brokers is a profitable business.

In 1998 the controversial US Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) placed obligations on websites with content for children to adopt and publicize a privacy policy, and obtain the consent of parents of children under 13 years of age before collecting or disclosing personal information from them. Direct parental consent must also be obtained if the sites offer access to third parties through chat rooms, email and instant messaging.

Other parts of the world, including France and South Africa, are also establishing laws on Internet content. The European Community has initiated an Internet

Action Plan aimed at combating illegal and harmful content on global networks. Internet service providers have introduced filter systems, while increasing numbers of individuals and organizations are developing activities designed to protect young people. Internet safety hotlines in eight European Union countries are linked into a network that allows the public to report illegal content.

To exclude children from the Internet because crimes are being committed online would be to deprive them of an extraordinary source of information and self-improvement. Child protection experts argue that the responsibility lies with parents and carers to protect their children. The challenge for parents, schools, public authorities, community groups, Internet service providers, media industries and regulatory bodies is to ensure that children are properly advised about the benefits and perils of cyberspace and are equipped with the skills to safeguard themselves.

There are some obvious precautions that need to be taken when introducing children to the Internet.

- Have the terminals been checked for screening mechanisms that prevent access to harmful material?
- Have the children been coached in personal safety – and been given opportunities to express the safety code in their own words, so that they feel they have ownership of it – before being allowed to go online?
- Have procedures been put in place for the reporting of improper behaviour on the Internet?
- Do teachers know about the regulatory agencies that need to be informed about sites, search engines and Internet service providers that might be considered harmful to children, especially those promoting unlawful activities?

### Good practice

The following initiatives give examples of good practice, suggested further reading and weblinks.

- The US Federal Trade Commission has a Kidz Privacy webpage explaining the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act for adults, teachers, children and the media.
- MaMaMedia, considered to be one of the best US children's activity websites, monitors communications, offers no realtime chat rooms, limits the collection of children's personal information and does not share user information with the site's business partners. It also requires all those who register to supply parental email addresses so that consent can be obtained.
- The Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA) is an international, independent organization that empowers the public, especially parents, to make informed deci-

sions about electronic media by means of the open and objective labelling of content. Web authors fill in an online questionnaire describing the content of their site, which is then given a Content Label by the ICRA.

- The international campaign group Innocence en Danger is one of many groups of concerned parents seeking alliances to protect children from the risks of unsupervised Internet use.
- The UK-based interactive website Miss Dorothy provides links for children and adults to examine safety codes, government guidelines and examples of good safety practice in schools.
- Chat Danger provides parents with advice on how to recognize and prevent problems that can arise in chat rooms. Although it is aimed primarily at the UK and Europe, advice is applicable for anyone in the world.
- The local police in Montreal, Canada, have prepared a *Guide de Sécurité pour les Jeunes Internauts (Security Guide for Young Internet Users)* for parents to teach their children about navigating the World Wide Web safely.

## Declaring for children

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The media world is not short of aspirational pledges to do good, and there is a substantial body of formal declarations and resolutions referring to the relationship between the media and children (see the MAGICgovernment section of this website for examples of these pledges). None have the force of law, but they can assist understanding that there is growing concern about the function of mass media in children's lives.

At the heart of all of them is an acknowledgement that children deserve good quality media products, and that they have a contribution to make to the media products directed at them.

Given the near universal ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the global influence of the most significant media owners, the least daunting of the challenges facing those wishing to strengthen the positive relationship between children and the media would appear to be convincing key players of the value of a 'top-down' commitment to children. Of course, in a highly competitive environment it is never going to be easy to persuade industry leaders to adopt common policies.

There is also scope for pressure to come from children themselves, from their advocates and from within the media professions. While cultural differences may be expressed through the variety of standards set by state and national media industry regulation, mere compliance is insufficient. What is needed is a compact between the media industries and children with a recognition of children's rights at its heart.

By networking across borders and disciplines, and by seeking to place children on the agenda for all gatherings at all levels of the media – from trades unions to professional organizations, trade associations and international media events – children’s advocacy groups and those sympathetic to promoting the rights of children within the media could have a significant impact upon industry thinking about the way in which children are both represented and encouraged to participate in mass media.

## Media regulation

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Systems of media regulation vary from country to country, and operate with varying degrees of success. Most systems – those supervised by the state and the media industries – include special mention of the vulnerability of children and the need to protect them. Few take a stand on children’s participation in media (see the MAGICmedia section of this website, for examples of individual regulatory codes).

On the one hand there has been growing emphasis on protection of children from pornography and depictions of violence. On the other there has been concerted pressure from within media industries for deregulation and increased opportunities for ‘the market’ to decide on what is, or is not, acceptable.

Technical quality and compliance with the laws of the land is only one aspect of media regulation. Regulation of content and the behaviour of media professionals is an even more fraught arena of debate.

Independence of thought, freedom of expression and freedom from vested interests are supposed to be hallmarks of good journalism. It is understandable that media professionals resent the notion that the state, or even their own industry, should tell them how to do their job. Yet in 1998, the International Federation of Journalists itself initiated a global debate about the need to establish baseline guidance for its members on reporting about children, when it became clear how few journalism codes of conduct even mentioned children.

If children are to benefit from the opportunities afforded by the expansion of mass media markets, there needs to be both a recognition of their rights and a willingness to incorporate them in the media agenda. Ideally this should come from commitment and conviction from within the industry, rather than compulsion from outside. Nonetheless, it is clear that media is primarily an adult preoccupation.

Concerted effort is needed to ensure that there is room and a welcome for children in the media, not just as the talent of the future, but as contributing members of society. Since there are no international regulatory frameworks to which all media give credence, seeking an acknowledgement by the media industries that they have a role to play in assisting States Parties to comply

with their obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child may require organized lobbying. The starting point could be to encourage media owners and regulators to appreciate and reflect upon the implications of the Convention for media practitioners.

## Prizes

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Prizes signify value and achievement. They can stimulate innovation and the pursuit of excellence. Prizes for individual performances, publications, programmes, effective journalistic and marketing campaigns or website design can provide a focus for children and young people and help to spotlight best practice and share it with others. Within the media industries, awards are also an important feature of marketing, generating public interest and sales.

Encouraging fresh approaches to media production by, with and for children can be achieved by including certain criteria in awards – for example, respect for the child’s perspective, or engaging young people at each stage of the production process.

Those in a position to initiate awards for child-friendly media products may wish to consider consulting children in the planning of an awards scheme, and the adjudication process. They may also wish to include a requirement that responsible involvement of children and young people is a key determinant of eligibility. This in turn may place a responsibility upon entrants to describe the participative techniques they have employed, so that others can benefit from their solutions to particular obstacles.

Another important consideration is sustainability. Are all relevant professional bodies aware of the awards scheme – from media producers to teachers, as well as the networks of voluntary organizations working directly with children? Have the awards been designed to give them sufficient exposure and kudos to encourage participation? What thought has been given to creating an awards process that makes best use of new communications technology to involve the public and members of specific age groups or professions in the awarding of prizes?

The global media market place makes it possible to develop award schemes that can operate at a national, regional and international level. Partnerships with media producers can bring opportunities to share best practice across borders. International Children’s Day of Broadcasting, the Prix Jeunesse and initiatives of the European Broadcasting Union are good examples.

Underlying the prize-giving process should be the intention that the winners will always be children. That means recognizing the contribution that children themselves can make to media production. Awards for children’s newspapers, photography, film and programme-making and website production sponsored by NGOs or the media industries, for example, are powerful stimulants

## Good practice

The following are examples of good practice, and suggestions of further web research.

- Among the innovative approaches of The Prix Jeunesse is the packaging of the best entries as a 'suitcase' with multilingual supporting materials that are available for presentation anywhere in the world, to exemplify good practice and encourage replication.
- The Canadian-based International Center of Films for children and Young People has been awarding prizes since 1981 to outstanding productions for children and young people that: have a potential for international distribution; contribute to better understanding between children and young people throughout the world; are of high standard of artistic achievement and technical competence; and which – in form and content – promote and respect the rights of children.
- Clap Cartable, organized by the regional administration of the French state education system, is one of numerous video festivals where children are film-makers and jury.
- The Premios Iberoamericanos de Comunicación por los Derechos de la Niñez, established in co-operation with UNICEF through its Americas and Caribbean Regional Office, the Spanish National Committee for UNICEF and the press agency EFE offers prizes for the most effective use of print, radio, television and photography to promote and defend of the rights of the child.
- The Chicago International Children's Film Festival engages both children and adults in the process of selecting 180 films for entry to the festival. A specially trained multi-ethnic Children's Jury and three Adult Juries of media professionals then make the awards.