

## FORUM: MEDIA'S ROLE IN SHAPING MALAYSIAN YOUTH

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### Paper Presentation 3

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

### REAL STORIES OF YOUNG MALAYSIANS

Mat is a young teen who lives with his mom and siblings in rural Kedah. Like most teens, Mat felt the need to belong to a group and wanted to experiment with high-risk behavior. At 17, he found himself joining an illegal motorbike racing gang in an attempt to fit in. Mat did it because he thought this was cool.

Twenty-one year old Tasha is a local undergraduate who is excited about her future. Tasha is also HIV positive. When I met her this year, she said to me. "I thought you could only get HIV from a 'drug addict' or 'prostitute' because those were the messages I got from the media."

Joe is young bright spark. Energetic and creative. But Joe was also an angry young nineteen year-old when I first met him. Initially, I found it difficult to make a connection with him. It took me some time and I eventually learnt that he is a product of a shattered family life which exposed him to violence almost on a daily basis. His childhood was defined by fear, one where his mom was often beaten by his father. And some times, Joe and sister would also take a bashing. Joe entered teenhood believing violence was an OK solution to dealing with problems. And of course, the movies he watched reinforced this belief. So that's how he lived his early life.

Ladies and gentlemen,

### UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE

I shared these three stories with you because it's important for us to understand that teen years are not easy years. Yes, it's an exciting period, one marked with discovery, and exploration of new behaviours and relationships. But these are also challenging and confusing times resulting from emerging feelings. A time when young people feel they need to test their boundaries to determine who they are and what they can do.

Teenage years and the transition to adulthood is a very taxing period - both for young people as well as their parents and I guess for society as well. Young people are vulnerable during these times – they are faced with peer pressures and influences. They go through physical, emotional and psychological changes which come along with a range of problems.

How they deal with difficult situations like peer pressure, discrimination, substance abuse or violence, is a reflection of not who they are but a reflection of the environment they grew up in – was it one defined with love and support, with information and education, OR was it one defined with violence, with scolding and humiliation.

Young people do not engage in risk behaviour because they are bad people. There is no such thing as a good or a bad person. Young people engage in risk behaviour because we as adults have failed them. Failed them in ensuring they had a happy safe and healthy childhood, failed them by withholding life-saving information and skills. Failed them by not protecting them from violence, either in their homes, in their schools, communities or in the media. Failed them by refusing to make an effort to understand the challenges they go through growing from adolescence to adulthood.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

## **MEDIA SENSATIONALISM**

I would like to share with you the words of Mr. Aidan White, Secretary-General of the International Federation of Journalists who said, I quote:

If children’s rights figure prominently in mainstream media it is usually in the context of child abuse, exploitation and sensationalist news making. Children are generally seen and heard at a distance, reflecting a weakness that resonates through any discussion on media and the rights of children, that young people are seldom allowed to speak for themselves.

Close quote.

According to the International Federation of Journalists 2002 Report titled “Putting Children in the Right – Child Rights and the Media” one factor leading media to exploit children is fierce commercial competition. Please allow me to read an excerpt from this report:

The exposure of emotions and sensationalism attract audiences and sell news. Cash-conscious media organisations apply greater pressure on news teams for productivity. Journalists, therefore, sometimes take an ill-considered, easy route to newsgathering, perpetuating myths and stereotypes.

An uncomfortable balance of interests prevails where ethical standards are too often sacrificed in defence of commercial imperatives. Selfregulation may not be convincing when media organisations appear to ignore the process or to use professional codes to support their narrow interests.

Very often even regulatory bodies lack the power to enforce sanctions that bite. Media professionals need to challenge the constraints that bind them to markets.

Journalists, writers, and producers must work towards a system of popular culture that addresses the needs of children (and young people) without devaluing them. The competitive nature of the industry means that media will often cut corners to beat a rival network or publication. However, journalists must remain aware of the need for fair, open and straightforward methods in obtaining information. Journalism should always be ethical, above all when considering the needs of children (and young people).

So let us ask ourselves this question. If we say we love our children and young people so much and consider them our future, why do we allow them to be humiliated in the media? Unfortunately for children and young people, they can be made villains by the media once they are judged to have lost their “innocence”. No one even thinks of questioning the root causes of a problem. And if we continue with this type of superficial response of scape-goating the most vulnerable – our young, then all we are doing is allowing our sores to fester.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

## THE POWER OF MEDIA

I thank you for your presence here this morning. In itself, it’s a simple yet powerful message of your concern for Malaysia’s young. Your presence is an affirmation of the crucial role that media are playing - and can yet play - in the promotion and protection of the rights of children and young people.

The central importance of mass media in shaping the lives of children and young people are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international treaty created to protect the basic rights of children, defined as persons up to the age of 18.

The Convention which has been adopted by 191 countries, including Malaysia, establishes some of the following rights for children:

- A child's right to a free flow of information and ideas;
- A child's right to information material specifically tailored to their age, interests and linguistic needs;
- A child's right to protection from material or information that may be harmful to their wellbeing; and,
- A child's right to freedom of expression, including the right to express their views on matters affecting them.

Additionally, the 1999 Oslo Challenge, an initiative organised by UNICEF and the Government of Norway, addressed a call to governments, organisations and individuals to build constructive relationships between children and the media.

In all my last thirteen years of working life, I have in some way or the other engaged with the media. And based on my experiences, I strongly believe that media professionals are champions of human rights. The media acts as the eyes, ears and voices of the public, drawing attention to abuses of power and human rights, often at great personal risk.

## RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM

Through your media platforms, you frequently expose the plight of children and young people caught up in circumstances beyond their control, or abused or exploited by adults. Through your work, you influence policy and encourage our government and civil society organisations to effect changes that will improve the quality of people's lives and ensure the best for children and young people.

As media professionals, you should however, be aware of how your efforts to uncover cases of abuse against children and young people, can at the same time infiltrate the public with tolerant attitudes towards their exploitation. If not careful, the media can unintentionally exploit children and young people by creating sexually provocative images of them in news reporting, documentaries and advertising. Although well-intentioned, these could inadvertently serve as a vehicle for child pornography, or a source of information for paedophile networks.

To truly celebrate and protect our young, the media must practice responsible journalism which reports the experience of young people, while reflecting respect for their rights. To do so, media professionals must always be aware of how your work can affect the lives of children and young people.

Sensationalism should not be tolerated, even if some may argue that sensationalism permits serious social issues to capture the attention of its audiences. There is no benefit in this if such coverage contributes to myths that damage public perception of children and young people. A fine line remains between sensitive, intelligent reporting by the media and sensationalizing the issue. The focus should always be on educating and informing the public, and monitoring child rights standards.

In exposing and highlighting abuse, the media plays a crucial role in exploring how exploitation of children and young people can be stopped. The media has the task of bringing these abuses to the attention of politicians and the public. The way in which the media represents or even ignores children and young people in such reports can however influence decisions taken on their behalf, and how the rest of society regards and treats them. We do young people an injustice when we merely represent them in media as “victims”, “innocents” or “villains”. Not only does this perpetuate society’s misconception on the capability of young people, it also increases their vulnerability.

Reporting in such cases should go beyond identifying a problem. It should include interviews, including with young people, where and when appropriate that illustrate the cause of the problem. Such stories will report consequences and describe the issue from a variety of points of view, presenting the situation in an entirely new framework. Such an approach is more likely to influence public policy, by informing policy makers and those in a position to take action. In such cases, the media reaches a degree of excellence that can have a profound effect on its audience, and create a real climate for change.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

## UNICEF AND THE MEDIA

The United Nations Children’s Fund strongly believes in the media’s power in protecting and ensuring the best for children and young people. And it is for this reason that we continue our best efforts to engage with the media to brainstorm on ideas and to jointly find solutions.

UNICEF has in fact dedicated a special day to recognise the media’s role for children. On the second Sunday in December of each year, UNICEF has a dedicated a day titled “International Children’s Day of Broadcasting”. At the very least, for this special day, UNICEF invites broadcasters to celebrate the many ways that children and young people are special and unique by giving them a chance to become directly involved with television and radio – as reporters, presenters and producers of programs that express their own dreams and concerns.

In countries with little resources, UNICEF has facilitated partnerships with media agencies to give young people a space to participate and speak out. Amongst such initiatives are the *Thai Youth News Center*; the *Every child has the right to education* with the Lao National Television; the *Aamra Korbo Joy* in Bangladesh as well as the award winning *Kabataan News Network* (KNN) in the Philippines. A fact sheet on these programs are given in the UNICEF folders.

We have also set up MAGIC or “Media Activities and Good Ideas by, with and for Children” which is a comprehensive, international resource of information, advice and best practices on children and media. The MAGIC Bank, a searchable online database, includes examples of media projects from all over the world that have had a positive effect on children.

In addition, there are two annual Awards that have been created internationally and regionally to celebrate media responses for children – one created in partnership with the International Academy of Television Arts and Sciences which is presented during the EMMY’s and the other, the ABU CASBAA UNICEF - ‘Child rights awards’ created in partnership with the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union and the Cable and Satellite Broadcasting Association of Asia (CASBAA).

We also work hard to produce content for and about children – these include cartoons for children’s rights, video news reports and public service announcements which broadcasters can access for free from the Newsmarket.

So yes, UNICEF is very serious when we say that we see the media as our partners for development, and for the role you play in providing young people a space to speak out and your role in always ensuring that the rights of children and young people will be upheld and protected above everything else.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

## MOVING FORWARD

In a world that is cluttered and full of distractions, the media in all its forms be it – the newspaper, a magazine, radio, TV, digital media -- can become meaningful, positive experiences for children and young people. Despite its sometimes challenging aspects, these media platforms can be helpful tools to teach valuable lessons to our young.

Whether through drama, factual output, entertainment or web presence, we must be ever mindful that children and young people are in the process of becoming the world citizens of tomorrow. As media professionals, you have your share in the responsibility to ensure that those citizens are protected as well as informed both intellectually and emotionally.

To keep your promise to children and young people,

- Media professionals should produce news and documentaries that detail the needs and challenges of our young, while always ensuring that they have the best interest of the child at heart. There is much that has been done to help guide media reporting for and with children and young people. Amongst others these include the International Federation of Journalists Guidelines for the Media titled “Putting Children in the Right” as well as UNICEF’s Guidelines on Reporting on Children and Young People under 18 Years Old. A copy of the UNICEF Guidelines is available for today’s Meeting. I sincerely hope that all of you will use this as your basis and guide whenever producing a story about young people.

- Media professionals should engage and feed the intellect of children and young people and stimulate their imagination. You must create appropriate, non-exploitative content - delivered in a safe environment. You have the tools and the platforms to open children and young people's minds to new worlds. You should use these to help them achieve their goals in their own good time.
- Media professionals should be respectful of children's and young people's culture and understand its distinctive exuberant character, its needs, its limitations, what it can offer us and its value to them. You must understand the difference between shaping this culture and reflecting it. As caretakers of society's future citizens you must be prepared to do both.
- Media professionals should understand and respect that, at times, the adult world can be a very challenging or even frightening place for children and young people. You need to tread carefully in helping them to understand this world.

As we move forward into realizing the dreams of our leaders, we must not forget these invaluable promises to our young. In this, we must be proactive, rather than reactive.

On behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund, I thank the organisers for giving UNICEF a chance to be with you this morning. At the same time, I thank you for supporting this important initiative by Karangkrif and the Malaysian Youth Council. I wish you a successful meeting.

Thank you.