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YOUNG PEOPLE AND MEDIA: MAKING A BIG IMPACT

This edition of "What Young People Are Saying" explores the complex and expanding role of media in the lives of young people. Throughout the world, media are shaping the texture and direction of social life, and this is particularly true for young people. On one hand, media are powerful vehicles for communications, translating words, images, sounds and ideas into easily accessible public resources. In this way, media facilitate intellectual growth and expansion, and are valuable tools for empowerment. Young people can use media to express themselves by creating documentaries, Internet blogs, multimedia art installations, and their own recorded poetry or music. Yet media can also spread propaganda, reinforce misleading stereotypes, and encourage violence and destruction. As adolescents become more immersed in media-saturated environments, they may be adversely affected by these negative messages.

OVERVIEW

Participants on Voices of Youth have been discussing the impact of media on their lives since the website was first established in 1995.

As might be expected, much of the discussion revolves around the negative influences of media, especially of violence in media. While some feel that violence can have an immeasurable impact on the lives of young people, others link violence in media to real-life events and see it as an educational tool.



UNITED STATES

The media exaggerate but I don't think it's in all situations. I would like to think it depends on the story which is being covered. For example, when it comes to issues affecting developing countries, they barely show a little footage but when it comes to issues affecting celebrities' lives, they go overboard with it. *girl, >21*

The positive impact of media is also discussed at length on Voices of Youth. Young people point out that media can unlock a gateway to social mobility, economic improvement, prosperity and creativity. As film, television, radio and the Internet increasingly reach young people around the world, they take on power to initiate social change by acting as a motivating and mobilizing force.

Many young people take advantage of opportunities presented by media to participate actively in the democratic process. Online discussion forums act as a neutral ground where they can connect with others, exchange ideas and work together for change. These forums test their opinions, introduce new ones, and expand their ideological horizons.

The following is a summary of what adolescents are saying about young people and media. For more information contact: voy@unicef.org.

NEW ON VOY

EXPLORE

The Children's World Water Forum
The 2nd Children's World Water Forum, which took place at the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico City from the 16th – 22nd March 2006, was a landmark children's meeting on water, survival and education.

SPEAK OUT

Violence consultation

A group of children met in New York to discuss the findings and recommendations of the UN Study on Violence Against Children. Interact with them as they prepare the child-friendly materials for the Study.

TAKE ACTION

Rural Voices of Youth

A Voices of Youth member from Nigeria started a project to reach out to young people in rural areas who do not have Internet access.

FROM OUR ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

"Let us all join hands together and put a STOP to violence against our kids by first correcting our Today, cause our Today will turn soon turn into Tomorrow ... and Tomorrow must be a wonderful tomorrow for our kids..."
girl, 21, India

COMING SOON ON VOY

Photo contest on inspirational women! To learn more, contact voy@unicef.org.

UPCOMING ISSUE
HIV/AIDS

YOUNG PEOPLE AND MEDIA

ISSUES IN CONTEXT

June 2006

Click on a link to read what adolescents are saying about young people and media

[Dealing with negative influences](#) [Positive influences of media](#) [The impact of stereotypes](#) [The portrayal of women](#) [Media projects by young people](#)

DEALING WITH NEGATIVE INFLUENCES

Media have an immeasurable impact on the lives of young people. As the world becomes more media-saturated, young people increasingly turn to television, the Internet, video games, newspapers, music, and radio as models for development. These in turn have the capacity to influence behavior.



AUSTRALIA

Media is the most influential thing in our lives. It tells us how we should look, dress, act, etc. Media has become a "how to live our life guide". It's like our modernized Bible. Everything we see, read or hear, we follow. *girl, 19*

Young people are especially concerned with violence in media and its capacity to breed real-life violence.



SRI LANKA

I ... think that violence on TV affects children a lot. It's our nature to imitate actions of others, especially actions we see often. When children see violence so often they imitate and begin to think violence is an ordinary thing. Not only are children affected by these shows, but adults are affected too. *boy, 21*

Some young people believe that violent content should be regulated by parents or guardians.



UNITED STATES

Violence on television is becoming more rampant, [and] parents do need to start ... [regulating] what programs their children should and should not watch at certain ages. It is also up to parents to explain to young children, in case they do happen to watch a very violent show, that what they see these

people doing ... is not the correct way to behave. They should teach their children to differentiate between the good and bad ways to approach situations as well as pointing out the things that are wrong. *girl, 17*

Others believe that violence in media actually prepares young people for the violence of real life. Violent images, they say, can introduce young people to real life tragedy, which may help them respond better to traumatic experiences in the future.



GEORGIA

I think that ... it is necessary to educate children. The banning of violence in films ... is not a way out because a child can just go out and see something bad. It is important to develop some kind of traits and characteristics from an early age which would help them to make a right choice and understand what is bad and what is good. *girl, >21*



BAHRAIN

Many people see the bad influences of violence in the media as "the child will follow the same path." But it's the opposite. Children need to see the reality of the world and the need to be conscious. *boy, 18*

Many young people feel that rather than prohibiting violence in media, we should instead encourage critical analysis of the underlying power interests involved.



CANADA

Maybe we are placing too much blame on the media. It's an easy thing for parents to blame their children's actions on. I think that instead of waiting for violent programs to disappear, we

should teach [children] how to watch TV and movies critically. It's something that I think should not only be taught to children, but to everyone. *girl, 14*

They point out that seeing and hearing about the suffering and brutality in other areas of the world may inspire young people to be more socially responsible and politically conscious.



INDIA

I mean, if we cuddle the kids, shelter them from all sorts of realities of the world, including violence, how will we prepare them for life? They need to know what's happening around the world [or] they'll grow up to view the world with rose-coloured glasses and wouldn't know the reality at all. *girl, 17*

POSITIVE INFLUENCES OF MEDIA

Young people note the many different forms of media and distinguish between their varying levels of impact on adolescents. Most believe that entertainment media are much more influential in their daily lives than news media.



UNITED KINGDOM

Why do the majority watch [or] read ... so much rubbish? For example, there are probably 10 people (of 800) at my school that regularly read a newspaper and probably 200-300 that regularly read magazines/comics. There are probably 50 who regularly watch the news [yet] ... all 800 watch TV. What is it that makes young people not want to hear about real life? *boy, 16*

Still, young people recognize that media can also play an educational role. As the information highway becomes faster, cheaper, and more accessible, young people the world over are finding new ways to educate themselves and some schools are taking advantage of media as a supplemental resource.



UNITED STATES

In our school, we watch [the] news every day. It pretty much covers everything we need to know, going from the

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rise and fall of gas prices [to] drugs in schools and fighting in other countries. *girl, 16*

Some young people point to the role media play in raising awareness and encouraging positive behavior in the form of activism or humanitarianism.



FRANCE

I think that media can be something very good for talking out and spreading the word of peace. I do believe that we youth should be more represented in it since we speak in another way and it's interesting to have different points of view. The media can do a lot to help kids—we wouldn't be talking about this if media [did not] make us aware of what's going on in the world. *girl, 18*

THE IMPACT OF STEREOTYPES

While almost all VOY participants recognize the educational potential of media, most are concerned about the perpetuation of stereotypes as well as sensationalist tendencies, both of which they see as market-driven.



UNITED STATES

I feel that youth are stereotyped in the media and so is religion, race, gender, and nationalities. It can be ignorant but it makes money. Something that should be asked: Is it more important to help the economies with a tactic that sells? Or to redefine stereotypes? In the ideal world both could be accomplished [without discrimination]. *girl, 15*



NORWAY

Of course the media exaggerates. That's how they make money. Often things are displayed in a one-sided, "black and white" way, such as the view on Muslims the last years [as] displayed in Western media. Of course, some try to tell the truth, but it's still hard to judge what's right and what isn't. *girl, 17*

Young people also point out that media have the capacity to filter reality, selectively amplifying certain stories, while silencing others.



BAHRAIN

The problem with the media is that they exaggerate the issues that don't matter. They make a huge deal over stories that would be of interest to the average reader. They highlight the scandals of celebrities and they color an entire nation as religious zealots due to the actions of a few, but they barely save a breath for the issues that *should* be talked about. In 2003, the center of the capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo was engulfed in lava when a nearby volcano erupted - did this receive as much coverage as Brad & Jen's breakup [this year]? *girl, 16*

Some young people feel personally victimized by media distortion. They insist that the news and entertainment media have narrowly portrayed the lives and perspectives of young people.



UNITED KINGDOM

I feel that we need a youth media code in place to stop the unfair stereotyping of young people by the media! They do it because it sells papers! *boy, 15*

On the other hand, a few VOY members note that not all negative characterizations of young people are the product of malicious intentions. Rather, stereotypes are often based on loose representations of reality.



MALAYSIA

Aren't you guys stereotyping the media as well? Why is there a generalization that says the media *always* lie and *always* portray stereotypes? People often forget where stereotypes originate from. And that would be from society itself. You can blame politicians, governments, corporations or the media, but always remember what makes up and shapes those said bodies. *girl, >21*

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

Negative stereotypes in media are perhaps most damaging to women. Many young people agree that media depictions of women place immense pres-

sure on adolescent girls to achieve an unrealistic standard of beauty.



QATAR

I find it really sad how we are only as good as the media tells us we are. If you are hot, thin, and wearing little clothes and lots of makeup then you are someone but if you are overweight and actually have respect for yourself and cover yourself up, then you're nobody. Especially in this day and age teenage girls in particular are obsessed with the way they look.... Women have become objects and I don't see it ever changing as long as you have people willing to take their clothes off for fame. *girl, 15*



SWITZERLAND

Most of the women shown in media are too skinny and no one should try to be as they are. The important thing is that you feel comfortable the way you are and that you can live without thinking about your appearance 24/7. *girl, >21*

Others take issue with the portrayal of women in exclusively domestic roles.



INDIA

Indian media has this paranoia with the "bharatiya nari", or the woman who stays home, takes care of kids, listens to her husband [and] is hopelessly skinny at 42. For any woman to be successful it's necessary to have an idea of self worth. *girl, 15*

Some VOY participants complain about media preoccupation with sex and the accompanying exploitation of women.



AUSTRALIA

Women are always used as sex objects by our modern world—especially in advertisements! It really annoys me when there is an ad for something like a car or a shampoo and they have women wearing next to nothing in the ads when they have nothing to do with what is being sold. It's so degrading to all women! *girl, 15*

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The prevalence of sex in media is also blamed for added pressure on young people to have sex prematurely.



AUSTRALIA

I think that ... the media portrays sex as something that everyone must do right now. As teenagers, we seem to be bombarded with images, not only of beautiful people with perfect bodies, but also ... of these perfect people in their perfect world having perfect relationships, where you only need to know someone for a day and you can have sex with them. *girl, 16*

As with sensationalism, young people trace the root of negative stereotypes back to the public itself.



UNITED STATES

If the media didn't provide us with images of perfect people, in perfect worlds, with perfect lives, would we watch? NO. The media don't necessarily promote superficiality. They show the viewer the dreams/aspirations of the general public. *girl, 17*

Though negative stereotypes of women abound, many young people point to examples of women role models who are proactively employing media to raise awareness and support humanitarian causes.



BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

I got information about HIV/AIDS two years ago. I was watching a documentary on Princess Diana, my idol, and I found out about her efforts in alerting the world about HIV/AIDS. From there, I have dreamed of becoming a UN representative just like Lady Diana and

Angelina Jolie. People should all know how to help the people who are already infected and how to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. *boy, 15*

MEDIA PROJECTS BY YOUNG PEOPLE

Media can provide valuable resources for young people to develop self-expression and artistic imagination, and can offer them a place in social and political discourse.



NIGERIA

Youths are making a difference in the media industry and we expect that we will continue the work. Many [youth journalists] are making their way into the system and are doing just great. I look forward to seeing the youth taking their voices and views global with the advent of the information systems and the technologies that make the work easier. *boy, >21*

These opportunities are especially important for those who live in economically impoverished or oppressive circumstances.



ZIMBABWE

The fight for youth empowerment and a better tomorrow is still on and no one but ourselves can help us achieve our desired goals. In Zimbabwe, the youth have teamed up to effectively use radio and television in making their views heard and to showcase our potential as tomorrow's leaders. *boy, >21*

Young people also use media to collaborate and interact with their peers, forming online communities to share ideas, establish relationships, and facilitate collective organization.



AUSTRALIA

Here in Australia we have little youth committees and forums. For example, within our school systems we have student committees that are the voice of the students so that we too can have our say about the ongoings of things in the school. There are also forums which are held all the time in different areas of government. *girl, 16*



KENYA

There is need for the inclusion of youth in the media regulation frameworks in Africa. This would make the aired programs more youth sensitive in their news agenda. Towards this end, I have started a project known as Youth Media Advocates Africa with the aim of bringing African youth together in the realization of this ennobling goal. Let's work to make this a reality. No longer should the voices of the youth be ignored in the media policy-making bodies across the globe. We can do it together. *boy, >21*

CONCLUSION

In many ways, young people today are proposing new and innovative paths to navigate a media-saturated society. They are highly conscious of the seductive impact of television, the Internet, film and radio—on them, their culture and even on political processes. But rather than passively accepting the negative influences of media, young people actively engage in testing the strengths and limits of different forms of media. Even on the most local, grassroots level, young people the world over are creatively and resourcefully employing a variety of media tools to explore their identities, creatively express their thoughts and opinions, and amplify their political voices. They are not doing this in isolation, and their ideas, ingenuity, and resourceful spirit will resonate throughout their communities for generations to come.

For more information, [read past newsletters from Voices of Youth](#).

VOICES OF YOUTH

<http://www.unicef.org/voyn/>

Since 1995, VOY has focused on exploring the educational and community building potential of the Internet, and facilitating the active and substantive participation of young people on child rights and development related issues. Through web boards, interactive quizzes, youth leadership profiles, live chats and more, *Voices of Youth* provides more than 20,000 young people from over 180 countries with an opportunity to self-inform, engage in lively debate, and partner—with their peers and decision makers—to create a world fit for children.

Web resources on young people and media

In order to ensure that key components of UNICEF's future growth in the area of youth media are being strategically driven, Voices of Youth is launching in early June 2006 its media site under the new *Voices of Youth Media Magic*. The site aims to become the only global online platform that connects children and young people and anyone interested in youth participation in the media. Look for it soon!

Other valuable resources on youth and the media include:

<http://www.listenup.org>

Listen Up! is a youth media network that connects young video producers and their allies to resources, support, and projects in order to develop the field and achieve an authentic youth voice in the mass media.

<http://www.glocalyouth.net/eng/index.htm>

Glocal Youth encourages young people to reflect upon youth representations as conveyed by mass media in the World Northern and Southern regions.

<http://pbskids.org/dontbuyit>

Don't Buy It is a media literacy site for young people that encourages users to think critically about media and become smart consumers. Activities on the site are designed to provide users with some of the skills and knowledge needed to question, analyze, interpret and evaluate media messages.

www.radiodiaries.org

Radio Diaries works with people to document their own lives for public radio: teenagers, seniors, prison inmates and others whose voices are rarely heard.

<http://www.kqed.org/topics/education/medialiteracy/youthmedia>

KQED Youth Media Corps strives to open the doors of communication and collaboration between media professionals and youth. Young people in the program develop media literacy skills to evaluate and respond to media, leading to a more informed and empowered citizenry. By adding youth voices into the regular mix of mainstream media the KQED Youth Media Corps ensures accurate, relevant and fair representation of issues that affect youth and their communities.

<http://www.justthink.org>

Just Think teaches young people to lead healthy, responsible, independent lives in a culture highly impacted by media.

www.worldradioforum.org

The World Radio Forum aims to establish a position within the spectrum of children's media by defining core values that champion child rights and the status of children and young people within their communities.

<http://www.sfcg.org>

Search for Common Ground creates innovative television, radio, and Internet programming for the reduction or prevention of conflict.