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WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT...

THE MEDIA, STEREOTYPES AND THE NEED FOR ROLE MODELS

“When youth actively take part promoting their own voices and culture through mass medias then images of youth will be more honest becuz no one can speak or talk about youth better than themselves.”

young girl, 15, Viet Nam

“Adolescents & Media” remains one of *Voices of Youth*’s (www.unicef.org/voy/) most active discussion boards, receiving almost 800 messages in less that two years. Young people from 87 countries worldwide have reflected on the ways in the which the media represents young people and the impact of those representations. They have put forth concrete suggestions for reform and exclaimed the need to involve young people, and portray youth in the best possible light.

Following is a brief summary of young people’s thoughts and reflections.

Overview

Overall, young people on *Voices of Youth* feel that the media is a powerful, but untapped, tool for change. They reflected on its ability to educate a wide group of people, provide direction for both adults and young people, and incite people to be involved and active in the global community.

However, young people stated that the media often misuses its power. Television, newspapers and radio were all criticized for offering stereotypical and often negative representations of young people. Participants repeatedly stipulated that the media tends to omit, or downplay, portrayals of young people as effective change makers, which in turn:

- promotes discrimination of young people by adults
- fosters poor self-esteem among youth
- fosters gender inequality and racism
- incites violence, and
- deprives young people of peer role models to emulate.

Participants offered numerous suggestions for how the media can become a more positive force for young people, focusing specifically on the need to:

- ✓ focus more on positive representations of young people
- ✓ give a greater voice and a stronger role to young people in the media
- ✓ use the media as an educational tool for both youth and adults

“...the media is a powerful tool to influence behaviour, the way people think and the way they perceive the world. in this way you'd think that the media would use it's power for positive change, instead we still see images of 'good for nothing' youth instead of the progressive people we are trying to be.”

young girl, 21, Zambia

A powerful tool for good

“The media gives us a window to the world, of what is happening in our own, and other countries. The image portrayed through that media is diverse, it can bring us information on the achievements of children overcoming adversity, or depict their abuse.”

young boy, 19, UK

Young people recognize the power of the media to effectuate positive change. Its pervasiveness and easy accessibility make it a particularly well positioned tool for education, information dissemination, and setting standards and norms.

✓ *I think media can play a very usefull role in helping youth to find their's direction as most youth today expose to media everyday in their live.*

young girl, >21, Malaysia

Misrepresentations and stereotypes

Participants stated that the media consistently misrepresented young people. One participant felt that *“...the media only portrays teens as one of two extremes. The good teens who contribute all their time for beneficial causes. Then there are the troublesome teens that you hear about...It seems, though, that the stories of the bad kids get blown way out of proportion and are covered with more intensity.”*(young boy, 16, USA)

Young people felt the impact of “one-sided” and “inaccurate” reporting to be grave and widely detrimental. By not presenting “realistic” images of young people, today’s youth:

- are misunderstood and discriminated against
- have low self-esteem
- lack peer role models to emulate, and
- see violence and debauchery as the most effective means of getting attention.

“They stereotype and over dramatize everything so the public will look down on the youth...Everytime someone see's me on the street dressed a little different then there kid I am characterized as someone I am not...”

young girl, 17, USA

✓ *“If the media focuses more on the youth that is helping the world, perhaps it will influence others to help the world. A child usually does something bad to get attention. If the media shows the best images of children more, a child will have to do something good to get attention.”*

young girl, 14, USA

Women

In addition to addressing the impact of media on youth in general, participants also explored the effect on women and girls in particular.

“The reason for eating disorders in young women are the pictures that haunt us every day, at least here in the US. The models aren't real! They are airbrushed and body parts are taken from several people. Youth have to be informed in order to overcome this.”

young girl, 16, USA

Body image: Participants from the United States focused on the link between body image, in particular eating disorders, and the ubiquitous images of thin, blond, “perfect” girls.

✓ *The media should promote and celebrate everyone’s differences*

Gender inequality: Participants also felt that the media promoted gender inequality by stereotyping women as materialistic and unintelligent and men as macho.

- ✓ *“In short, today’s media in general is far from perfect and a reform is necessary if we want a society without sexist, racist or any other stereotypes.”*

young boy, 14, Greece

“...women as consumer beings, only caring about cosmetics and beauty, this is what advertising does. They promote woman’s beauty – as sex symbol- and not their mind...As for men, movies promote the image of a macho men—powerful and successful—ready to get into a fight and solve a difference in combat rather than peacefully. Some of them even go further presenting actors who show sexist behaviour”

young boy, 14, Greece

Developing Countries

“Nowadays media are so focus to people that are rich, they focus more on the celebrities instead of helping the children in needs.”

young girl, 21, Canada

Young people were concerned with the tendency to homogenize and stereotype peoples from developing countries, or to ignore developing countries entirely. Participants from both industrialized and developing countries noted and condemned this tendency, stating that it promoted discrimination and diverted attention from those in need.

Participants from Africa in particular felt this tendency reflected the dominance of the “West” over the global media.

“As an African youth and a girl, I feel disadvantaged several times not because of my circumstances but because of the images and stories created by others and distributed about my life, my past, my dreams and even my future. When the time comes for me to play a role in the world, there is none left for me because other's prejudices, backed up by images which they have selected as 'African' have already determined a place for me without respecting my right to own my own image.”

young girl, 17, Kenya

Society & Economics

While most participants identified the media as an independent entity, some young people emphasized the direct impact of current trends in society and financial interests on the media.

Society: Understanding how society and the media mutually promote one another was put forth as a necessary action point.

- ✓ *“Before blaming the media ,we gotta take a good look at our own notions and concepts of things. The media and the society go hand in hand. it's something like 'you scratch my back, and i scratch yours'”*

young girl, 16, United Arab Emirates

“...I think the root cause of all this is the way our societies function. People still are with a conservative mindset that we as youth have any positive contribution to make... Our society is also more interested in hearing sensational news... The media reacts to the societies wants. It's a consumer deal.”

young girl, 16, United Arab Emirates

Economics: Participants agreed that the media is driven largely by economic concerns, “concentrating more in making huge profits, and they do this in every way possible to them even if it means to put youth at stake.” (young boy, 21, United Republic of Tanzania)

Solutions

Young people grappled with the best ways to handle the misrepresentations, stereotypes and violence put forth by the media. Although participants explored the benefits and drawbacks of censorship, overall they

felt that positive images of young people and substantive youth participation would have the greatest impact.

Censorship

One of the more contentious debates revolved around censoring the media. Participants debated the issue without reaching a consensus

Yes: Those who felt the media should be censored characterized young people as easily swayed and impressionable. The government was invited to “place emagoes on inevitable parts played by youths in movies and films” (young boy, 18, Nigeria), and to prevent children from seeing inappropriate content.

“les gens suivi a la tele sont souvent les plus imités surtout dans des pays comme les miens”
young boy, 20, DR of Congo

No: Young people who were against censoring the media stated that “everyone has a mind of his or her own and they are capable of making the right or wrong decision.” (young girl, 18, USA) Young people also cited freedom expression to substantiate their argument.

What the media can do

Young people put forth numerous suggestions for action on the part of the media:

- ✓ **Promote Young People:** *“The media should start being a voice for this children because they still have found no way to speak for themselves and make others listen.”* young girl, 19, Kenya
- ✓ **Enable youth participation:** *“Creo que ya es tiempo que se creen estos espacios para que los jòvenes hagan conciencia a otros jòvenes de que ya es tiempo de que los jòvenes se organicen y participen activamente en lograr lo que quieren para ellos y para otros.”* young boy, <21, El Salvador
- ✓ **Provide role models:** *“The Media ought to be used as a tool for solving, promoting and improving YOUTH MATTERS, so that the youths can be well oriented and educated on the roles they are expected to play in the very near future.”* young boy, >21, Nigeria
- ✓ **Educate:** *“My opinion is that the media should focus on educative programmes that would educate the minds of young people and give children the right to express themselves through the media.”* young girl, 16, Nigeria

What young people can do

- ✓ **Create partnerships:** *“maybe we should just overlook the primary motives of the media and see how we can work with them and get a better deal for ourselves then go against them.”* young girl, 15, Bangladesh
- ✓ **Unify:** *“I suggest to organize a movement for youth in the world to unite others organizations which largely compose of youth, like the scouts which have a good result in the service for the world society, this movement is to multiply the voice and strength of youth, to tell the world of adult, they did not agree to every decisions that make by them which is bad, examples: wars, corruptions, pollutions, discrimanations and manipulations of rights. The mass media should not look down the IQ of youth because their will be a great people.”* young boy, >21, Malaysia
- ✓ **Publish ourselves:** *“I think only youth can understand youth. It seems to be impossible for adults of 30-40 to publish a newspaper aimed at teenagers and youth because they cannot understand the lifestile of teenagers; they can try to remember themselves at the same age but they cannot*

understand us COMPLETELY. We need a newspaper published by youth aimed at us youth.” young boy, 17, The Russian Federation

Conclusion

Young people on *Voices of Youth* are clearly calling for a greater and more substantial role in the media. They recognize its power and potential and feel that if given the opportunity they could harness that potential and use it to make a significant and positive impact. It is time for the media, empowered by youth, to inform society's perspectives and bring people together to create a better today and tomorrow.

“I think that youth and youth opinions should be heard more. people are often to afraid to listen to what we have to say... but if they would listen they would find a lot more answers and a lot more wisdom. We are the way to the future, raise us up knowing that and developing that and we will pave the way to a better world. Let us be heard and to gain respect.”

young boy, 16, Australia

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[Voices of Youth](#)

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