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Monitoring the media since 1993

Media Coverage of Children during Youth Month

By Judith Mtsewu

Introduction

South Africa celebrated June as a Youth Month to mark the anniversary of the Sharpsville massacre on 16 June, 1976. June also sees various youth and child-focused development days, including:

- International Children's Day (1 June);
- International Day of Innocent Children Victims of Aggression (4 June);
- World Day against child labour (12 June);
- International day of the African Child (16 June); and
- Child Protection Week (28 May to 3 June 2007).

Considering Youth Month provides ample opportunity to highlight issues around children, the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) wished to assess whether this was happening in South African media and if the coverage either violated or enhanced human rights of the children concerned.

Methodology

The MMP undertakes monitoring based on issues of discrimination. Falling under the Anti Discrimination Unit, it includes daily monitoring activities, which are most often presented as comprehensive analyses of media coverage of particular issues. These regular analyses highlight the presence of trends, which can highlight either or both positive and concerning trends. So such an analysis will allow the media to reflect on their performance.

Some of the specific areas that the MMP pays special attention to when monitoring the media are human rights and gender and children, HIV/AIDS and race representation.

The focus of this monitoring was on the print media. Various newspapers were monitored from the 4th of June to the 18th of June. This meant that the media was monitored for a total period of two weeks. The focus of this monitoring was limited to newspapers which are available in Gauteng, with 2 newspapers being available nationwide. Given the purpose of the monitoring, this should be considered a start.

The newspapers that were monitored were the following:

- Daily Sun;
- Mail and Guardian;
- Sowetan;
- Sunday Times;
- The Citizen;
- The Star.

The above list of newspapers includes four dailies and two weeklies. This analysis did not include The Star on the 4th, 5th and the 12th of June 2007. The sample is by no means large enough to make generalisations on national reporting trends. Despite this, it does provide some valuable insight into reporting on children.

Because this analysis focuses specifically on children and the youth, the MMP decided to include several children's views on some of the articles that are used for the thematic analysis. The learners are of different ages and are gender representative. All the quotations attributed to these learners are quoted verbatim.

Media got it right!

There were several common themes across all newspapers. These were: children's health, child labour, child abuse and court cases, and child protection week. There were several positives in the articles monitored, firstly, a number of sources were quoted in most of the stories, secondly, many articles focussed on cases in the court system, thirdly, child perpetrators were not further stigmatised as murderers, finally, in most instances the stories would not further harm the children. However, many of the stories had the potential to do further harm to the children.

Many Sources

Firstly, the articles published in this time period in the newspapers consulted, used multiple sources to generate information. The benefit of this was that different voices and multiple perspectives were presented as opposed to just one perspective of one individual or expert. Therefore they reflected not just expert voices such as forensic pathologists, advocates, government representatives and law enforcement agencies but used other sources as well such as educators and community members. It was unfortunate to notice that despite this being a positive tendency, there still remained a tendency to use very few children as sources in these stories, even if these stories were about children. This often undermines children's experiences as it subsumes their realities with those of adults, continuing to present their realities as insignificant.

An example of this was seen in stories that appeared in the *Sowetan* and the *Daily Sun*, amongst others. There were articles that reported on numerous initiatives for the benefit of the youth, but the focus of these articles was on those who led these initiatives as opposed to the intended beneficiaries of such initiatives. For example, in the articles used the views sourced were those of the officials from the National Youth Commission and a representative of a government ministry, as for instance in the articles "Youth must create own jobs" (*Daily Sun*, June 18 2007, p. 32). and "Youth month boon for kids" (*Sowetan*, June 11 2007, p. 5). The choice made by the journalists reflected a tendency to

present a top-down view as opposed to a bottom-up view. The 'bottom' is commonly saturated with amongst others the most vulnerable in society such as children, the elderly and women. This position often means they are also the least powerful and so are often voiceless. Therefore the greater use of the bottom-up approach will mean that these often 'powerless' and 'voiceless' groups are afforded an opportunity to express their views, influence media practices and share the insights of their own experiences. Thus a bottom-up perspective is achieved.

Covering the courts

Secondly, there were many articles that reported on child abuse cases within the justice and court system. The decision to do this in the articles tended to present the justice system (and by extension the society) as an institution that takes child abuse seriously.

For example, *The Star* newspapers that were monitored had child abuse cases as a recurring theme. Some of the cases reported on were those of Micah Bramley Patterson (3 years), Wilfred Kriel (8 years), Michaela Garoenisha Jones (6 years) and Steven Siebert (6 years).

One of the positives in most of these articles was that they did not just report on the case itself, but they went further and provided some context to enable a greater level of understanding by the readers. This is done for example by *The Citizen* (15/06/2007, p.4) in its story titled: "Teen's rapist gets 15-year sentence". In this article, the journalist goes beyond just reporting on the court proceedings regarding this case, instead the article also explores the after effects and consequences for the rape survivor as well as her family. The judge in his judgement, reflected and awareness of the various rights of the parties involved, the rape survivor and the rape accused.

Here is a learner's view on the quality of the reporting on the abovementioned article.

"They give the necessary information on the bulletin. They also give the offenders' name, I like this because it makes people aware of who is responsible for the crime."

What I would've liked was to here more on her recovery, they gave very little information on that, because all they said was that she got trauma counselling. I think if they had gave information on how she recovered it would help other victims."

"I liked the fact they also specified the right that were violated. I like the fact that they included the law and constitution as well." (Abongile Xhantini, Grade 7, Saxonwold Primary School).

It is worth noting that in these articles most newspapers followed up on these stories so that their reporting went beyond just reporting on events but on keeping the public informed on developments, and also unpacking the various aspects of the case and the subsequent trial phase.

No further stigmatisation

Thirdly, none of the children who are alleged to be perpetrators of crimes were actually portrayed as child killers or criminals – except with a headline of *The Star*.

This case referred to the death of Wilfred Kriel at the hands of his schoolmates. The headline used for this story was unfortunate in that it suggested that the boys were criminals when it referred to these two young boys as “axe killers”: “Mom waits for ‘axe killers’ to appear” (11/06/2007, p. 2). This seems to show an improvement in the stigmatising of children from the original Empowering Children in the Media research¹.

“Do no harm”

Most of the stories published on children and had the potential to harm and/or endanger the lives of the children concerned. In most cases this was avoided because the journalists did not identify underage children. This was positive because it served the interests of the children involved, and is in accordance with the South African legislation and constitution. The story the *Sowetan* (08/06/2007, p. 3) had on child prostitution which did not identify the underage youths that it was reporting on. None of the sources used, including that of the young prostitutes were identified. The photograph showed the picture of a young girl, who was said to be a prostitute and was taken from the back. So she was unidentifiable from that picture angle.

Direct identification was not common in the stories monitored. There are often unexplored complexities around issues of identification. Two instances that occurred in two different newspapers are worth mentioning. There was a photograph from *The Star* (11/06/2007, p. 5) published a photograph which showed one of the finalists of the Miss Earth contest with some children from Jane’s Haven Charity Organisation. This organisation was described as an organisation for HIV sufferers. The problem here was that the two children who were with the Miss Earth finalist were identified by name and also they were clearly identifiable in the photograph. The information on the organisation led one to believe that the two children were themselves HIV sufferers. According to the South African law, no person’s HIV status may be revealed by another without their consent or their knowledge.

This provision is complicated by the fact that there are times when the parent or guardian of the child concerned gives consent for the publication of the HIV status and name of the child. But even in such cases, the journalist still needs to determine whether this identification is indeed in the interest of the child or not. So getting consent from the parent or guardian does not take away the responsibility of the journalist concerned to protect the child and minimise harm to the child. In this case, it would seem that it was not in the best interest of the children to identify them by name or through having their faces identifiable because of the ongoing stigma that is still linked to HIV and AIDS. .

Here is a learner’s view on this picture of the Miss Earth finalist with two girl children

“The only bad thing is that it should not be allowed for journalists to specify is someone is HIV positive. It’s bad for an adult, so imagine how bad it would be for a child” (Jenna Echakowitz, 12 years old, Saxonwold Primary).

¹ Available http://www.mediamonitoring.org.za/ecm_2005/face.html

Another paper that got this wrong is *The Citizen*. On the 13th of June 2007 (p. 8) it ran a story titled: "Businessman shot dead before his daughter is raped". The story was about a businessman who was shot dead in his home and whose daughter was subsequently abducted and raped by the intruders. The problem with this reporting was that even though the name of the girl was not mentioned, the article provided enough information to readers (which might be community members) to identify the girl. For instance, the name of the girl's father was given as well as their exact location. This was dangerous reporting because of the likely consequences resulting from indirect identification, such as giving an opportunity for the intruders to seek her out and harm her but also for the girl to face stigma from the community that knows that she was raped. The girl's life was put at risk as she was one of only two people (the other being her mother) who could identify the culprits.

Room for improvement:

Despite the good aspects to the coverage, more could have been done in some stories. Firstly, the journalistic principle not to cause harm was often contravened, and secondly, the effects of the teachers strike on the children was by-in-large, not explored.

Public service strike and children?

It was interesting that during the two weeks of monitoring, very few stories reported on the impact of the strike (a strike that began on the 28th of May and officially ended on the 20th of June) had on children specifically. It was with interest that we noted that despite the public service strike being major news in the country for some time, very few of the articles on the strike were directly linked to its impact on children. *Sunday Times* included some articles on the strike that focused on children while other papers did not. The *Sunday Times* (10/06/2007, p. 4) article reported on the strike from the perspective of a learner who had been adversely affected by it. The article sourced numerous voices, including one of a learner. The *Sunday Times* of the 17th of June 2007 (p.10) published an article under the headline: "Burnt boy dies after long wait for ICU treatment" and provided background information linking the death with the lack of staff.

It is worth noting that the strike went on for 26 days in total and so MMP recognises that reporting on the strike might have appeared at a different time period in the life of the strike. This omission emphasised the need for the media to locate its articles in current contexts. It also reflected the tendency of the media (as well as society) to focus on how adults are impacted upon by such things as the public service strike and so pay very little attention to how the same strike impacts on children.

More analysis necessary

The reporting on the Child Labour and Child Protection week was largely event-based. This means that these specific issues usually come up only around the international dates as opposed to being generally themes that are covered in the media. This coverage was linked to the two days of June 12 and the week long events diary around the Child Protection Week. Interestingly, not all the papers monitored reported on these events. Of those monitored, it were the *Daily Sun*

(12/12/2007, p. 25) and *Sowetan* (14/06/2007, p.11) that reported on the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) study done as well as its findings. The challenge that remains for the media is to find ways of keeping these issues on the public agenda after the dates have passed and so encourage society to respond to these issues daily and continuously. It would be sad if the next time we see stories around issues of Child Labour is next year around the same date.

The opinions of children who monitored these stories had very strong views on some of the stories that appeared in the media. These views show that children are more than capable of being active citizens as they often have very strong opinions about things that directly and indirectly affect them. The addition of children's voices also makes for more colourful stories.

Conclusion

Children and youth received substantial coverage in the monitored period. This is promising, as issues pertaining to youth were covered, including the celebrations and the court cases in which young children were victims of committed crimes.

It seems that coverage on children and issues pertaining to children can improve further. The media can try more actively to hear children's voices, and thus represent children as active agents, involved in the world as well, instead of passive recipients of hand-outs and the occasional plan to benefit children. This undermines the agency of the children, and perpetuates the myth that children live insular lives, isolated from the rest of society. Furthermore, a lot of coverage was event-based. This means that children were reported on largely because of the events that happened – and so tended to receive substantially less coverage the rest of the year.

There appears still to be a lack of knowledge of legal and constitutional mechanisms protecting children, amongst journalists. These often address issues around the ethics of child identification, use of visuals involving children, details around court processes involving children, amongst others. As discussed earlier, there were several instances where the identity of the child was mentioned, when it would have been desirable not to; or other identifying information was provided thus enabling the child to be identified, again not a desirable situation.

What is clear is that children are indeed part of the audience of the media. The comments by the children show children often form their own opinions regarding news articles. The children who were asked to give their opinions on some of the articles published during the monitoring period, all proved to be very informed and engaged young citizens. These children are by no means the only ones who are informed and opinionated and journalists would find this out if they tried to source children's voices.