

Status of children's rights in South African media: 2016 compared to 2012

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1. Introduction

South African media has the responsibility to protect children's rights and to promote their voices in the news. However, this remains an ongoing challenge. Despite the existence of the Constitution, the Code of Ethics and Conduct for South African print and online media as well as other child rights frameworks such as the Criminal Procedure Act etc, which are aimed at protecting children, and promoting their voices when necessary, we continue to see violations.

Eighteen media houses namely Business Day, Cape Argus, Cape Times, City press, Daily Sun, e.tv, Mail & Guardian, SABC 3, Saturday Star, Sowetan, Sunday Sun, Sunday Times, Sunday World, The Citizen, The New Age, The Star, The Times and The Sunday Independent were monitored for a period of five months from the 1st of April until the 31st of August 2016. The same number of media was analysed in 2012. A content analysis methodology was used to gather information and thereafter captured in an online monitoring system called Dexter.

The extent to which children are marginalized and how their rights are violated as will be highlighted in this report raises concerns about whether editors and journalists are conscious of the consequences of their unethical reporting on children.

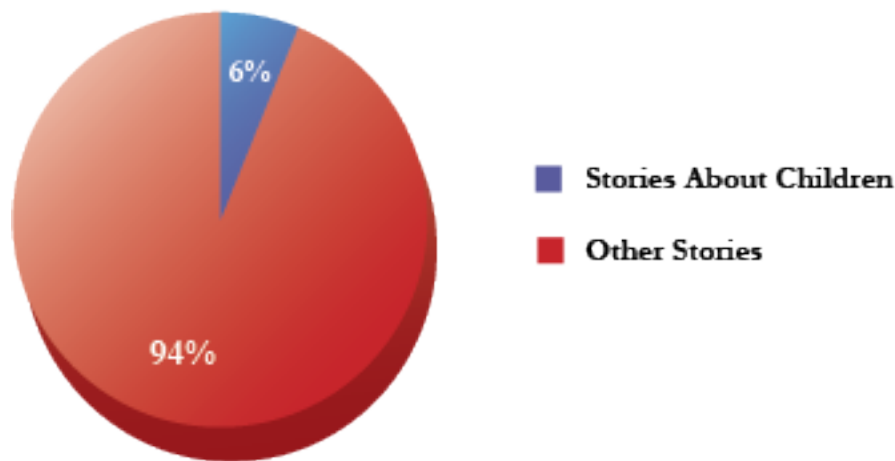
This report will compare 2016 to 2012 findings in order to determine whether or not there has been an improvement in the way media reports on children in South Africa. It will discuss in detail the findings commencing with the number of stories in the media followed by where the stories came from; what they were about; how children were accessed; how they were portrayed; whether their rights were respected and also whether the information provided in the stories was informative.

2. Stories about children

“I think the media should have a balance between negative and positive stories,” Cade Prinsloo, grade six Park Senior Primary School pupil.

According to Statistics South Africa, children in the country constitute 40% of the population.¹ However the media coverage does not come close to fittingly represent this demographic. The 2016 results as seen in the figure below show that children only constituted six percent coverage across all media. This is a decrease from the nine percent recorded in 2012. This can be attributed to the decrease in the number of stories produced in the media. In the 2012 monitoring period, all stories published, whether about children or not amounted to 87 306² while 74 647 was recorded in 2016 thereby having a decrease of 13 percent. While some media houses have improved in terms of quantity, there are those such as SABC3, e.tv and Saturday Star that have declined their reporting on children. SABC3 recorded a decrease of 35 percent from 42 percent in 2012³ to seven percent in 2016; e.tv was at 21 percent in 2012 and at five percent in 2016 while Saturday Star recorded a percentage of 14 percent in 2012 and two percent in 2016.

Figure 1: Stories about children

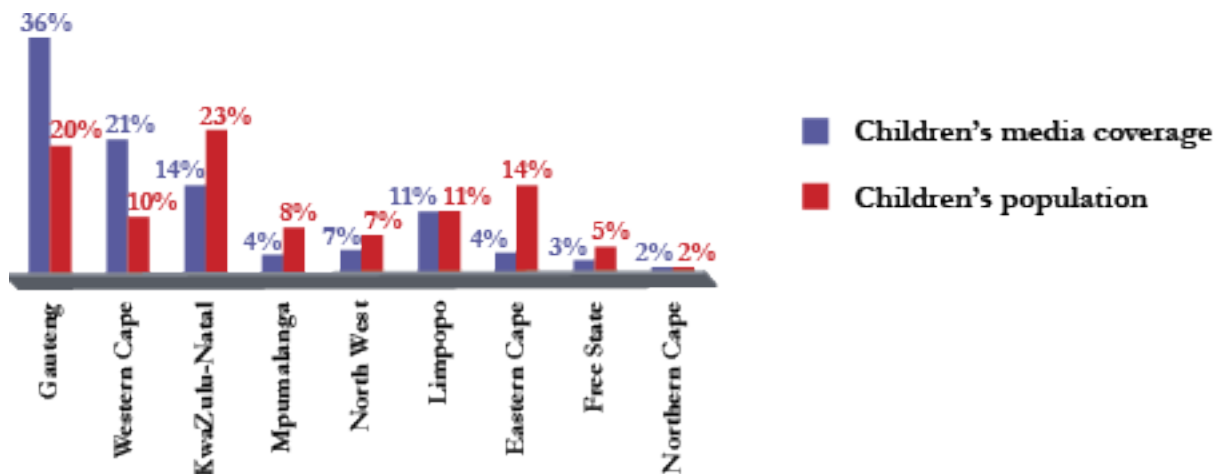


3. Origin of stories

”Journalists should start reporting more on rural children to ensure their needs such as development are not neglected,” Asheeqah Mobarra, grade six, Pelican Park Primary School pupil.

Gauteng continues to have a greater proportion of coverage at 36 percent (28 percent in 2012) followed by Western Cape at 21 percent (12 percent in 2012) and Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN) at 14 percent (six percent in 2012) when compared to other provinces such as Free State, Mpumalanga and Northern Cape which always receive lower coverage. The urban bias in coverage shown by these findings could be attributed to the fact that most media houses are located in urban areas with minimal access to or interest in rural areas.

Figure 2: Origin of stories



The media coverage percentages in the figure above are calculated from the overall number of stories recorded in the analysis and in the particular province against the population. The 2016 results show children in Gauteng being represented in the media at 36 percent against the 20 percent children population. Contrary to Gauteng, children in KZN were under-represented in the media. The population of children in KZN constitutes 23 percent of the entire population of South Africa but received 14 percent media coverage.

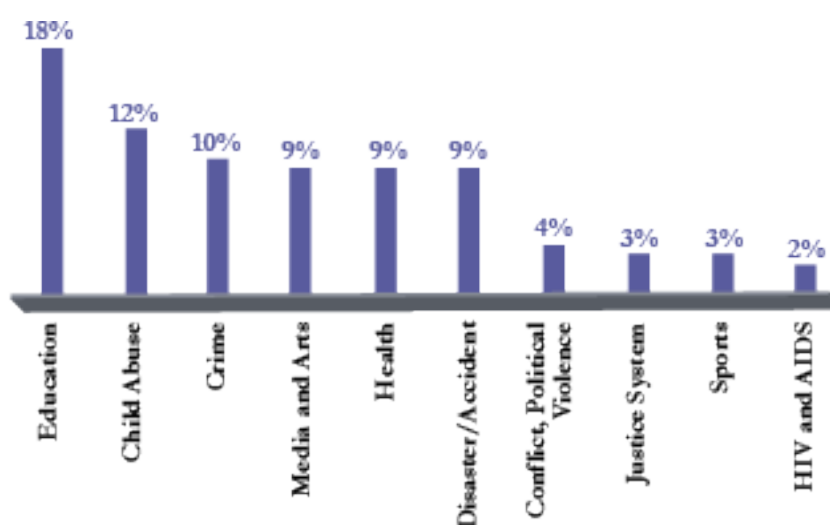
The media should be commended for ensuring that children living in Limpopo and Northern Cape provinces were well represented in their coverage at eleven percent and two percent respectively. These coverage percentages are equal to the children's populations in the two provinces.⁴ The percentage of coverage in Limpopo in 2012 was six therefore the province recorded an increase of five percent in 2016. This increase is a result of the protests that occurred in Vuwani in Limpopo in 2016 that saw the closure of schools.

4. Top 10 topics covered

“I would like to see more stories on HIV and AIDS and how people can prevent it,” Zayedani Luddy, grade six Pelican Park Primary School pupil.

The diversity of topics covered in the media is very important as it highlights the challenges children face as well as where they are excelling. The figure below highlights the top 10 most covered topics.

Figure 3: Top 10 topics



⁴ <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022016.pdf>

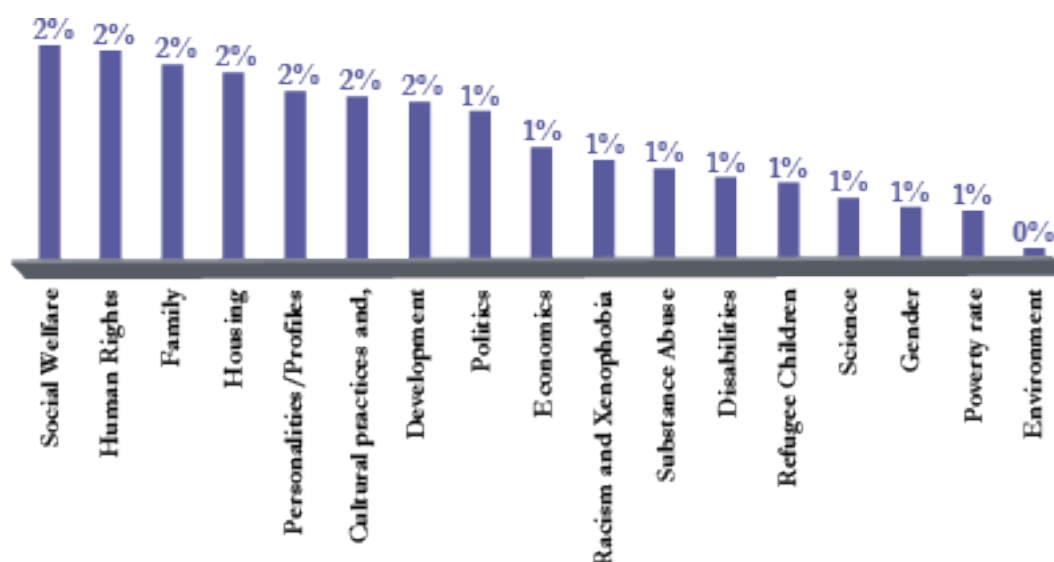
Education continues to get more coverage than other topics at 18 percent in the media. This however, is a decrease when compared to 2012 results where it received 22 percent coverage. Meanwhile, coverage on child abuse and crime has increased from the four and six percent in 2012 to 12 and 10 percent in 2016 respectively. As can be seen from the results above, most topics covered are or can be regarded as negative. This however, is not to say that all the stories reported under those topics were negative. The implication nevertheless of having positive topics such as sports receive a mere three percent is that it supports stereotypes about children only making news when something negative happens to them.

5. Topics less covered

“We want more stories about children’s achievements,” Iman Norodien, grade six Pelican Park Primary School pupil.

The figure below shows topics less covered by the media. What is concerning is that these topics did not make the top 10 list in 2012. The media is encouraged to diversify their coverage of children in terms of topics. When this is done, all issues affecting children will be brought to the attention of policy makers.

Figure 4: Less covered topics

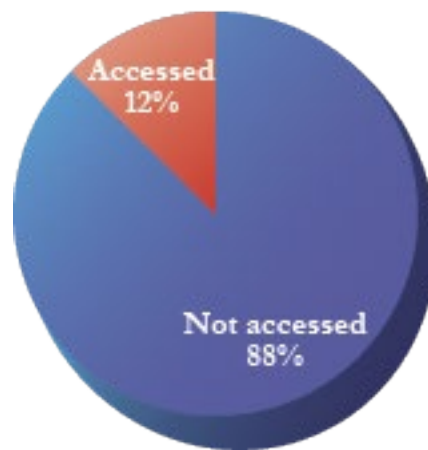


6. Children’s voices

“Journalists need to include children’s voices as they have the first hand impression on the events happening in their lives. Children’s rights to expression and others should be respected,” Ntshuxeko Nkuna, grade six Park Senior Primary School pupil.

Over the years, children in South Africa have been denied an opportunity to express themselves despite South Africa being a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is aimed at protecting children and promoting their participation and freedom of expression. Like adults, it is important that children are afforded an opportunity to participate in matters that affect them. This does not only enhance their decision making skills but also ensures that their right to be heard is promoted. Most importantly, accessing children in stories about them enriches stories with their perspectives. Accessing children and including their views in news about them should be done in accordance with the Journalism Ethical Guidelines which seek to promote the best interests of children.

Figure 5: Children's voices

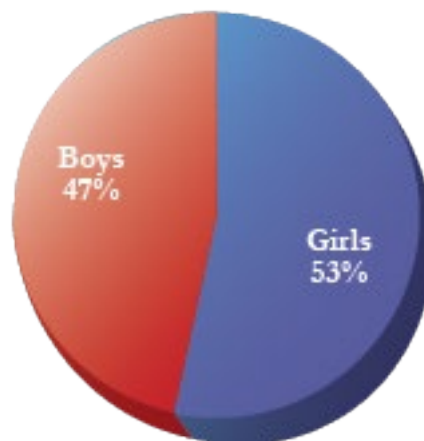


The results above show that only 12 percent of the children's stories accessed or quoted them. This is an increase from the five percent recorded in 2012.⁵ While this increase is commendable, the media should strive to access children more as 12 percent which translates into 8958 out of 74 647 stories is a far cry from what should be.

7. Coverage of boys versus girls

According to the Commission for Gender Equality, gender inequality is still a challenge in South Africa.⁶ The media has a responsibility to help address these issues in their reporting especially in stories about children. This must be done under a child rights principle of equal participation and non-discrimination.

Figure 6: Girls Vs Boys Coverage



Contrary to the prevalent gender inequality in society, media has done well to ensure an almost equitable coverage of boys and girls. Boys constituted 47 percent whilst girls 53 percent. In 2012, boys received 52 percent and girls 48 percent. The shift in coverage of the sexes could largely be attributed to the increase in the percentage for the role of victim from 19 percent in 2012 to 22 percent in 2016. These stories where children are portrayed as victims often feature girls.

⁵ http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/images/uploads/Coverage_of_Childrens_Rights_in_Media.pdf

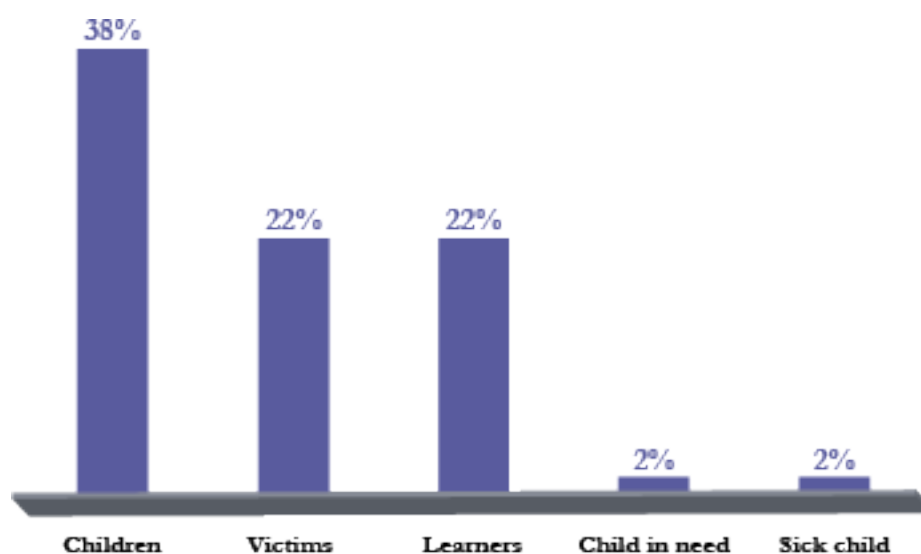
⁶ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B43RY8hVdugGTEtrb0dsSFg4ak0/view>

8. Top 5 children's roles

“I feel sad because I feel that we are much more than how the media shows us,” Chelsy Kleinsmith, a grade six Pelican Park Primary School pupil.

The way children are seen in the media has a profound influence on how society perceives them. Therefore, the media needs to start challenging the way children are seen and report more on them in positive roles. The link between how children are portrayed in the media and the issues affecting them that the media covers cannot be ignored. As can be seen from figure three, child abuse and crime were among the top three topics covered. In most if not all of the stories under the two topics, children were portrayed largely as victims or just children. This explains why those two roles are on the top two in the figure below at 22 percent and 38 percent respectively.

Figure 7: Top 5 roles



The results above are slightly different from the ones seen in 2012 where children as just members of the family constituted 41 percent, while learners and victims constituted 19 percent each.⁷ Learner as a role was used to refer to children who attended school. This however does not mean that all the learners were portrayed in a positive manner. Victim as a role is disempowering to children as it paints them in a negative and helpless way while just mentioning them as children does not in any way mean they are shown in a positive light. Children as a role was used when the story referred to children belonging to a particular family or when merely making reference to children in general. While it is important for the media to recognize the vulnerable children especially in negative stories such as those about abuse, it should ensure that there are more empowering roles such as survivor etc. Other positive roles such as sportsperson and achiever should be used as well and this can only be done if the media improves their coverage of sports and other developmental stories about children. Children should not be confined to stereotypical roles but diverse and empowering ones.

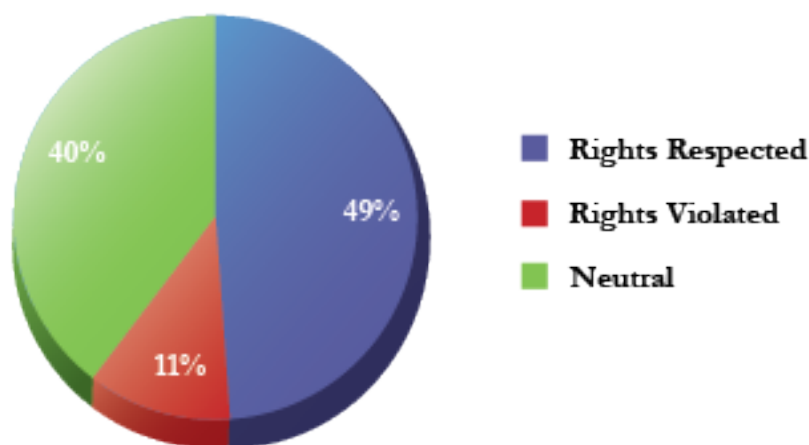
⁷ http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/images/uploads/Coverage_of_Childrens_Rights_in_Media.pdf

9. Rights respected

“All children have rights to participation and by not accessing them it feels like they are taking that right away from them,” Cedella Kasinahama, grade seven Parkhurst Primary School pupil.

Children’s rights continue to be neglected and in most cases abused in society. The media has the duty to ensure that children enjoy rights such as those that relate to their physical, social and mental well-being as enshrined in the Constitution. While we call on the media to promote such rights to ensure society receives awareness on the importance of having children enjoy their rights, we also encourage the media to protect and promote the four main rights related to children in the media. These are rights to freedom of expression, privacy, dignity and participation. Thus, respecting children’s rights in the media entails adhering to the aforementioned rights, that is, respecting children’s rights to voice their opinions and participate fully in issues that affect them. It also means respecting children’s rights to privacy and dignity by not identifying them in stories about crime, abuse or stories that could expose them to victimisation, secondary abuse, stereotyping and stigmatisation. The figure below shows that there has been no improvement in the protection of children’s rights in the media when comparing the 2012 results to the ones recorded in 2016. If anything else, the media’s violation of children’s rights in the media has taken a turn for the worst with an increase in rights violation of nine percent. The violation of children’s rights was at two percent in 2012⁸ and increased to 11 percent in 2016. The percentage of rights respected was at 49 in 2016. This percentage represents mostly those negative stories where the identity of children was protected or positive stories where their views were accessed. There were stories at 40 percent that were neutral. These were mostly stories that didn’t clearly violate or clearly protect any rights or those that reported on and portrayed children as just that with no defined roles.

Figure 8: Children’s rights

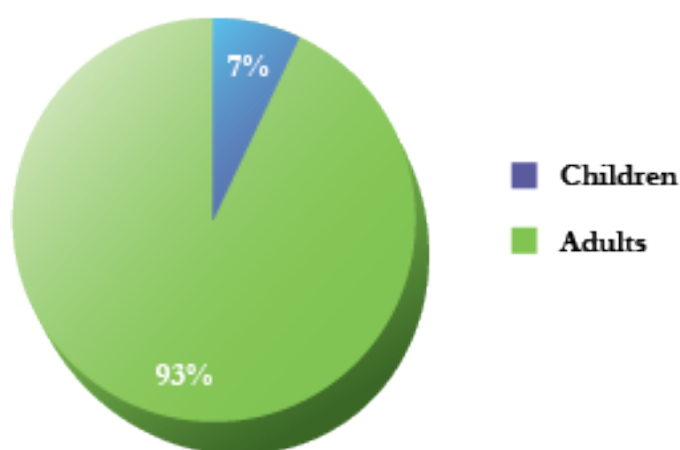


⁸ http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/images/uploads/Coverage_of_Childrens_Rights_in_Media.pdf

10. Children versus adults

The media should ensure that voices of both children and adults are adequately accessed in their reporting. The results below show that children were accessed at a staggering 10 percent in all the stories compared to adults who were accessed at 90 percent. Media needs to access more children in their reporting especially when it is in the best interest of the child. By not accessing children, the media is essentially denying them the right to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and participation. As media is a powerful tool in shaping perceptions, failure to access children perpetuates the stereotype that children's voices are not important enough to be heard. Children's voices bring fresh perspectives to stories and enrich them with their views. Therefore, the media should always access children when it is in their best interest. This section was not monitored in 2012 hence the lack of comparison.

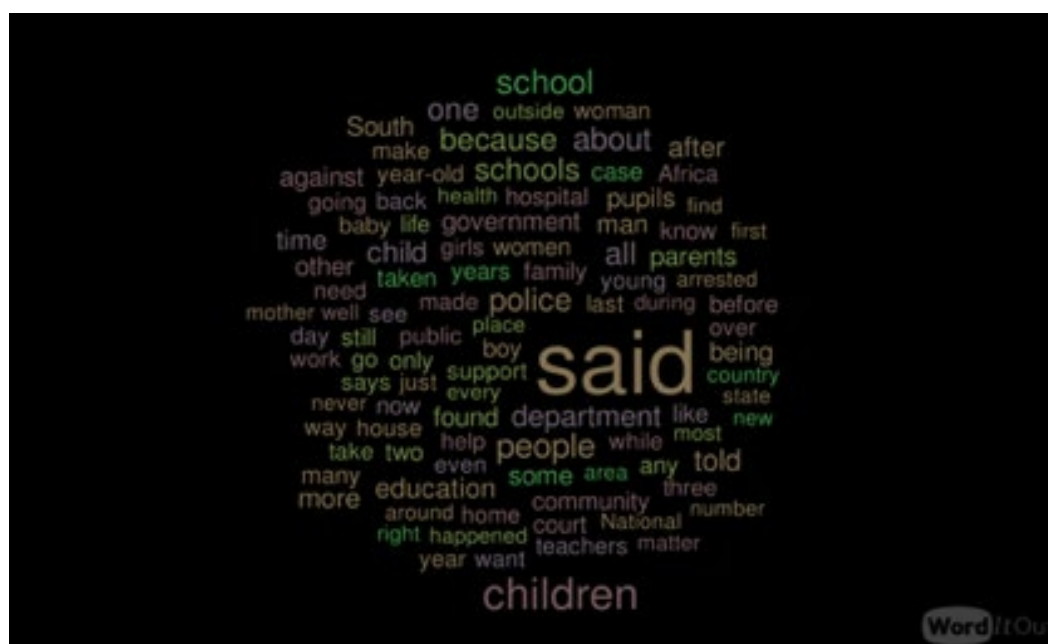
Figure 9: Children's vs. adults' voices



11. What are the adults talking about

As indicated in Figure nine, adults have a louder voice at 90 percent than the children in stories about the latter. All direct and indirect quotations by adults were collated and put into a word cloud. The figure below highlights the words mostly spoken by adults. The bigger the word, the more it was repeated in the quotations.

Figure 10: Word cloud



The word cloud above shows that the word “said” was more quoted in the stories followed by “children”, “school”, “police” and “education”. This corresponds very well with the top topics covered (see section three and 10 for comparison). Education being the most covered topic explains why words such as school, teachers, pupils and government appear often in the word cloud. Furthermore, the high percentages of stories about crime against children like rape, physical abuse and the mention of the justice system contributed to “police” featuring prominently.

The word cloud however highlights that issues such as poverty and teen pregnancy were neglected despite them being among the biggest problems the country is faced with. This could be attributed to the fact that the topics received less coverage as has already been shown in figure four. The word cloud was not featured in the 2012 results hence the lack of comparison between the 2016 and 2012 results.

12. Quality of information

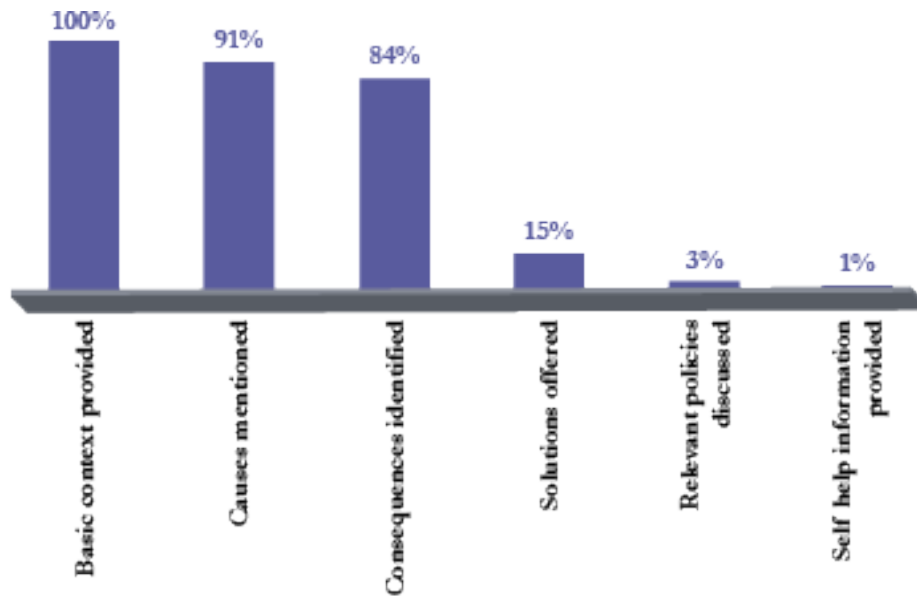
“I demand that journalists put more efforts in getting information before publishing the stories about children,” Nopumelelo Zinja, grade seven Park Senior Primary School pupil.

The stories monitored hardly went beyond providing basic context. The reasons for this could be many ranging from arguably tight deadlines to lack of willingness to research about the topic being reported on. Considering that issues like child abuse and crime constituted the top 10 topics covered in 2016, we should have seen more stories providing solutions, self help information and those that discuss relevant policies. This is relatively similar to 2012 findings where only two percent of stories offered solutions and one percent discussed relevant policies and legislation, and offered self-help information.⁹ While the 13 percent improvement in terms of solutions offered is commendable, the media needs to ensure it provides a wider context to stories in order to help its audience. This may be achieved by conducting thorough research and accessing as many sources as possible, including children in stories.

⁸ http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/images/uploads/Coverage_of_Childrens_Rights_in_Media.pdf

⁹ http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/images/uploads/Coverage_of_Childrens_Rights_in_Media.pdf

Figure 11: Quality of information



13. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on this assessment of South African media, there is need to improve children's participation and protection of their rights in media coverage of issues affecting them. The results show that children's voices are not adequately represented, their rights are still being violated and the media is struggling to provide more information in the stories to empower its audience. The media is however being commended for its almost equal representation of boys and girls. While this should not go unnoticed, the importance of having a media that prioritises reporting on children in an ethical manner cannot be over-emphasized. To achieve this, MMA recommends that media houses adopt the following;

- Since children constitute a substantial proportion of the population in South Africa (currently at 40 percent), there is need for this to be reflected in the number of stories about children that the media covers. MMA does not advocate for a quota system but at least a broader recognition of their importance to our present and our future.
- Children face an array of challenges and media should cover the diverse issues that affect children, and this not only includes diversity of topics covered but also diversity in terms of geographical coverage. Children also bring fresh perspectives and can reveal different sides to common stories on issues from economy to politics and sport.
- Where possible, media needs to go beyond just mentioning children to accessing them as much as possible. Given that at times accessing children can be cumbersome and daunting, it is essential that media practitioners are constantly reminded of the value of including children's participation and are continuously trained on how to ethically access them.
- Media should aim for zero tolerance on infringing on children's rights in their reporting. This may be achieved through continuous training as well as effective media accountability systems that ensure that media practitioners who fail to act ethically in their reporting are held to account.
- Children are capable of much more than they are given credit for and media should strive to portray them in roles that are empowering than disempowering. For example, instead of portraying children as victims of abuse they should be seen as survivors since the latter has positive connotations.

