On Wednesday 22 April, a conference was held in London, UK, to discuss the representation of children in the media. ten years on from the Oslo Challenge. This was a collaboration between the Norwegian Government and UNICEF, and included the following challenge to media professionals at all levels and in all media:

to work ethically and professionally to sound media practices and to develop and promote media codes of ethics in order to avoid sensationalism, stereotyping (including by gender) or undervaluing of children and their rights

Read the Oslo Challenge **here**

The conference was organised by the Institute of Education and the Open University. Read more

Conference report

Skip to:

The Oslo Challenge and beyond - a view from the inside

Mike Jempson, Director of MediaWise, opening the presentations, bemoaned the shortage of men in the room. "It is a serious point," he said, "almost no male journalists come along to the training I undertake. Child rights and the media is considered a soft issue, for girls."

Mr Jempson explained the tensions between journalists championing the freedom of the press, and child rights activists concerned at the negative depictions of children in the media. He said: "At every stage, journalists are utterly, utterly defensive about press freedom. The problem is that the media set the agenda - if they don't like something they won't print it. So it is incredibly important how you couch it. The Oslo challenge was about changing the nature of the debate."

He added that the Convention on the Rights of the Child is often disparaged in the media, as a fluffy piece of top-down bureaucracy. He said "If anything appears about the Convention, it

always get knocked. A bit like anything on health and safety measures."

Mr Jempson was especially keen to emphasise how youth-led media could be much more innovative than adult media, and that it provided fresh perspectives. While in India to help a set of street children develop their own radio station, he remembered one child asking an adult journalist: "You wouldn't answer personal questions if we asked you, so what gives you the right to ask us to bear our souls."

He also recounted the story of a photographer from an aid organisation, visiting India to collect pictures on street children. However, the everyday lives of the children were not proving sensational enough for his brief, so he paid children to collect rubbish from underneath trains – an image considered more appropriate for the organisation's media campaigns.

Mr Jempson went on the talk about his work training journalists, and the history behind the Oslo Challenge. You can read the rest of his presentation **here.**

Victims or vermin, but never the voice of reason: Children's portrayal in the British news media

Ciara Davey, of the Child Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) then spoke about children's portrayal in the British media, and the results of a research project on the subject undertaken by CRAE.

She demonstrated how negative portrayals of children in the media, as troublemakers and deviant, or as victims and so on, were not new.

In the fourth century BC, renowned philosopher Plato asked: "What is happening to our young people. They disrespect their elders, they disobey they parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets...their morals are decaying."

Meanwhile, in 1898, newspapers warned of the menace of "hooligans" and a "dramatic increase in disorderly behaviour."

She said children were presented in the news in one of two ways:

- child as victim - vulnerable, passive, dependent, angelic, ideally with blond hair and blue eyes. This fits in with idealistic Western conceptions of children that define childhood as a time of innocence.
- child as law breaker - threatening, out of control, menacing, hoodie-wearing, knife-carrying. A 2006 survey found that 71 per cent of stories about children and young people over one week were negative.

However, Dr Davey emphasised that the angle of the story can be as instrumental as the language or images used.

She added that only two per cent of newspaper stories on children referred to children's rights, while less than one in four were accurate about children's rights. She said "Child rights are seen as very dry and very boring".

Media expert **Amanda Barnes** then explained what journalists could do to address the issue, noting that "not surprisingly, children are very affected by how they are portrayed in the media".

One child, already affected by violence and abuse, said: "Sometimes I hate walking past old people because they look down on you. They give you eyeballs"

Elderly people were asked what they felt about children in the street. While many said they thought children were unruly and so on, most did not actually have any contact with such children. Their opinions had been heavily influenced by negative media portrayals.

She added young people had begun to fear each other as a result of media reporting. One child was quoted as saying: "The things you hear on the news, you begin to think it could happen to me. If you go out at night and its dark, you are wondering if anybody could be there...I could get stabbed, I could get shot."

Children have no self-organised body. Groups such as trade unions, or professional associations (for example for doctors) have public relations machinery to "defend your reputation". They also have legal support and recognised spokespeople.

Children are generally unable, or do not have the confidence, to for example call up radio stations to voice their feelings on matters affecting them.

So what can be done? These are just a few of the suggestions Amanda had for redressing the imbalance:

- Make space for children as commentators – from all walks of life
- Give children control over how their views are represented
- Put a children's rights angle on the story
- Keep the recommendations of official bodies in the public domain
- More monitoring of the media and engaging in dialogue with journalists.
- The media can have a positive effect by:
- Exposing injustice
- Joining forces with campaign groups
- Marking progress in children's rights

Find out more about CRAE's Report Right campaign:
http://www.getreadyforchange.org.uk/campaigns/age-discrimination

In response to questions from the floor, Dr Davey admitted that, even when children are well prepared for interviews, they do not always get the chance to air their views. For example, an interview CRAE had arranged with the BBC about a group of young people dispatched to Geneva to speak to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, merely prompted banal questions from journalists about "what they were doing at school."

A roughly mapped terra incognita: Images of children in Serbian media

Nada Korac, of the University of Novi Sad, Serbia, presented a 2001 study of children and the media in Serbia, 'The Invisible Child'. The study mirrored the findings of the research undertaken by CRAE.

For example, 72 per cent of representations of children in the media were classed as "passive".

She suggested that if an alien were leafing through newspapers, browsing the internet, watching TV, they would likely make the following conclusions:

"The child is a member of a rare, helpless and rather endangered species. The members of that species are mostly of indefinite age, sex and social status. All they are capable and fond of doing is to play and have fun. Apart from that there is little they can do, understand or say.

Adults are there to protect them from all risks and dangers, as far as other responsibilities and financial resources permit, because they are kind, considerate and caring."

She argued there were some "brilliant journalists doing something about it – they are mostly young and mostly women." However, she cautioned that editors may turn otherwise insightful and positive stories into sensationalist articles.

The study demonstrated a "superficial and sensationalist approach" to children, who were largely presented in a negative way. Children were used as a means for drawing attention or attaching importance to other themes. Moreover, there was a judgemental attitude to children based on adult standards.

Dr Korac quoted Gerbner: "Drama is fiction by creation. News is fiction by selection."

Read more about the report **here**

In response to the presentation, a delegate from Ireland talked of the problems of prioritising children's rights education, as opposed to human rights education. A particular problem is with teacher training, she argued, since teachers' were not always aware of the issues and how to teach them. She added the whole curriculum should be permeated by a rights approach.

Monitoring of South-Eastern European media: how to address child trafficking without re-victimisation?

Zsofia Farkas, Regional Advocacy Project Manager for South Eastern Europe, Terre des Hommes, followed with a presentation about the reporting of child trafficking in the region. She said she did not want to reinforce two stereotypes about journalists and South East Europe.

"Journalists are not monsters. I have been working with them and there is hope. And it is not the case that ethical reporting is not happening or is impossible in the area."

She spoke about her organisation's work in monitoring articles on child trafficking and child rights in the media.

Among the findings, they discovered a lack of understanding, the use of stigmatising language, for example against the Roma population, the misuse of terminology like trafficking, smuggling, prostitution, and the use of sensational expressions such as 'slave trade', or 'being sold'.

The reporting could also be one-sided and uncritical. Reporters might use one or two sources of information, such as a police press release, and there may be assumptions without supporting evidence. Personal data was also revealed, and rules of reporting not respected. Victims may even be presented as criminal. Pictures could show children in degrading or even pornographic situations.

On the other hand, positive articles may have made mention of the international standards of child rights perspectives, and may focus on analysing specific dimensions of trafficking, such as problems of re-victimisation and criminalisation.

She summarised the challenges to better reporting as follows:

- Fluctuation of journalists
- A lack formal education, and training
- Specialisation among journalists
- Editors and owners – journalists may be on the ball, but editors may insist on sensationalist coverage. Moreover, editors are harder and less willing to train, while journalists may be more motivated

- Lack of ethical code
- Lack of strong ethical commitment from the newspapers

For more information, visit: http://www.terredeshommes.org/

Balanced Representations? Cooperation between local photographers and international aid organisations in Bangladesh

Sanna Nissinen, of the Open University, presented some preliminary findings from her research on representations of children in humanitarianism.

She said her Interest was in looking at the photographic practices underlying the images of children.

"Children are more willing to be collaborators than adults. They are also less self-conscious, and less likely to foresee the possible horrors of publication," she said.

Her work revealed that Asian photographers were well aware of the imbalance in Western depictions of their countries. One explained these representations as "Impoverished, underdeveloped and poverty stricken nations that can never rise above their situation."

A former editor of the Times, India, conceded that poverty was indeed rife: "I am not staying it is untrue, but I criticise the approach and not the result."

Photographer Ariadne Van de ven has also lamented the one dimensional approach: "The conditions they live in are historically, politically and socially very complex, but we Westerners run the risk of behaving like bundles of shocked sensibility that only see 'POVERTY' and thereby reduce individuals to nothing more than their economic status."

Sanna also noted that photographers often have little say in how their photographs are used, or how they are edited in with other photographs.

She quoted Noamh Chomsky who said: "Images can be exploitation or opportunity. But they never work alone for either extreme."

"Cute kid, but over-exposed": Media representation of children: The NGO experience and perspective

Tracy Ulltveit-Moe said "Cute kid, but overexposed" had been scribbled on an image she had by a member of Amnesty International's media department

The image was of a child shot and paralysed in Guatemala because his dad was a trade unionist. Amnesty used the pictures, without the permission of either the child or the father, and they were widely distributed.

Ms Ulltveit-Moe said there often might discrepancies between different NGO departments on the use of images – for example between those who work on programming and those who work in fundraising.

The Oslo challenge protocols had not been respected by Amnesty when they used the image of the boy – not, she emphasised, because Amnesty was bad-intentioned, just because they were so passionate about the injustice they had seen.

Because of these very appealing images the boy was given the best medical treatment in the US. The boy and his father were also given the keys to several cities, and were star guests at

an America baseball game. Howevever, in Guatemala the campaign received unwelcome attention and the father got death threats. Amnesty helped them to obtain asylum in the US.

Ms Ulltveit-Moe identified issues raised by the incident, for example:
Are standards advocated by researchers compatible with the objectives of human rights NGOs?
Must individual child interests always prevail over other considerations, such as promoting children's rights in general?
Without individual cases would Amnesty lose much of its impact?
Are there ways to protect individual child victims or witnesses so their testimonies can be used?
Why use children's cases at all?

She noted that individual cases and images may be effective in arousing interest (the "politics of shame"), and also money. Moreover, there is also a need for children's testimonies - as victims and witnesses of human rights violations, sexual abuse, extrajudicial executions and so on.

She asked if some NGO depictions of global horrors promoted emotion at the expense of understanding – a phenomenon sometimes called "aid pornography".

Ms Ulltveit-Moe remarked that children were frequently shown on their own in family situations as if their families and communities had failed them, with the implication that only those in the West can help them.

She explained how a photojournalist she knew had brought some children from a rural area in the Philippines to a hotel in Manila, expecting them to enjoy the taste of luxury. They each had a separate room, but in the morning, the journalist found them in one room huddled up together. They were afraid of their surroundings. She concluded that those working in human rights are not always adept at putting theories and ethics into practice.

She also recounted how one journalist, on a battle field in the majority world, had been overheard saying: "Anyone here been raped and speak English".

Images of children in conflict and disaster: the ethics and politics of representation

Karen Wells, of Birkbeck College, concluded the presentations. She said: "We have invested so much in childhood as separate from adulthood, and as a time of innocence."

She observed that while Images of the suffering child "provokes anxiety in the adult spectator," at the same time, watching suffering images of children feels "voyeuristic and sadistic." Adults are defined in relation to the ability to protect and care for children.

Ms Wells noted how the encounter between the image of the lone, suffering child and the spectator is individualised and stripped of politics.

She critiqued the "picture of the smiling African girl" part of a new 'NGO code' that aims to avoid depictions of suffering, repeating stereotypical discourse, and intends to maintain respect.

"I would contest this view on several grounds", she said, asking "are we so sensitive so as not to be exposed to the impact of human rights violations. Why must we be protected from suffering."

Representations of suffering can force the spectator tu engage with what is happening elsewhere, she argued. "They can mobilise the desire to do something."

She observed how a CNN report on the Gaza conflict earlier this year began with caveat: "Some of these images may offend". Not, she noted, the fact that thousands of people were being killed, but that the actual image might offend the Western gaze.

Images of suffering must demand or provoke a response, Ms Wells insisted. "They need to be political, rather than just appealing to sentiments. Sentiments may result in crying, deploring, giving money, but in may not result in political mobilisation." She said that while depoliticising suffering may be effective for fundraising, it did not promote change and political action.

Berry Mayall, of the Institute of Education, concluded the conference. She said: "As women's rights determine the power difference between women and men, child rights determine those between adults and children."

She said the focus on children's welfare had historically pivoted on their protection, fueled by the activities of NGOs with this project in mind. Read more of her concluding remarks **here**.

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