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PERSPECTIVES ON MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF CHILDREN

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Abstract

The fundamental human rights must always be taken into consideration by the media, because one of the major duties of a journalist is to observe whether the rights of each and everyone are respected in the society. But the battle for rating sometimes leads to unfortunate compromises and the disregard of the ethical principles and even the laws. Such undesirable situations are to be noticed also when events involving children are covered by the media. Because of the pressures constantly made by the institutions and organizations with expertise and responsibilities in the field, such as UNICEF, things have improved significantly lately. But there are still issues to be solved and the good practice guidelines are still needed in order to correct the journalistic misconducts and avoid the occurrence of what is usually referred to as "secondary trauma".

Keywords: media, children, representation, ethics, guidelines

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INTRODUCTION

One of the main responsibilities of journalists is to depict reality in a correct and unbiased manner, to analyze and decode the events taking place in the society. It is a mission not easy to carry out, but the journalist must have always in mind the fact that their acts have consequences. That is why they should understand that an unswerving approach when dealing with the representation of reality is mandatory, if they really want to gain a good reputation and be referred to as reliable sources of information. And, of course, not to get into collision with the laws or the moral code. To feel like doing the right thing at the right time. To be certain they do their duty with honesty and professionalism.

The same principles must be taken into consideration when children are subjects of media representation. Even more, we may say, because the underage persons are to be presented in relation with several national and international acts and resolutions meant to protected them as vulnerable individuals. It is a delicate situation that should be tackled with extreme caution and great responsibility because the legal, social and psychological consequences of a flawed and/or dishonest representation can be damaging for both sides, the children involved and the media institution that presented incorrectly a certain situation or event. Taking into account their obvious sensitivity and vulnerability, the minors are the ones that will definitely suffer more under such circumstances.

The recent researches, analyzes and surveys show that, despite some significant changes of attitude from part of the media, there are still too many situations in which the minors are presented in a way that violates the fundamental rights of the child and the very essential rights of the human being,

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especially the right to a private life. It is a matter of most importance and a problem which should be tackled with great responsibility because of the fact that all the news with or about underage persons have to comply with the standards, regulations, laws and guidelines that regulate the media activity regarding the persons who are very vulnerable mainly from the psychological point of view, persons who must get a more efficient protection from all the institutions that are meant to watch over them. Thus, media must cover with significant precaution the events involving minors, as UNICEF and Media Monitoring Project recommends: "Children are often associated with innocence, purity and vulnerability but may also be vulnerable to poor treatment and human rights violations. Such events are newsworthy and should be covered by the media, yet this coverage has a potential to expose child victims to secondary trauma. Issues affecting and involving children do need to be reported and the Media Monitoring Project encourages the media to continue doing so. However, every effort must be made to ensure that the best interests of the child are not compromised"
(https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/SAF_publications_childrendying.pdf).

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Media has had an essential role in emphasizing the significance of human rights ever since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Its importance in defending the children's human rights and its contribution to the development of the individual were stressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 44/25 of November 20, 1989, entering into force on September 2, 1990 (Article 17):

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"States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall:

(a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of article 29;

(b) Encourage international co-operation in the production, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;

(c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;

(d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous;

(e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18" (http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx).

The press must not only pinpoint the importance of respecting the basic human rights, but it should also reveal the abuses committed in the society by individuals and/or institutions. The media activity can lead to a change of perspective and attitude towards the most vulnerable members of society, especially the children, and it can also trigger serious debates that can be followed by changes of laws and regulations in the states. Especially now, when the speed of transmitting information is unbelievably high and media can rapidly spread the facts and notions from everywhere to anywhere on this planet, bringing people and ideas together in the blink of an eye: "With media as a

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product of globalization, they (people) are now being able to convey their ideas all over the world. Media has undoubtedly revolutionized the world by literally bringing the whole world in our living room. Media, both mainstream and social media, provides us with news from everywhere in the world and prepares us to gather together and fight against anything violating basic rights of an individual or community. Media has also spotlighted various social discriminations that had happened around us silently since long. (...) Human Rights activists are now aware of anything and everything related to violation of rights of individual and are always prepared to take necessary actions against such crimes" (Akrivopoulou, 2017, p. 9).

So, media acts like a reliable whistleblower for the modern societies, having all the means necessary to detect and spotlight the violations of human rights, but the institutions authorized to take the appropriate measures must make their moves accordingly. Media gives the alarm so that other entities can become aware of a problematic situation and subsequently act in order to solve it and prevent the occurrence of other similar situations. And, when children are involved, the actions should be fast and efficient, because of the significant potential of long lasting undesirable effects that a harmful event can cause to the underage subjects. But, as we may easily notice, there exists cases of doing more harm than good with an inappropriate manner of covering an event. Because if the journalists are not aware of the consequences of their way of relating to the sequence of events that represent the foundation of the news, if they are overzealous or they simply don't pay attention to the details, if they overlook the sensitivity of the subject and neglect the laws, rules, regulations and guidelines related to the media representation of children, they can cause additional trauma to the victims of the events depicted.

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Looking for rating at all costs, some media institutions give no importance whatsoever to the possible consequences of their ways of covering events involving children, they only want to attract, even shock their viewers/subscribers and sell their media products as much and as fast as they can. The legal and ethical implications of a media product must be taken into consideration permanently and the deontological principles should govern the activity of each and every media endeavor. In theory, this is exactly the case. But there are still slippages and misconducts in the media that can cause long-term noxious consequences to those who have already been hurt and abused in the events covered by the news.

The issues regarding the media representation of children are extremely complex and they have been constantly targeted by studies conducted or commissioned by the institutions which have the necessary expertise and the responsibility of monitoring and supervising the way in which the rights of the underage persons are respected in the media as well, and UNICEF is definitely one of the most important. This institution has emphasized the negative and stereotyped way in which children are represented in the media, based on the most comprehensive surveys and analyzes. In this regard, UNICEF cited a 2004 survey realized by MORI for Young People Now magazine that demonstrated that young people were increasingly represented in the media as 'problems'. Likewise, in November 2003, MediaWise analyzed the content of some of the most important British newspapers. The results presented a bleak picture of the way in which children were portrayed. Out of a total of 32 items with or about children, only two were positive. Other research projects have shown that this stereotyping of children is an international phenomenon, as UNICEF stresses. Glocal Youth's research, which accuses the media of failing to focus on young

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people's civic engagement, has detected similar trends among mainstream media across Europe.

This negative tendency is to be found almost everywhere in the world. The Media Monitoring Project (MMP) analysed in 2003 the representation of children and the way in which their rights are respected in the South African news media. The Empowering Children & Media (ECM) project included participatory workshops with the children, a three-month monitoring period and specialized training with journalists. Both adults and children monitored the news media and every media product containing references to children was noted and counted over a two-week period. According to UNICEF, the key findings of this research were:

" *Children are under-represented in the news media*

Children feature in only 6% of news items according to adult monitors, while the child monitors found that only 26% of their monitored stories contained children.

Children are predominantly represented as victims

In the adult monitoring, more than 25% of the items portrayed children as victims. On the whole, children are portrayed most often in negative terms and in limited roles. The children's monitoring confirmed these trends. The children commented that the media should make an effort to represent children in more positive roles.

Children are represented mostly in negative stories

Both the adults' and children's monitoring revealed that news stories in which children appeared were predominantly negative. According to the adult monitoring, one in two stories featuring children related to negative topics such as crime, violence, abuse or disasters.

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✓ *Male and female children are equitably represented, but are still stereotyped*

Despite this apparent equality, further analysis showed a perpetuation of gender stereotypes in how children were represented. Girls were more likely to appear in stories about child abuse, while boys appeared mostly in sports-related stories. This reinforces the stereotypical portrayal in the media of women as victims and men as empowered" (http://elearning-events.dit.ie/unicef/html/unit1/1_5_2.htm).

The following table summarizes the issues identified by the children as most important during while monitoring the media (http://elearning-events.dit.ie/unicef/html/unit1/1_5_2.htm):

Top Ten Children's Issues	**%**
Children notice/ don't like death and killing	15
Children should be included in the news	13
Children are victims	12
Children are not represented in the media	10
Children have a right to protection, education, provision and healthcare	9
Children enjoy sports and entertainment	9
Child abuse is horrible	4
Children notice crime	3
Helping needy children/people is good	2
Criminals should not go unpunished	2

The results of the Empowering Children & Media project confirmed the results of another research conducted in 1998 by the charitable organization

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Save the Children focusing on the opinions of the children about their representation in the media. These are the practices in the media that children dislike most:

the use of children's serious comments to make adults laugh

the use of 'cute' children to add charm appeal

the use of photos and descriptions of children in miserable situations to evoke emotion, even though this does nothing for children's self-respect or for the audience's respect for them

children being patronized and spoken down to

adults speaking for children, when the children know more about the subject

children being made to perform like circus animals

adults showing off children's ignorance

adults putting words in children's mouths, or interrupting them

children being made to look passive when they are not

young people being lumped together as a problem group (http://elearning-events.dit.ie/unicef/html/unit1/1_5_2.htm)

In Romania, although due to a series of measures taken against the ways in which media covers, especially in the news reels, the events involving children, the things have improved significantly, there are still many issues that must be solved as soon as possible. That is why good practice guidelines are needed, as journalists must understand they should comply with the regulations and the recommendations issued by all the institutions and organizations involved in the contextualization of social conduct. A very useful and compelling guideline was recently issued (June 2017) by the Center for Independent Journalism – Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent (CJI) and UNICEF Romania, "The Good

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Practice Guidelines Relating Media Reports with and about Children" in which we can find several useful principles and recommendations, as well as examples of good or bad practice from the Romanian media. The guide has four components:

- A set of ethical and practical principles and recommendations regarding the reports with and about children;

- The draft of an ethics code for the journalistic reports with and about children;

- A series of case studies on subjects covered by the Romanian press that triggers exercises of critical thinking and may lead to putting into practice the ethical principles displayed;

- An inventory of laws and legal norms, as well as a selection of their texts that can have an impact in the reporters and editors' daily work (http://www.cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/GHID-UNICEF_DESPRE-COPII_ONLINE_13IUNIE.pdf).

According to the authors of the guide, the subjects treated by the Romanian audiovisual media that caused the most flawed reports were the economically exploited children and those related to the access to education. The most common problem identified in that context was the presence of the elements which permitted the identification of the underage persons. Compared to the situation in 2014, the authors notice that the TV journalists have started to avoid the depreciatory language used as a direct reference to the victim, the subjectivism and stereotypes, including those of racial and ethnic order (http://www.cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/GHID-UNICEF_DESPRE-COPII_ONLINE_13IUNIE.pdf).

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CONCLUSION

Media must continue to improve the way of approaching the events involving children. Serious steps forward have been taken also in Romania, as the studies confirm, but there are measures yet to be taken in order to not affect anymore the dignity, the sensitivity and the rights of the children when making a media product. The journalists must permanently think of the consequences of their actions and they must understand that giving up principles in order to achieve rating it is not acceptable anymore in the modern societies.

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