

Empowering Children & Media: Five Key Monitoring Results

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In 2003 the Media Monitoring Project (MMP), an independent Non-Governmental Organisation of South Africa, together with children, investigated the representation of children and children's rights in the South African news media. The Empowering Children & Media (ECM) (1) project entailed various stages, including participatory workshops with the children, a three-month monitoring period and specialised training with journalists and media practitioners (2).

Both adults and children conducted monitoring of the news media (3). The adults monitored the media for a three-month period from March to May 2003. Every item containing a reference to children was monitored, and relevant information was recorded about the topic, sources, representation and other issues relating to children's rights. The children engaged in a parallel monitoring project in which they monitored a news medium of their choice over a two-week period (4). Key research findings were as follows:

1. Children are under-represented in the news media

Children feature in only 6% of the news items according to adult monitors, while the child monitors found that only 26% of their monitored stories contained children. The adults' monitoring results revealed that the majority of items depicting children appeared in print (75%), with the remaining 25% split evenly between radio and television.

2. 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 discourse and in limited roles. The children's monitoring confirmed these trends, and the children themselves commented that the media should make an effort to represent children in more positive roles.

3. Children are represented mostly in negative stories

Both the adults' and children's monitoring revealed that when children appeared in news stories the stories were predominantly negative. According to the results of the monitoring conducted by the adults, one in every two stories featuring children related to negative topics such as crime, violence, abuse or disasters. The graph below illustrates the top ten topics across the adults' monitoring results:

4. Male and female children are equitably represented, but are still stereotyped

The adults' monitoring results indicated that the breakdown of the gender of the children accessed in the media for the period monitored was 55% male: 45%

female. Despite this apparent equality, further analysis showed a perpetuation of gender stereotypes in how children were represented. Female children were more likely to appear in stories about child abuse, while male children appeared mostly in sports-related stories. This reinforces the stereotypical portrayal in the media of women as victims and men as empowered.

5. Top ten issues raised by children

Many of the issues raised by the children were reflected in the adults' monitoring results. The children commented that they were shown mainly in negative news stories; there were few positive reports about children. On a more positive note, the children commented on the good work the media does in helping locate missing children. The table below provides the top ten issues determined by the children as most important during their monitoring exercise.

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

Conclusion

The monitoring exercises by both the adults and children revealed similar trends and patterns, to the extent that the results of the children's monitoring was confirmed by those of the adults' monitoring. Both sets of results indicated a limited and narrow representation of children in the media, and demonstrated the need for greater, diverse representation of children in the South African news media.

Notes

1. The name of the Children Victims of News Project has been changed to empowering children and Media and is funded by save the Children Sweden and UNICEF.

2. 22,000 news items from 36 different news media, including print, radio and television were monitored.

3. Participatory workshops with children were held in three provinces in South Africa (Eastern Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal), and gave the children the opportunity to share their perceptions of how they are represented in the media, something they felt was important in the news. Most importantly, the children were able to develop critical media literacy skills.

4. Many of the children chose to monitor radio news.