

It seemed that the two child-murderers got more hostile publicity than adults would have got for the same crime. This probably influenced the punishments which became very harsh. Also in the United States, where a child is killed by gunshot every two hours, the Bulger case was a first page story day after day. A picture from a security camera was published showing the two boys walking away with the little child; that very image appeared as a symbol of smashed illusions.

The child as *perpetrator* probably causes more vibrations because of the widespread child-victim image; the contrast between the two is upsetting. Child criminality therefore tends to be an emotional issue and newsworthy, for instance, gang assaults against other minors.

The more important that the media handle such problems with some care. Sadly, however, there have been extreme cases where media representatives have taken the lead in hate campaigns against groups of children, almost always poor and abandoned minors in the margin of the society. Media with an unfortunate term usually label them all as "street children." There was, some years ago, a radio station in São Paulo which incited policemen and others to "cleanse" the streets from these children, in other words: to kill them.

Children in Crisis

The coverage of the stone-throwing boys in the West Bank and Gaza during the *intifada* uprising, which started in late 1987, raised other problems. It was, at best, confused; the boys were sometimes portrayed as heroes, sometimes as untamed trouble-makers. Again, the contrast to the innocent-child image was stirring. The fact that the Palestinian boys — sometimes also girls — on occasion confronted very young Israeli soldiers and that both parties tried to manipulate the international media, complicated reporting even more.

The theme of boy soldiers was taken up in July 1995 by Newsweek with the first page heading: "Boy Soldiers: A New and Ruthless Breed of Warrior." The 10-page story gave available facts about the recruitment of young boys to armies and militias in a number of recent conflicts. The salt of the story, and perhaps the reason why it was featured, was the fact that boy soldiers sometimes had been exceptionally cruel. To the credit of *Newsweek*, there was an attempt to put also that finding into a wider context thereby explaining how the boys could be both perpetrators and victims at the same time.⁵

5. *Newsweek* 7 August 1995.

During the genocidal massacres in Rwanda last year, when more than five hundred thousand children, women and men were brutally butchered, there were also children among the killers; in some cases they were very young. They were discovered by foreign journalists in prison afterwards. How should these boys and their participation be described? Silence is of course not the answer, neither are sensational reports dehumanizing and demonizing them. Well-researched backgrounds are needed in order to explain what really happened; and for such reporting the voice of the child himself is important.

Some reports on child prostitution have reflected similar dilemmas. It is not easy to see the real child in that vulgar environment in which girls and also boys sometimes are seen to be active. The heavily made-up call-girl in the brothel is a far cry from our image of the innocent child, even when we are told about how she was forced into the humiliation.

The tendency of the media to go for the exceptional stories can give the impression of the outside world as a theatre of absurdities. The actors on that scene become distant and unreal, perhaps even threatening. Today's news reports cry out for supplementary journalism giving backgrounds and contextual information, even analysis.

Respecting the Integrity of the Child

There are of course other types of stereotyping around children in the media apart from those mentioned here; one indeed relates to gender bias. They all tend to distort reality and dehumanize the individual child.

Perhaps this is why it has been possible for some papers and radio-TV programmes to violate the integrity of a child. The right not to have one's name mentioned in connection with reports on crime or sexual abuse is not always respected. Too seldom is the identity of a child covered on photos from such situations, even when the adults are given that privilege.

This is in contradiction with the spirit of Article 16 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

1. No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home, or correspondence, nor to lawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation.
2. The child has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.