

Enlighten and Illuminate

Protecting Children's Basic Rights

Address delivered by Deborah Jean-Baptiste-Samuel at the Lumen Media Awards 2008

The media has the power to inform, and shed new light on issues affecting the rights of children. The media, both print and electronic, can captivate and mesmerize audiences, can inform and entertain, and now beyond responsibility, there is a salient need to enlighten and illuminate the need to protect children. Our most valuable resource is not oil and natural gas, but the children of our nation, that voiceless powerless sector with boundless talent and possibility, embodying treasure.

The media has the power, and can be empowered, to perform a major role in the awareness and policing of the protection of our nation's children. Power according to the exponents of social research is measured through responses. Just as the novelist or movie maker impacts on the mind and emotions of the reader or audience, so too the journalist has the power to enlighten and activate the public audience. Around the world journalists who embraced this inherent power have been catalysts for change and renewal concerning the rights of children, CHILDLINE, PRESSHOPE, and Speaking for Silent Sufferers, to name three.

Power in Persuasion

The word whether in print or broadcast has "say and sway". The 'say' is the information, the 'sway' is the persuasion to active response. The art of journalism is not a sterile process of putting words and images together, it is a dynamic force with potential energy in informing and activating toward positive response. There is power in language. Barbie Zelizer 1992 notes "Narrative is seen as an effective tool for accomplishing community and authority, and a means of maintaining collective codes of knowledge." As such communication is patterned activity that draws members of a society together in commonality and community.

Legislation is welcome, but the law alone cannot protect the welfare of children, the law does not change the way people think, or their behaviour. The media can do that, it can influence the way people think.

In Narrative and Social Control 1993, edited by Dennis Mumby, Peter Ehrenhaus in his essay notes the capacity of narratives to shape public consciousness. The media can record the good, the bad, and the ugly, it can expose the truth however painful and shameful, and can also lead to the healing of wounds. The media can pressure decision-makers to act. Child abuse is a breach to peace, it is a brutal tear in the social fabric, that presents itself now in crisis and demands redress. This social drama is not a mystery, a whispering of pretense and unknown, it is a gripping horror of betrayal, exploitation, untimely and gruesome death.

News of a child abused sends a painful dart straight to the heart of every individual because children are vulnerable to the vice of villain perpetrators, and innocent to the incredible evil encountered. The media makes the public aware of cases of child abuse,

when abuse becomes patterned, the nation is in crisis. We have been in crisis for several years, and the chronicle of catastrophe is evident.

Akiel Chambers ten years ago, Amy Anamunthudo and Sean Luke within more recent years, and the loss of Hope Arismandez this year. The heinous act of the killing of Hope Arismandez, aged 8, saw the tentacles of terror at work. The nation was outraged and in pain. In one day Thursday 29th May 2008 – this is a sample of the news headlines:

Children under Seige
Schoolmates set up shrine for Hope
Family feels the pain
Beast
There are monsters among us
Suspect had violent past
How many more must die savagely?
Brutality, blood and young bodies
Boys, girls they are all vulnerable
Laws needed to protect them
Don't trust anyone with our children

On that day, in addition to the news related to Hope we saw:
Mom in court for burning 7 year-old son's hand
Man accused of raping 12 year old girl walks free

That sad week in May we saw:
Goodbye to Hope – Farewell to hope – Hope is dead – Week without hope – Losing hope is so painful. All accompanied by photos of children in tears holding their head torn with pain to the core.

One headline “Shame!” echoed the song of Ella Andel, whose lament is chorused by “Shame on a people, shame – and echoed - shame, shame.”
‘A Crying Shame’ was the headline in an Express article on 7th April 2005 – No one reported repeated rape of a 9 year old girl. The child was raped by as many as 28 men led to her by her drug-addicted mother. Neighbours knew and remained silent.

The media is properly poised to act on behalf of children, abused or otherwise. Often even the basic rights of children are infringed.

Operating as an underlying principle in TT legislation is the fact that the best interest of the child is always of paramount importance.

The international code governing rights of the child is enshrined in the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

The Convention sets out these rights in 54 articles and two Optional Protocols. It spells out the basic human rights that children everywhere have: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to

participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The four core principles of the Convention are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. Every right spelled out in the Convention is inherent to the human dignity and harmonious development of every child.

Article 3 - “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.”

Every child has an inherent right to life and liberty, to survival and development, to education, nutrition and health, and to protection from harm or abuse.

The important function performed by the mass media is also recognized in the Convention in terms of the promotion of a child’s social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. It encourages the media to develop appropriate material and guidelines for the protection of the child.

All parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents, guardians, or other persons who have care of the child.

Power as Police

The media has a policing power also. As police, the media can detect, respond in an emergency, investigate, expose, arrest and offer prevention strategies. This in no way underestimates the role of the protective agencies, police officers, child protection units, juvenile bureau or the litany of legislation designed to prevent harm meted out to children and to bring perpetrators to justice. The media can work in tandem to enlighten and empower decision makers, arms of government, parents, caregivers, and the public. The media is a purposeful instrument capable of reaching thousands in one print or broadcast, it can influence and educate, offers a platform for the public voice, and can inform social policy.

In a 2007 report by the Economic and Social Council of UNICEF the inadequacy of legislative reform was stressed. Social policy innovations are needed in the fields of child development and child protection.

The report noted, “There is an increase in the number of reported cases of physical abuse of children in their homes and communities, as well as in institutions caring for children, and in the number of crimes committed by children against other children. In a recent study on violence in the Caribbean 10 percent of the boys and 5 percent of the girls reported that they has at some time been knocked unconscious in a fight, with similar numbers reporting that they had been stabbed or shot at.”

Our own news reports children being beaten unconscious by parents, we all remember the photo of 5 year old Daniel Walker forcing smile for the news cameras as he lay in his hospital bed with broken bones and swollen body. Daniel Walker was battered until unconscious by a man he knew well. Other children have been poisoned by parents, forced to ingest lanate, or have been neglected and permanently abandoned.

The report continues, “In a survey of Caribbean school children about 11 percent of the girls and 9 percent of all children reported that they had been sexually abused, including through incest. Among adolescents who were sexually active, almost 80 percent of the boys and 50 percent of girls reported that sexual initiation occurred before the age of 13. Up to 40 percent of the girls reported that their first sexual initiation was forced.”

Children in residential care facilities are not protected by policing or monitoring mechanisms. Children in these institutions are ‘invisible’ and easily forgotten. Nutrition, schooling, and basic care are often sorely lacking. This can be compounded with instances of physical and sexual abuse.

Other policing protection concerns are in the areas of child labour and trafficking in children. We have to take measures to combat the illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad. Child labour is no longer alien to our shores, they are seen in trades from vending to prostitution, and the presence of street children is not a myth.

Power to Protect and Prevent

The role of the media is wider than the news report, it carries the power to protect. Prevention is better than cure, and through awareness parents, caregivers, and teachers can spare children the onslaught of terror and pain. Many of the reported violations could have been prevented.

Much of the media coverage is case-based. The heat tends to wane after the case, but the problem persists, so the fires should remain kindled to explore general related issues and to program minds toward prevention. Generally children are not abused by strangers, they are harmed by those they know and trust (parent, step-parent, member of the family, or respected adult). Sadly, children are at risk in the so-called ‘sanctity and security’ of that place called home. Where a parent proves vile, a neighbour needs to be vigilant.

Prevention must look at the possibilities of ill-treatment and abuse meted out to children – in their homes, their schools, institutions of care – and resonate with robust action. Incest, organized sexual crime, child pornography, child prostitution, must all be addressed.

Child pornography is a secret scandal, it involves the sexual abuse of a child and the permanent recording of that abuse. Child pornography uses the same equipment and resources of the media for the recording, publication, and circulation of its pollution. Those in the industry move from magazine to film with record-breaking profits. We live in the midst of a pedophile pestilence, and the media can enlighten and educate toward tempering this menace.

Cultivate and capture a culture of concern for the children.

This can be done by being a voice for the voiceless through the spoken and written word. Where the rights of children are swept aside, the media has no right to silence. Under the shawl of silence and shame, a child is hurting. Anything said can and will be used against the vile forces perpetuating the exploitation of children. It becomes a noble and worthwhile act to make noise, to create awareness, to encourage alertness, to foster vigilance, to generate debate, to form advocacy groups, to campaign against all forms of child abuse, to focus on life-enhancing skills, to author a sustained child protection series, support victims, to expose violators, to prepare and place parents and care-givers in the posture of prevention. Enormous work can be done by a specialist reporter who will devote time to this particular issue. The media is poised to propel positive change in the prevention of child abuse, and the protection of children. The media is an agent of social change. Extensive work done by the Glasgow Media Group and the Centre of Mass Communications Leister University support this truth.

From the statistics, the reality is simply this - the next child to be abused may be yours. No one is immune.

Published word and image leaves its mark, whether divine or decadent. The media and by extension advertisers need to be sensitive about the images that are imbedded.

Where there is darkness, light is needed. The media can assist to illuminate this present darkness. The media can give information, and clear guidelines to take necessary action, the instructive approach will be constructive. Instruction is one of the ways to ensure prevention, with an aim of keeping a semblance or order in the lives of children.

Lumen - light-giving body, emission of light – these awards celebrated tonight are vital in sending the right message to both media practitioner and audience, in saying efforts to highlight the plight of children and the need for their protection will be rewarded.

In its function to illuminate, to shed light on a subject and provide light in a dark place, the media can mobilize the public, hold sustained campaigns, expose dereliction of duty, and transform minds. Child protection needs to be part of the editorial agenda of media houses, a subject in its own right worthy of space and coverage, not seen as a sub-set of health, crime or social affairs. A child protection desk is welcome, with journalists assigned. The peculiar and complex nature of child abuse and child protection, the rigours of investigation, sensitivity in presentation, need for follow-up features, information on various services, triggering intelligent debate, finding creative ways to enlighten and instruct audiences requires devotion of a diligent journalist.

The media has the power to enlighten and illuminate in the area of child protection. It is a power to be engaged in preventing the torment in and termination of the lives of children.

In this wonderful country we should be able to look directly in the eyes of every and any child and say with triumph – “You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars, you have a right to be here!”

Deborah Jean Baptiste-Samuel
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