

## The Role of The Mass Media In The Promotion Of Child Rights

Birara Gebru\*

### Introduction

Respect for human dignity and the rights of the child are world public concerns: they are concerns of all peoples irrespective of location, culture, religion, race or sex. Any advocacy work to strengthen and broaden the scope of respect for conventions all over the globe necessitates utilization of means that can help generate, store, reproduce and disseminate information instantly. The means that can help fulfill these requirements are the mass media.

It is common experience that children are liked by their parents, relatives and the community at large. Their helplessness and innocence command our care for them; their love and belongingness attract our attention; their growth and prospect arouse our expectations. These are but good feelings we have toward our children. Blended with these favorable feelings, however, there are also longstanding, deep-rooted traditional malpractices that lead to numerous forms of child neglect, exploitation and other abuses.

In the presence of this kind of mixed feelings toward the child, the favorable attitude may seem to sugar-coat and hide-under the numerous natural and man-made calamities. Information dissemination devices recently innovated, however, have helped to reveal pockets of violence against children. These days many are well aware about the malpractices that children are subjected to.

Increased awareness and understanding about the ill-conditions that made children to be helpless victims of the adult dominated world have initiated and led to agreements of international acceptance.

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The 1989 UN convention of "The rights of the Child" with its 54 Articles is a recent development of the international agreement. Delegates of over 180 states have signed the agreement to respect statements of the convention on "Child Rights". To achieve this, the content of the convention has to be highlighted by the mass media besides its promotion by the use of other forms of human communication.

### **Types of Human Communication**

Man has developed through time various communication types progressively. The five commonly mentioned types are:

*Intrapersonal Communication* is the communication interaction that place with in ONE individual.

*Interpersonal Communication* is the face to face communication between individuals or groups.

*Organizational Communication* the formal communication that takes place in an organization.

*Mediated (Media) Communication* is communication at a distance using technical devices, and

*Mass Communication* is the communication interaction between institution and the unknown mass audience. Like media communication technical devices are used to cover the distance.

### **Components of Mass Communication**

Mass Communication is a very complex process. It includes a number of components that operate together for common end result. According to the HUB model the components are:

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- Communicators* the producers of content to be consumed by audience.
- Codes* the various symbol modes (image, sound or word), which are expected to evoke meaning in the consumer.
- Gatekeepers* decision makers about what content should reach the audience including the makers of the code. They are supervisors of content and the keeps of the faith or standard.
- Mass Media* sophisticated technical device operated by professionals to multiply and distribute content adding velocity and amplitude.
- Regulators* controllers outside the mass media institutions like courts, government commissions, consumers, public pressure groups who follow laws or regulations.
- Filters* Frames of reference through which audiences receive messages. They are the eyeglasses through which we view the world. There are many filters such as informational, physical, psychological and cultural that affect individuals ability to handle content.
- Audience* the relatively large, heterogeneous, anonymous receivers who are physically and emotionally separated from the communicator.

## **Mass Media and Child Rights Convention**

Apparently, conventions are initiated, deliberated, agreed upon and signed by few delegated individuals. Its practice, however, involves families, schools communities and the general public. To be fully accepted and practiced by the masses, information about conventions (agreements) need to be disseminated immediately and convincingly. These are the main functions of mass media. Word-of-mouth or face-to face communication would be a very slow process open to numerous distortions to reach the culturally segmented world. As such, it need to be mass communicated for effective and wide impact. Mass media avails itself as the sole best means of reproducing and immediate distribution of information world wide. Public opinion is shaped by ideas, information and presentations provided by the mass media.

Conventions on the Rights of the Child, by its very intent to be respected by all, is a mass communication content i.e. it must be distributed to the mass society. Thus its practice can not materialise without mass media. It need to be printed, broadcast verbally or visually or disseminated through other means to reach the world wide audience.

Mass media is often understood as the technical means through which mass communication takes place. It is a vital part of the mass communication process whereby unspecialized, impersonalized information is distributed to a very wide audience using media technology advanced technical device. Mass media may include:

- Print media - newspapers, magazines, books, pamphlets and any other technical devices that carry messages to the masses in a way they are appealing to the sense of sight.

- Electronic media of (a) audio-content presentations (i.e. radio, audio recordings and others that appeal to the sense of hearing, and (b) audio-visual content presentation (i.e. television, video recording, motion picture and others that appeal to both senses of sound and sights).

What makes a technical device a mass medium is not the nature of the instrument as such but the creation of an impersonal relationship between the communicator and the anonymous mass audience. Considering the conventions of "Child Rights" the content is impersonal (does not deal with specific children) and is expected to reach peoples of all State parties. This is depicted under Article 42 which reads "State parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the convention widely known by *appropriate and active means* to adults and children alike, (emphasis mine). The convention has to be mass communicated and the process involves many activities.

The reception of messages may result in reactions in the receivers. The reaction of receivers to a message is called "Feedback". It is a very useful mechanism of revealing receivers' understanding about the message. Otherwise the human communication act would have been a "hidden game"-little known about what happens in the mind of the receiver. The degree of achievement of what is intended or the fidelity of the communication process can be checked only through the feed back.

Noises can interfere and distort intended end results. Barriers (noises) of mass communication can stem from the operation of any one of the components mentioned above. Cultural differences, prejudice, ignorance, poverty, mental set, lack of empathy, distorted presentations, are but a few of the common barriers. Noises can be minimized through the joint effort of all components of mass communication. No one component can do it all by itself. However,

when used efficiently, the contribution of mass media to the promotion of "Child Rights" can be immense.

### **What Can Mass Media Do?**

Mass media use technical devices. There is nothing good or bad about the devices used. Defects in devices are rectified before they are put into use. The good or bad is in the application. All the other components of mass communication will directly affect the operation of mass media. Our discussion here, therefore, will deal with the ideal. It may give the impression of mass media as being flawless although practice usually does not prove this to be true all the time. However, if used properly, mass media have a lot to contribute.

The main contributions of mass media in promoting convention of Child Rights can be categorized under the fixative, distributive, manipulative and expressive uses of mass media.

### **The Fixative Use of Mass Media**

Ideas are produced by individuals and agreement on ideas are reached by a group of people at a given time. The ideas produced and consents reached are given life and permanency by storing them for later use. Mass media devices helped us store the Convention of Child Rights ratified in 1989. Books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, recorded the word message of the convention to be read world over. Television, motion pictures and photographs recorded the historical documents and gave the exposure of the convention and end-less life-time to be viewed at any time and place when one so wishes. The advantage, in these cases, is fixture for permanency of content and events on soft ware materials.

Additionally, presentation of recorded materials can also give a vivid view of events, such as the UN decision procedure on the

convention; examples of child abuses that occur at different places and times; examples of proper treatment of children by communities; and the like. Most mass media devices present content to individuals and not to groups. Television, radio, books and the like present information visually and in sound to individuals and help to fix content in the mind of receivers; give vivid impressions and thus help to be remembered for a very long period of time.

Our behaviour is shaped by the information provided by mass media. Our knowledge about "Child Rights" is based on what we have read from printed materials or from what we have heard when we tuned into broadcasts. When the content is of world concern, mass media remains to be the sole information source. One can say if there is no mass media there will be no convention to be accepted world wide in a given time.

### **The Distributive Use of Mass Media**

What are stored in print and/or audio visual form of the Conventions of Child Rights can be reproduced innumerable multiplied to cover all the 180 and above state parties using different codes, languages and arrangements. This reproduction capacity of mass media give velocity of distribution. Although some are slower than others to reach the mass audience, (i.e. print compared to radio or TV), the mass media have given rise to degree of extending the strength of our senses. Hardly does any conflict of abuse pass our attention these days because of the presence of tele devices; i.e. telephone, telegraph, tele fax, television etc. New developments add up to the strength and width of information distributions.

The distributive capacity of mass media can favorably be used to reproduce and disseminate Child Rights information into and within member states.



Radio can reach the unreachable and cross borders and inform people about child rights. It can provide forum for public discussion which may culminate in favourable action. The credibility that people have attached to specific medium, can be used in favour of helping people understand Child Rights, and it can help mobilise the populace against all forms of child abuses and neglect.

Mass media can also be used to assist children learn about their rights and to stand against violation of their rights. In developed countries, the mass media provide children with hot line telephone numbers to help them report any violent treatment. Mass media can also act as a socialising agent in shaping behaviour of children. The impact of mass media is not yet fully explored, but one can generalise that it can help promote Child Rights and assist children to be fruitful members of the global village that media have created.

### **The Manipulative Use of Mass Media**

The advantages of mass media under this category stem from the strength of the technical and expertise mix. The sophisticated devices used in mass media are produced and effectively put to use by professional experts. The technical strength of the devices also help professionals to manipulate sequence and make-up events in producing valid programs. The content of the Conventions of Child Rights, can be organised and recognised with amplification, given strength of attract and hold attention of viewers. African Network for the Prevention of and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN), for example, has the newsletter that produces articles in visualised presentation on children's rights. The organisation of content attracts attention and grips one to read more of it and retain better.

The technical devices have the strength to reduce, or enlarge or control the speed of events, to slow down, speed up or freeze them.

Sequences can be changed, juxtaposed and superimposed. The hidden can be animated; and the very far away can be brought to close view. Action can, directly, be recorded, dramatised or recreated. Effects (both sound and visual) can be added. The mixture of all these can make the presentation more real than the reality. This strength can be used to promote Child Rights in attractive, convincing and influential way. The abuse and neglect of the child can also be presented to the public with its gruesome details, in an attention compelling, emotion gripping manner as a result of the manipulation applied in the programme production process.

### **The Expressive Use of Mass Media**

Mass media use man-made devices, so refined to help man overcome a number of his limitations. They have helped him express intent more vividly, more attractively and more remunerably. The expressive use of media combines all the advantages mentioned above. Permanent storage and reproduction, wide distribution, manipulation of various expertise and technical abilities, all contribute to present best content to the audience.

The media help to present content according to the specific necessities of state parties in terms of informational, psychological, and cultural acceptance or presentation by members.

Best samples of both positive practices of Child Rights and negative attitudes or practices toward children can be presented to the public in unforgettable way. A short radio or TV drama can demonstrate positive child treatment which can linger in the mind or views for a long period to time. As such, the expressive characteristics of mass media could help promote the respect for the Right of the Child. Unlike print media, radio, TV and motion pictures can communicate

with illiterate people. Some of them can serve as universal languages.

### **Level of Mass Media Use**

Mass media can be used at different levels of area coverage. The widest use of mass media is observed when the content is meant for international audience as is the case during World Foot Ball Cup Competition, Olympics and the like.

The most common mass media use is observed at national levels, such as: Radio Ethiopia, Addis Zemen, Ethiopian Television Broadcast, etc. Mass media at this level address people in a given country. Of course mass media can pass through walls and cross borders without limit. Cultural and language differences may be the barriers for mass media use at this level.

There is also mass media use at community or institution level. Local radio stations and 'school mini media' are examples of this kind.

Effective use of the potential of mass media embedded in its technical and expertise mix will surely benefit the attempt to promote Child Rights' Convention at all the above levels.

### **Limitations of Mass Media**

Attempts to change the attitudes of people incur many obstacles. One out of these is the limitation of the technical devices used to recreate and distribute content. Primarily, the complex technology is liable to a number of technical failure. Where there is no power, proper maintenance and efficient personnel, mass media presentation is distorted. The programme production is a centralised process and demands conformity to common understanding, while the expected consumers are scattered, fluid, divorced and heterogeneous. As such, it fails to satisfy individual needs and also

overlooks inconveniences of individuals or groups. Moreover, the feedback may be too slow to reach the source to the correct on time. Furthermore, mass media are more likely to reinforce and legitimise established ideas than to persuade people to change existing attitude or behaviour. Mass media can not do the advocacy of Child Rights all alone. They have to comply with other types of communication especially interpersonal and face-to-face communication in the promotion of Child Rights.

### **Final Remark**

All in all, mass media, as a very useful component of mass communication, have numerous contributions to develop understanding about Child Rights. They lead to acceptance and practice, to disseminate conventions world wide that can lead people to favourable action, and to give the convention prolonged life time through various recordings.

Limitations prevail but the contributions or advantages of mass media in the promotion of Child Rights by far out weigh the former.

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