

The Oslo Challenge and beyond

A view from the inside

Mike Jempson

Director, The MediaWise Trust
Senior Lecturer (Journalism), University of the West of England
Visiting Professor in Media Ethics, University of Lincoln

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Imagine Silvio Berlusconi, Conrad Black, Bill Gates, Ted Turner, Rupert Murdoch, Steven Spielberg and the chief executive officers of AOL, Bertelsmann, MTV, Time Warner, Viacom and the Walt Disney Company all in one room. Now imagine what a group of girls and boys who had created their own media outlets in Albania, Armenia, Brazil, Cambodia, India, Palestine, Poland, Uganda, Vietnam, Zambia might say to them. Hold that thought...

Now consider what the media moguls might say to a gathering of heads of state and policy-makers alongside the Executive Director of UNICEF and her Goodwill Ambassadors, when confronted with demands for fair and accurate representation of young people and more opportunities for children to engage with the media.

That was one of the scenarios envisaged by former journalist Dr June Kane when she was given the task of organising what was to become The Oslo Challenge.

The origins of the Challenge stretch back to a theme day held by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1996 – to explore relationships between children and the media. At the time the vice-chair of the CRC was the Swedish diplomat

Thomas Hammarberg, now the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights. Another former journalist, this was an issue close to his heart. He encouraged the creation of a working group to explore a more positive relationship between young people and the media and counter a prevailing view that in general the media was, if anything, harmful to children. Among those taking part was Aidan White, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ).

He was persuaded that the IFJ should not only attend the Stockholm World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in 1997, but should make an intervention for the first time - to acknowledge that journalists are not just detached observers but through their work are 'players' in the field of children's rights. At the event he drew attention to the special role of journalists and the mass media in reporting offences against children and informing civil society about the political and social issues raised by child abuse.

In recognition of their dual role, media professionals were singled out in the final declaration and encouraged 'to develop strategies which strengthen the role of the media in providing information of the highest quality, reliability and ethical standards concerning all aspects of commercial sexual exploitation'. (Stockholm Agenda for Action, Item 3.k, 28/8/1996). The IFJ then undertook to promote co-operation between journalists and other media professionals in the defence and promotion of the rights of children.

At the time the journalism ethics charity PressWise, (now called MediaWise) was planning a conference to examine the problems facing journalists who try to expose the sexual abuse of children. I had been working on a TV programme investigating organised abuse networks and was concerned at the political and legal obstacles that prevented us from telling the full story. We were unable to use material that might have warned parents and children about real dangers in the midst. At around this time, film-maker Peter Kosminsky was under attack for his groundbreaking drama-doc *No Child of Mine*; and Vivienne Westwood was parading her latest adult fashions on pubescent girls just to demonstrate that they would look sexy even on 13 year olds.

Our Child Exploitation and the Media Forum (London, 11 March 1997), presided over by Elizabeth Lawson QC, Chair of the Family Law Bar Association, became the UK's response to Stockholm. As a result PressWise was commissioned by the IFJ to survey what journalism codes of conduct around the world had to say about reporting children. When the Norwegian

government convened an International Conference about Child Labour later that year (Oslo, 27-30 October) I was asked to represent the IFJ.

We successfully pressed for the inclusion of two clauses in the Conference Declaration, signed by some 30 governments, identifying the media as 'players' rather than mere observers of social mobilisations around the issue of child labour. Almost immediately the IFJ engaged with the International Labour Organisation in promoting the Global March Against Child Labour through its affiliates, and won backing from UNICEF for a global project on media engagement in children's rights.

I was appointed the IFJ's Media Child Rights Officer and began drafting Guidelines for Reporting on Children, which were presented in draft form at the IFJ's triennial Congress in Brazil (Recife, 2 May 1998).

In the same year UNICEF commissioned PressWise to produce a manual on children's rights for journalists. They had in mind a substantial loose-leaf training manual, but we insisted on producing a tiny pocket-book packed full of story ideas. *The Media and Children's Rights* has been translated into more than a dozen languages and remains in use a decade later. (A revised second edition was published in 2005). Denise Searle, who worked on it with me, later became Chief of UNICEF's Internet, Broadcast and Image Section in New York.

By now UNICEF and the Norwegian Government were in discussion about how best to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the launch of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Taking their lead from the CRC working party the plan was to highlight the positive by bringing together media professionals and youthful media activists and develop networks that could make a lasting impact for the good of young people.

For the Norway the key player was Trond Waage, who served as Children's Ombudsman from 1996 – 2004 and is now a Senior Fellow at the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence.

June Kane, who had been UNICEF spokesperson at the Stockholm conference and was now a consultant with the International Labour Organisation and UNICEF on child labour and trafficking, was hired to coordinate things. Although we had been working in parallel on similar themes for several years, our paths had yet to cross. We eventually met in Slovakia when UNICEF commissioned June to scrutinise the training programme we had devised

around the handbook.

She roped me in to the Oslo process. I prepared some ideas for the event and we spent hours on the phone talking through the possible and the probable, the potential and the pitfalls. There were planning meetings with Trond, Thomas, Cecilia von Feilitzen from the UNESCO Clearinghouse at Nordicom, and UNICEF officials, but much of the thinking was done over the phone, and the fledgling internet. June believed that we could only reposition the debate about the role of media in children's lives if we could get the top key media players committed.

She had less than a year to get the media moguls into a room with youthful media activists and their adult advocates. She foresaw a cascading effect. The top echelons of the industry should hear from young people, especially those whose lives were dominated by conflict and poverty conflict, about the liberating and empowering potential value of media for them. And if the industry could also see that governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations were in place to help promote media literacy, youth journalism and creative media production – perhaps children's rights might be enhanced through investment in child-friendly media.

June's grand plan did not work out quite as she had hoped. For whatever reason the top dogs were not persuaded to attend, but on 18 & 19 November 1999 some 30 media professionals, academics, UNICEF officers and Ambassadors and, most importantly, young media activists did get together in Oslo. We spent many hours in debate, discussion and workshops not just about the role of media in alerting the world to children's rights, but how young people's engagement in media activities could in itself fulfil the aims of the Convention.

It was an amazing experience for me – and not just because human rights activists like singer Harry Belafonte, South African poet Denis Brutus, and Lisbet Palme, the wife of the assassinated Swedish premier, were among the participants.

It was the children who made it. One of those who impressed me was Mary Phiri who ran a successful magazine called *Trendsetter* in Zambia with her sister and some friends. As Editor-in-chief she had stood up to pressure from American donors who wanted her to drop references to abortion and sexual advice at a time when the HIV virus and AIDS should have been top of the media agenda. Another young man ran a media club in Sao Paolo

which had begun to attract street children. They had come up with a novel way of finding out about life for young people in the Amazon rainforest. They posed questions and raised issues through a nationally broadcast radio programme, and received in return crude hand-made newspapers with words and pictures cut and pasted from magazines and sent down-river weeks later. They were truly remarkable documents, and the young people too were inspiring.

Never having met before, and from all five continents they employed the shower caps they were amused to find in their hotel rooms in a piece of theatre about 'the Vivienne Westwood look of the plastic generation'. Set in a cave it featured acid rain, mobile phones, a condom demonstration, school uniforms, the evil eye and the notion of built-in transmitters telling people what to do – literally mind-blowing. When we parted we were all in tears.

Meanwhile across Oslo a series of intense media workshops took place, some literally in tents, in preparation for a gala day of performance and speeches to celebrate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on Saturday 20 Nov. 1999 in Oslo City Hall.

The day itself was cold, and wet. The City Hall where the Nobel Award ceremony takes place gradually filled up. There were displays of media products made at the workshops and Trond, resplendent in national costume as master of ceremonies, informed us that there were three queens present, along with UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy (1995-2005).

The event did not get off to an auspicious start. There were the inevitable technical glitches with a big screen, then a youth dance theatre troop performed their own interpretation of the Rights of the Child, or rather breaches of those rights. So graphic were some of the scenarios that quite a few nervous middle-class parents hurried their distressed children outside.

The main instrument of the event however, was to be the Oslo Challenge document itself, painstakingly drafted in advance under June's supervision.

In many ways the document - a challenge to governments, media owners and practitioners, children's organisations, young people, their parents and teachers - was a testament to hope for the future. A hope not just for fair and accurate coverage of children, but for rejection of stereotypes, investment in media production by children and research into

the impact of media on children's lives. It was a call to 'everyone engaged in exploring, developing, monitoring, defining, directing and participating in the complex relationship between children and the media, to ensure that the overwhelming power of the media for good in the lives of children is identified, encouraged and supported, while the potential harmful effects are recognized and reduced'.

To quote its closing words 'anything is possible in a world where the media industry, voluntary sector, intergovernmental agencies, governments and civil society all want to pull in the same direction to create a better future for children – a future in which their relationship with the media will be pivotal.'

But it all began with disappointment. Few journalists turned up at Carol Bellamy's launch press conference, and the challenge did not 'go global' quite as we might have hoped. Perhaps in the minds of too many journalists – then and now – children are just 'tragic victims', 'cute little angels', 'nasty devils' or simply just irrelevant to the adult world.

Certainly it was difficult to persuade journalists everywhere that this was an agenda worth following up – even during the three years of consultations and training programmes among journalists around the world launched by the IFJ before a final version of their Guidelines could be adopted at the 2001 Congress in Seoul. Wherever we went the same stereotypes cropped up – and still do today, with monotonous regularity – if children got a look in to mainstream media at all, that is.

It was UNICEF, as ever, that kept the faith – backing the IFJ initiative and, when no-one else immediately responded to the Oslo Challenge, bringing together youth media activists from across the Baltic States, the Caucasus, Eastern and South Eastern Europe and Central Asia to form the Young People's Media Network (YPMN).

At the first 'brainstorming' session in Amsterdam (7-8 December 2001) I learned about intrepid youth journalists in Albania whose TV current affairs programme Troc was one of the most popular – exposing corruption and cruelty to children and getting the perpetrators sacked! As Denise Searle, now wearing her UNICEF hat, told the gathering "*Two of the most important components in building a democracy are participation of young people in society and a free media.*"

The most important thing for all these young people, apart from access to equipment and training, was the opportunity to be in touch with their peers in other countries. Rade Vrcakovski, a youth participant from Macedonia explained: *"We want to learn from each other so we can send a clear message to our people that we all have the same problems. We are the same people."*

Their curiosity, enthusiasm and inventiveness would put many journalists to shame. A voluntary Task Force helped the Network take off in February 2002. The YPMN still exists, but finding anyone willing to invest in these skills for the future has been the most difficult task.

UNICEF also sent PressWise trainers off around the region covered by the network to enthuse media professionals about working with children, and publishing material that would explain their rights and examine the shortcomings of their government's provision for children. As part of this process we would hold meetings with editors and sometimes policy-makers. We were always made welcome, but the big question was always 'What resources do you bring to help us make a difference for children?' In poor 'transitional' countries diverting scarce resources to the needs of children, especially their interest in media, was way down the agenda.

It was street and working children in Delhi who most powerfully got the message across to some of the media elite. We were training children from the Butterflies Project to run their own radio station, and leading journalists were invited to listen to their first programmes they had made, squatting on the floor in an egalitarian huddle.

The children described the way their trust and dignity had been trampled on by journalists whose only aim was to get the story they wanted. "You wouldn't answer personal questions about your lives if we asked you," said one child. "So what right have you to demand that we bare our souls?"

Some had worked out their own strategy – the media come with preconceived ideas, so tell them lies because that is what they want to hear. In consequence myths are perpetuated – an abnegation of the media's role. They also performed a stunning piece of street theatre about the way 'straight' society treated them. So impressed were the media professionals that it was eventually broadcast on national TV.

But for the most part the aftermath of Oslo was very dispiriting. Oslo had ended with a promise to produce examples of best practice to carry forward the challenge, resources to encourage others to get involved through that new thing - online networks. But funding was hard to come by.

It was two years before June and I again teamed up, this time with Loretta Hieber of Media Action International to collect the data and work out a sustainability strategy. Loretta and I favoured a website which could become a resource and a focal point for anyone interested in any aspect of children and the media. It was Loretta who came up with the splendid acronym by which it has become known: Media Activities and Good Ideas by with and for Children - MAGIC!

We collected information about the aims, achievements, costs, difficulties, funders, participants, resources and structures of a range of media projects from around the world. I wrote a series of short papers to introduce key topics, and the website finally went live in 2003. In effect the YPMN now went global through MAGIC. Although it has developed life of its own through the MAGIC network, there were insufficient fund for the website to stand alone and it remains a part of the UNICEF website at www.unicef.org/magic. It has become a showcase for some extraordinary developments in children's media including the remarkable 60-second videos. There are now more than 2,000 of these films accessible online at www.theoneminutesjr.org.

The MAGIC network is moderated by one man Chris Schuepp, who has devoted over 5 years to promoting youth media around the world.

He is not alone, of course. Children and the media is a fertile ground for researchers, practitioners and media activists. There are flagship initiatives like the Prix Jeunesse www.prixjeunesse.de, UNICEF's Voices of Youth, www.unicef.org/voy and the World Radio Forum www.worldradioforum.org with its (Children's) Radio Manifesto, launched at the 4th World Summit on Media & Children in Rio de Janeiro in 2004; there are projects like Radio Kidocracy at Bush Radio www.bushradio.co.za in South Africa, Andi in Brazil www.andi.org.br, the Manana Youth Center in Armenia, www.mananayouth.org and so many, many, more kept alive by UNICEF, Plan International and Save the Children and their ilk.

And the debates and showcases go on. This summer (19-28 August 2009) sees the fourth annual International Youth Media Summit take place in Serbia. Next year the Sixth (triennial) World Summit on Media for Children takes place in Karlstad, Sweden (14-18 June 2010). In 2006 we had the first Youth Media Development Forum in Mali. It is great that interest and involvement is high, but it seems a pity to me that there is insufficient co-ordination and too much competition for status and scarce resources. The Oslo Challenge was that a thousand flowers bloom, but not so they strangle each other.

Perhaps most important of all, in the last decade children themselves, everywhere, have become far more adept at using communications technology than their parents. They realise the power that lies in their hands, and they will be taking us to places never dreamed of when the Oslo process began, ten years ago.

Related papers

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Child Rights Information Network, September 2006.

M. Jempson, ***How to report on children in crises***
Reuters AlertNet, July 2006

M. Jempson, ***The Media and Children's Rights***, (2nd edition) MediaWise/UNICEF 2005

M. Jempson, ***Slander, sentimentality or silence?***
in *childRIGHT*, Children's Legal Centre, University of Essex, 2005

M. Jempson, ***Children and Media - A Global Concern***
PressWise/IFJ Afrca & Asia Pacific, 2003

C. Barry & M. Jempson, ***Children and the Sex Tourism Trade: Awareness Training for Media Professionals***, Chapter in *Child Rights and the Media: Putting Children in the Right*, International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), 2002.

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M. Jempson & W. Norris, ***Information and Child Rights: The Challenge of Media Engagement***, IFJ, 1997

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