

MONITORING CHILDREN IN MAINSTREAM DAILY NEWSPAPERS

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Introduction

In order to have a better understanding of the way media covers and represents children, a monitoring report of the main six daily newspapers was carried out for the whole month of October. The daily newspapers were from mainstream media and the ones considered to have the largest number of sales. Since there are no official data on the sales of newspapers and their overall circulation, the selection of newspapers to monitor was made on the basis of private consulting with the editors-in-chief of the daily publications. The daily publications included in the monitoring report were: *Shekulli*, *Panorama*, *Standard*, *Gazeta Shqiptare*, *Korrieri*. During this time all the articles featuring, involving or affecting children were monitored. Children in this case were defined as those under 18 years of age. In order to have as a complete picture as possible, articles that did not focus especially on children but were related to them were also considered.

The analysis of the monitored articles was both quantitative and qualitative. The main topics that came up in these articles and hence were included in the analysis were children trafficking, domestic violence, education, juvenile crime and justice, etc. The total number of articles monitored was 99 articles for all six newspapers. Articles monitored did not include only news stories, but also editorials, features, brief news, etc. The articles' length varied from two paragraphs to a whole tabloid page, depending on the news. However, in general the articles on children were not central to the space of newspapers monitored and were related to some news event of the day. The number of articles per paper is the following:

Daily newspaper	Number of articles on children
Shekulli	28
Shqip	18
Panorama	13
Korrieri	17
Standard	9
Gazeta Shqiptare	14

These articles were monitored having in mind the UN Convention on Rights of the Child, the Oslo Challenge, and the Albanian Code of Ethics for journalists. The general

framework of these documents was used, but special attention was devoted to the ones that deal directly with media and its rights, responsibilities, and challenges when reporting on children.

In general, there was a sort of coherence with regard to the range of topics on children covered in the daily newspapers monitored. In fact, as it will be shown later, the news peg on reporting on kids was usually related to some press conference or report issued from some national or international organization. In this sense, there was a notable lack of spontaneous initiative to cover the children in the daily papers, with a few exceptions. In the same way, these newspapers also did not show any attempt to follow-up on these issues later, once the reports were released.

When trying to group the topics that are covered regarding children, several main trends are noticed in children reporting. More specifically, in terms of content the topics can be grouped in the following broad topics: juvenile crime and victims, education and health, and domestic violence. With a few exceptions, there were no features or investigative stories on other particular aspects of children life. In fact, the shortage of articles on children is indicative of the low priority of the coverage of this group in the daily newspapers. Another feature to consider in this regard is also the motivation for the published articles, namely press releases, events, or reports issued by the government, non-governmental organizations, or international organizations. Similarly, the reports on missing children, the use of children's quotes and interviews, and the photos and layout also help to understand the nature of media coverage of children in the daily newspapers. Since these are some of the prevailing trend in the general coverage of children in daily newspapers, it would be helpful to further study them in order to have a more complete picture of the reporting on children in general.

Children's problems and public figures

As it can be expected, children are rarely the center of the articles monitored. Instead, the grown-ups are always talking in their names, be it their parents, government representatives, human rights activists, experts, etc. As Mike Jempson points out: "Coverage of children rarely features in journalists' vocational training because, by and large journalists deal with adult themes in an adult world for an adult audience."¹ In an unusual manner, children in these articles are usually quoted in those cases when they witnessed some crime, and not in order to serve as mouthpiece of their own life and experience.

In fact, the lives of ordinary children are rarely depicted, investigated, or featured in the pages of these newspapers. One reason for this might be the nature of these publications, which rarely include feature stories, but just breaking news in most of the time. One exception that deserves mentioning in this regard is the extended story on education of kids in a village. This story, titled "Nobody can teach to Qeparo children," published in *Shekulli* on October 4, extends across two full pages of the newspaper and quotes not

¹ Jempson, Mike. "Slander, sentimentality or silence? What young people have to put up with from the media," p.2, quoted in http://www.mediawise.org.uk/display_page.php?id=896

only parents, but also kids. The article tackles the problem of lack of foreign language education in this school and the overall low quality of education. In fact, articles on education are frequent among the not-so-significant number of articles on children. What makes this article more special is that children are in fact quoted. Even though it is only one child who talks, at least there is an attempt to lend a voice to those who are most affected but, for different reasons, never have the chance to be heard.

As mentioned, it is a real challenge to find any articles where children are quoted and the above article is one of the few exceptions. What one can certainly find very easily is the presence or statements of government officials or human rights activists that talk on children and for children; whether it's on behalf or not, that is debatable. More specifically, such events as the release of a report on children, the celebration of an anniversary of a village of children in need, or any other similar event always make it to the news, featuring the respective statements of the involved politicians, ranging from the President, to the Speaker of Parliament, the Minister of Education, Minister of Justice, etc.

In this regard, October was an active month with events on children, including both government's and human rights activists' participation. As such, coverage on children was visible, but the real children were in fact lacking in the newspaper pages. So, major events during this month were the releases of two reports on children's situation: one from UNICEF on situation of kids and domestic violence, and the other on the alarming dropout rate of kids from schools. In this regard, high state representatives were widely and almost indiscriminately quoted by the newspapers under examination, while the voices and views of kids were totally absent. For example, in the event of the organization of a roundtable to present and discuss the findings of the report of UNICEF, all the newspapers quoted the findings of the report and the comments of the Speaker of Parliament, the Minister of Education, and the Minister of Justice on the report. For example, one such story was the one titled "Violence: One in seven children has contemplated suicide," published in *Standard*, on October 13, p.9. This dramatic title corresponds to the article explaining the findings of the UNICEF report as well as the recommendations that come with this report. In addition, the article features also the lengthy statements made by the above-mentioned politicians in this roundtable, which indicate the alleged attachment of these figures to the cause of children in need and the potential steps that the government has undertaken in this regard. More often than not, the newspapers also included photos of the politicians, thus enhancing their presence and visibility in this cause.

While the presence of these politicians in these articles cannot be judged and it is certainly a good sign that high-rank officials are involved in this important cause, their visibility is certainly disproportionate compared to that of the children themselves, who constitute the focus of the report. None of the articles published on this day in this report featured any children and their feedback or experience on the whole range of problems. More importantly, there were no follow-up stories on this topic, neither the following day, nor in the remaining part of the month.

This fact is indicative of the low importance attached to the stories on children, or even worse, of the way that children feature as a potential for improving the image of politicians or human rights activists in the media. In fact, international studies on coverage of children have shown: “media’s peculiar relationship with children: if they are not victims, tearaways or child soldiers, they are invisible.”²

In fact, the whole array of articles monitored testifies to this trend. Although it seems that much is being done to improve children’s situations, the children are almost absent in the articles. Human rights’ activists and different NGOs are always there, displaying the work they do; in some cases so are politicians, showing their support. However, the children’s voices, their problems and benefits they have had from the work being done are almost totally lacking.

For example, an article that falls into this category is the one titled “Foundation of Albanian Children: One more opportunity for sick children,” published in *Standard* on October 31, p.11. The article starts by indicating the importance of dealing with children in need:

“Child care needs special attention, not only from state bodies, but also from individuals and experts that contribute in this area. ... State institutions’ obligations in this direction are often preceded by the support and assistance of foreign organizations that give their contribution in our country for years now.”

The article then focuses on a particular organization, mentioning even the names of the founders and some of the members, and focusing then on the honorary head of the foundation, the wife of the Prime Minister. Due to the high profile of this person in the country and her own profession, her election as head of this foundation would seem more than appropriate and the aims and activities of the foundation more than noble ones. However, as the article draws to the end, the reader gets to be informed on the visit of the Foundation’s members in Italy and the details of their itinerary. More specifically:

“The aim of this visit was the establishment of relations and cooperation to assist sick Albanian children. The delegation had a meeting at the Municipality of Taormina, where it was received by the Mayor. Later on, the visit continued to the hospital “San Vincenzo” of Sirina, well-known for its services.”

Further details follow on the visit of the well-known delegation to Italy and the reader gets a picture of the capacities of the hospitals there and the efforts to cooperate in this area with Albania. On the other hand, the reader never is informed of any specific benefit or work done with children in Albania and how this visit could improve their life.

What further attracts the attention to closely monitor this article is also its writing style. More specifically, the way that it is drafted is very similar to a press release. It does not fail to mention the great contribution of this organization to Albanian children in general terms; it ranks the prominent members of the foundation; and it finally describes the detailed itinerary of the event, in this case the visit to Southern Italy. In addition, a photo

² Ibid, p. 4.

with the main members of the Foundation is also included. In this case, there is little distinction between this story and a press release that an organization would issue, rendering the information both not so attractive to the reader, and angled in a manner favorable to the organization, rather than to the public.

In a similar fashion, usually the activities of the different organizations that work in this area also feature as news, but the way they are written is more similar to a press release than to a news story or feature story on children and efforts to improve their situation. For example, such an event was the opening of a counseling line for children in need in Tirana. This service was provided for by the Center for Protection of Rights of Children, and serves to children that seek advice on how to deal with the problems they experience. While in itself a very good service, the way the news was offered to the reader clearly reveals that this act would hardly get any coverage if not backed and pushed for by the organization. In fact, the attribution to the organization is included even in the title: "Domestic violence, CRCA counseling line for children," (*Gazeta Shqiptare*, October 4, p.14.)

Other articles that fall into this category are the ones on a project on physically challenged children just completed by World Vision, that of an office established at the Municipality of Gjirokastra to assist children with the support of Terre Des Hommes, the opening of a Secretariat for children in need at the Ministry of Labour and Equal Opportunities, and so on. These kinds of articles are quite frequent on the pages of these daily newspapers; as it is often the case, the everyday children are missing.

In order to be fair to the overall coverage of children in these daily newspapers, it must be mentioned that some papers do make efforts to cover the children's problems, especially when it comes to education and health problems. In this respect, the newspapers chose to pay attention especially to the problems of infrastructure in education institutions and the way this affects the learning process. Such articles include: "Are the courtyards of our schools safe?"³ on the safety of children that learn in these institutions, "With books on the floor in the school without desks,"⁴ that addressed the need to improve the infrastructure of the schools, "Thirty children learn at home,"⁵ focusing on children whose school had been ruined, "Heating with gas should be removed from kindergartens,"⁶ "Tirana, kids learn sitting in chairs they brought from home,"⁷ "School directors in Dibra give the alarm: We have no heating,"⁸ "Dentists in schools since Communist times,"⁹ "Devoll, children from the Macedonian minority are left without education,"¹⁰ etc.

³ *Shekulli*, October 7, 2006, p. 18.

⁴ *Shekulli*, October 12, 2006, p.10.

⁵ *Gazeta Shqiptare*, October 13, 2006, p.23.

⁶ *Gazeta Shqiptare*, October 10, 2006, p.16.

⁷ *Shqip*, October 26, 2006, p.22.

⁸ *Shqip*, October 14, 2006, p.34.

⁹ *Shqip*, October 7, 2006, p.34.

¹⁰ *Shqip*, October 14, 2006, p.30.

In this way, covering such topics is a serious attempt from the media to expand the range of the children's problems and the topics that most affect them and the media deserves a special mentioning in this regard. However, these articles, despite the good will of bringing closer to the reader the problems of the children, they fail to increase the involvement of the children in the overall picture. For example, one article titled "Devoll, children of Macedonian minority are left without education," published in *Shqip*, addresses the problematic issue of the lack of teachers that could carry on the education process in Macedonian. However, the article never quotes any children, or parents for that matter; although it stands out from the crowd of other articles that are more general and more common in topics, the value of this information would certainly increase if any children were quoted on how the inability to go to school like other children of their age made them feel.

In the same way, in an article published in *Shqip* on October 7, titled "Dentists at schools since Communist times," the problem of health care service in schools is addressed, making note of the grave situation in this area. While giving detailed official data on the situation, the article only mentions the opinions of the children and the way they feel only in a brief and general manner: "Pupils that were asked in the capital if they take care of their teeth at school look at you in a surprised manner."¹¹ However, the article does not go any further, including any specific quotes from the persons asked, which would render the article more credible and the picture more complete.

Missing children

Another category of articles that seems to benefit the children and their media coverage is the one involving missing persons, more specifically missing children. These kinds of articles appear only in a limited number of newspapers. In fact, this is an interesting trend that needs more attention, since it reveals the mechanism working behind the priorities of selecting what to cover from children and what not. The cases of missing persons and children are still a problem in Albanian society. In this regard, there are a couple of TV shows that deal with the cases of these missing children and their fate. It is precisely these stories that make it to the pages of the newspapers, which is in fact indicative of the selection mechanism of issues that affect children that need to be covered in these papers. This element becomes even more telling when considering that the papers that publish these articles belong to the same media groups that own the televisions that produce these shows, like *AITV* and *Shekulli* newspaper, or *News24 TV* and *Gazeta Shqiptare* newspaper, or *Top Channel* and *Shqip* daily newspaper. True, the papers do devote space to this worrying problem, but in a way this is not an independent investigation and reporting trend; it is something they get ready from the TV they are affiliated to and that in a way increases the visibility of the television show, apart from addressing the problem¹².

¹¹ *Shqip*, "Dentist in schools since Communist times," October 7, 2006, p.34.

¹² Such stories include "Xhevahir Gezdari was kidnapped for trafficking purposes," *Gazeta Shqiptare*, October 3, 2006, p.12, "The Prosecution Office reopens the investigation for the missing 12-year old," *Gazeta Shqiptare*, October 17, 2006, p.14, "'Juliana's kidnapping about to be revealed," *Shekulli*, October 8, 2006, p.21, "Mystery and anxiety for Juliana Hoxha," *Shekulli*, October 15, 2006, p.12.

Other stories

Apart from the above-mentioned topics, there is another category of stories that involves children but does not fall into any of the above categories. These stories are mainly published in a weekly supplement that daily Panorama devotes to psychology, and cover such topics as divorce and children, parents facing the sicknesses of their children, working mothers and children, etc. They usually include surveys or research data from foreign sources. For example:

“According to one of the latest psychological surveys, employed wives do not affect negatively their children. This finding derives from interviews with 12,600 persons aged 14-22.”¹³

In a way, these articles are a kind of guide or counsel for parents and what they should have in mind when finding themselves in these situations. So, their assistance or attention to children is certainly arguable, since these are often phrased in psychological or scientific terms, certainly targeted at grown-ups. In this way, coverage of children in the country or their presence and participation in daily newspaper is certainly not improved.

Children’s voices

As mentioned above, the voices of the children are rarely present in the stories on children and oddly enough, the media do include them when children have happened to witness some crime. During October one child was a witness in crime and another one found a corpse. Although most of the newspapers mentioned these facts, only one of them actively pursued the track of interviewing children on these traumatic experiences and covering them on their pages. This paper published interviews with these two children and also pixelated photos of these children¹⁴. Although these children’s voices add to the almost absent voices of children in the pages of the paper, they also raise ethical questions on whether it is appropriate to interview children on this and make them relive the trauma they experienced. With regard to identification of the minors, one of them is fully identified, name and surname, whereas the witness of the crime is identified as Enea Z. Hence, the decision to identify these persons certainly poses serious ethical questions, especially with regard to the witness of crime, since it could even endanger the child. In this case the newspaper certainly has given higher priority to the ability to provide a fuller picture on the crimes than to the need to protect children and witnesses, and this definition of public interest test is certainly arguable.

Photos and layout

Photos and layout are also important in the overall monitoring of children coverage in the daily newspapers. Images can be very helpful or harmful to the overall coverage,

¹³ “Working mothers do not affect negatively their children,” *Panorama*, October 15, 2006, p.15.

¹⁴ These stories are “I thought it was a doll, I freaked out when I saw the body,” *Shekulli*, October 22, 2006, p.9 and “The masked killer shot Dritan behind his head and left calmly,” *Shekulli*, October 21, 2006, p.8.

depending on the choices the editors make in this regard. In general, the newspapers have respected the rule of not identifying minors with photos, or at least of covering their eyes in case pictures are present. One flagrant case when this rule was not respected was that of the abandoned baby in Pogradec, whose picture was shown by almost every newspaper, but one. True, it was a two-day baby, who does not understand anything now; yet, the ethical question of what she will feel like if she sees old papers and her photo in the future remains. Even more so when doing a public interest test: it is unclear what is the real public interest in viewing this photo, since the photo shows just another baby, with nothing different compared to others.

Most of the papers seem to use archive photos when covering children, due to different reasons, economic, professional, etc. In most cases, but by no means in all of them, these photos showed pictures of children with hidden or blurred eyes. Exceptions were made for the stories of missing children, which, in a way, make sense, given the hope that somebody might identify the missing persons and notify the paper or authorities. However, only daily *Korrieri* put a caption saying that the photos used in general were from the archive and served for purposes of illustration only.

With regard to layout, in general the newspapers have now established their own layout styles. In general the newspapers use a lot of boxes, tables, or side stories, which help organize the information in a reader-friendly manner. This is especially visible when considering the stories on the releases of UNICEF reports, which contained a lot of data and was difficult to read in the text. Instead, all newspapers used boxes and sidebars to help explain the situation.

Conclusion

In general, it cannot be concluded that media coverage of children in the daily newspapers is a serious, in-depth, and completely ethical one. The efforts to cover children and give them a real voice and the place they deserve are very limited, for different reasons. Instead, state bodies, politicians, and NGOs do the talking for the children.

In addition, even when children make it to the pages of the newspapers, their coverage often poses serious ethical questions with regard to the topics covered, their identification, the manner of interviewing, and other conditions journalists should have in mind when dealing with minors. Overall, it can be said that the sensational, patronizing, and insufficient coverage prevail, rather than a correct and coverage of children, free of stereotypes.

Recommendations for improvement of children coverage in the media

- Journalists should increase children coverage in the media and expand it with analysis of the children's situation;
- Journalists should reflect on the ethical dilemmas when interviewing children and the circumstances of the interview;
- Journalists should approach children as any other person, and not in a paternalistic, sensational, victimizing, or exploiting way;
- Having in mind all the due care when dealing with children, journalists should attempt to increase media presence and visibility of children;
- Journalists should pay special attention to the language and terms used, especially when covering juvenile crime and justice;
- Media should improve and further work on usage of photos, archives of images, and captions;
- Journalists should try to involve experts on children and their opinions and data on a more frequent basis;
- Journalists should always apply the public interest test as defined by the Code of Ethics when making decisions on interviewing children and publishing information on them.