

To Often Victims or Perpetrators

Youth Representation on
Local TV News

A Report by the Grand Rapids
Institute for Information Democracy
GRID



GRID



Methodology

From October 8, 2001 through December 7, 2001 GRIID taped the news from three GR-based TV stations; WOOD TV 8 (6 & 11pm), WZZM 13 (6 & 11pm) and WXMI FOX 17 (10pm).

We documented the total number of stories from each newscast and those that were youth focused. By youth focused, we mean stories that were about youth (events, achievements, crime, educational), but not stories that were included in the sports segment. We also did not include stories that were about school board meetings, teacher salaries, or school closings, unless students were part of the story. Some policy issues were also included, since they were stories that were more specific to student activities or general social well being for youth.

We then included some content analysis that looked at youth representation, youth voices and positive/negative portrayals of youth. In addition, we added a list of recommendations to the media for future coverage of youth and youth issues. These recommendations were determined by the input of youth and youth advocates that attended a briefing session on the data and summary findings.

The ages we included in this study of youth were from 1st grade through 12th grade.

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Introduction

For decades it has been convenient for politicians and journalists to scapegoat youth for many of the ills that plague our society. "Today's Youth" are unquestionably more promiscuous, more drugged out and more violent than any previous generation if we take seriously the sensationalized reporting that is fed to us daily. Yet, when you take the time to seriously investigate what youth are doing and how they are being represented in news coverage, you start to see a different picture.

Researcher Mike Males has written four books in recent years that critique the popular perceptions of youth as represented in the media. One of his books *Framing Youth: 10 Myths about the Next Generation* (Common Courage Press 1999) contends that youth are less violent, using fewer drugs and are *not* as sexually promiscuous as the previous generation. Males believes that there are still significant

problems that youth face in our society, but the number one indicator for youth problems is poverty.....not sex, drugs, guns or the video games that journalists tend to blame for "our violent youth."

Our 60-day study of youth on three local TV News stations confirms much of what Males reveals in his studies. Our conclusions are also similar to those in a recent Children Now study that looked at youth coverage in multiple TV news markets across the country.

<http://www.childrennow.org/media/local-news-study/local-news-01.pdf>.



Here is a summary of our findings:

- 1) Even though youth make up an average 28% of the population in the counties in the viewing area, they make up only 5% of the news stories.
- 2) In all 3 stations surveyed more than half of all youth stories were violence-based/negative (WOODTV8 - 53%, WZZM 13 - 72%, FOX 17 - 68%).
- 3) Youth stories that received follow-up coverage (multiple stories) almost exclusively were violence-based/negative.
- 4) Even when covering youth stories, Adult Voices were heard more frequently than Youth Voices (WOODTV8 - 43 to 27, WZZM 13 - 29 to 21, FOX 17 - 17 to 2).

What might be the consequences of these limited and negative stories about youth? As we have pointed out in other studies, viewer exposure to these images and messages over a period of time can have significant effects. The limited and mostly negative representation of youth could have damaging effects on youth, particularly on youth self-esteem.

More importantly, how will these images and messages effect the perception of adults, since youth are not large consumers of local TV news? Adults will create public policy or endorse public policy, and if their understanding of youth issues is shaped by local TV news, it is reasonable to conclude that the policies created may be inadequate or detrimental to youth.

These are some of the questions to keep in mind as we provide some content analysis in the next section.

Data

Total number of stories (6 & 11pm newscasts) - 1,003
Total number of youth focused stories - 59
Percentage of total stories that were youth focused - 5.9%
Violence/disaster-based stories - 31
Positive stories - 28
Policy stories - 3



Total number of stories (6 & 11pm newscasts) - 970
Total number of youth focused stories - 53
Percentage of total stories that were youth focused - 5.5%
Violence/disaster-based stories - 38
Positive stories - 11
Policy stories - 5



Total number of stories (10pm only) - 648
Total number of youth focused stories - 28
Percentage of total stories that were youth focused - 4.3%
Violence/disaster-based stories - 19
Positive stories - 9
Policy stories - 1



Youth on Local TV News

If you spend time with youth these days it is easy to see two things: 1) they live in some precarious times - pressures, educational expectations, consumerism, economic pressures, etc. and 2) they do some pretty amazing things. In many ways these two aspects are not mutually exclusive. Young people do amazing things in spite of the pressures of growing up in the 21st century.

When kids do good things

All three stations survey had fewer positive stories about youth than negative. Of the three stations WOODTV8 did a considerable better job with numbers, with just under 50% of their youth stories with a positive message.

(see data on previous page)

Not surprising, the majority of positive youth stories were related to youth response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. All three stations did stories on local high school students who went to New York to volunteer with relief efforts (WOOD - 1, WZZM - 5, WXMI - 1). The Girl Scouts were featured on 3 occasions (WOOD - 2, WZZM - 1) for remembering the victims of 9/11 by planting trees. The only other positive story that received coverage on more than one station was about the students on the Mayor's Youth Council. (WZZM -1, WXMI -1)

Even though all of these stories were positive, they tended to be very limited in scope. It is easy to run a story that shows kids cleaning up something. It makes for great visuals to see kids hauling trash

somewhere. But what would it have done to the story if the youth were asked whether or not they learned something about Habitat for Humanity or why people are "needy?" In other words, were there lessons learned?

Several stories were done which did address some very creative and courageous acts by young people. WOODTV8 and WXMI17 did run a story about a diversity conference for teens in Holland, but only WZZM13 had a story about how working for racial justice can change ones life. The story involved a Muslim teenager who was committed to

Positive Stories that were covered on only one station:

- Cub Scouts visit veterans
- Girl who recovered from car crash graduates
- Girl dancer in Nutcracker play
- Student day at East GR
- First graders go shopping at Meijers for "needy"
- Youth volunteer for Habitat for Humanity cleanup during lunch-hour
- Disabled kids get bikes

sharing her values with others in a very public way despite the racist backlash against Muslims since 9/11. The story also demonstrated that she wanted to expand her own knowledge of other cultures by learning and teaching Spanish to fellow students.

Another story that reflected youth courage and passion was about a group of students in Muskegon. They organized themselves in response to school budget cuts and held a public demonstration expressing their dissatisfaction with the consequences it would bring to them. For all the stories that the local TV news runs about school problems, budget cuts, inadequate space, teacher salaries, etc., this was the only time in the two-month study where we see how kids feel about these issues.

Victims and Perpetrators

One of the dilemmas with covering negative stories is that it can create a perception that things might be worse than they actually are. Additionally when something bad happens it tends to get ongoing news coverage. This is not necessarily a bad thing.

Take the case of a 10 year-old girl who was abducted in the fall of 2001. This story received a combined 15 stories on the three stations. In this case repetition may be good, since more coverage may lead to finding the perpetrator. The unfortunate side effect is that we are not treated to the same kind of ongoing coverage with positive stories about youth. In fact, the only positive story that received follow-up coverage was the teens who went to New York to volunteer after 9/11. (WZZM) With negative stories about youth, whether victims or

All of these stories did not necessarily need follow-up coverage, since none of them required the public to report anything to the police. They are all tragic stories, but nothing that deserved follow-up coverage, especially since they did not address public policy regarding school violence prevention, youth access to firearms or street safety.

The coverage of violence-based/negative stories also provided no context. Viewers were never told how many acts of school violence have been committed in the past year or how often child abductions

Violence-based/negative stories that received follow-up coverage

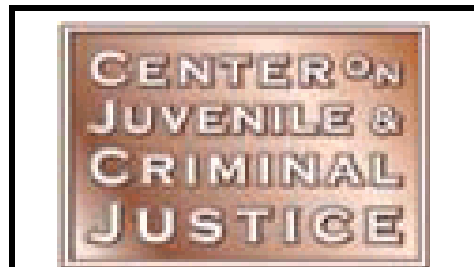
- Teen shot while breaking into some else's home
- Teen dies while working at Hayride
- Student plots to blow up school
- Student suspended for putting Ritalin in another student's drink
- Boy stabbed in Grand Rapids
- Grandville teen suicide
- Boy dies after being hit by car

take place. If this information were part of the story or the focus of a follow-up piece then the coverage of violence-based/negative stories can be very useful to viewers. Presented out of context it can lead to viewers having a distorted view of the youth in their community.

Another aspect of violence-based/negative coverage of youth is that it tends to sensationalize youth violence. National indicators seem to reflect a general decrease in areas like school violence. The Center on Juvenile & Criminal Justice has been tracking school violence and school shootings for years and their most recent report *School House Hype* (<http://www.cjcj.org/schoolhousehype/shh2.html>) demonstrates that school shootings have been down since Columbine. Unfortunately that is not typical of what the public perceives, since coverage of school shootings has increased in recent years. Again, if simple data was provided when local school violence occurred, it

could go a long way to preventing knee-jerk reactions in school policy.

A few examples of sensationalized coverage of youth acts of violence both occurred at schools in the greater Grand Rapids area. One story involved the death of a teachers aide who was seen breaking up an altercation between two students earlier in the day. It seems she had heart failure, but the coverage was such that it tried to lay the blame at the feet of the students who were fighting. WOODTV8 did the worst with this by having the principal live on the phone during their newscast. Even though the principal made it clear that there were health concerns, the news-readers tried to get her to say it had something to do with the kids.



www.cjcj.org

The other story involved 2 female students who assaulted a security guard at a Grand Rapids school (all three stations ran stories). The tone and the language of the story made it sound like shocking news, when in fact the guard was not seriously hurt. Interestingly enough we documented no coverage of adult violence perpetrated against youth during the 2-month study. We know that domestic abuse of children by adults is a serious problem, but when stories are run that deal with that subject the "shock" of it does not seem to ring as strong with reporters as when teens attack adults.

Better seen than heard

One last aspect of the youth representation in local TV news coverage was that youth voices were very limited. With all three stations surveyed adult voices still outnumber youth voices even in the stories that were youth focused.

(see data on next page)

WXMI 17 had the fewest youth voices, totaling only 2.

There didn't seem to be significant disparity between male and female voices, but there was some racial disparity. Native American and Arab American youth voices were never heard and Asian and Latino/a youth voices were significantly limited.

Conclusion

A great deal of the problems with youth representation in local TV news coverage is similar to that of the other areas we have surveyed in recent years. (<http://www.griid.org/griidreports.shtml>) Improving how news is covered in general would go a long way to improving youth representation and coverage of youth-focused issues as a whole.

Reporting that looks at the general welfare of youth, social indicators and youth achievements could drastically change the way that

Voices in Youth Focused Stories

Youth Voices - 27
Adult Voices - 43



Youth Voices - 21
Adult Voices - 29



Youth Voices - 2
Adult Voices - 17



adults view them. Giving youth a greater voice in news coverage could also help how adults perceive them, but more importantly, it could lead to an improvement in how youth see themselves.

Recommendations for the Media

1. Make a list of youth-based groups/schools and do positive stories daily.
2. Interview more Youth - more Youth voices.
3. More comprehensive interviews with Youth.
4. Do follow-up stories when Youth do good things.
5. Give information that provides opportunities for Youth - list resources.
6. Stop assuming things about Youth.
7. Don't discriminate with certain groups of Youth; Youth in poverty, inner city schools, racial minorities, gay Youth, non-christian Youth.
8. Don't wait for bad/negative things to happen to report on Youth.
9. Let Youth produce Youth-focused stories.

Youth Media Resources

Children Now - <http://www.childrennow.org>

Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice - <http://www.cjcj.org>

We Interrupt This Message - www.interrupt.org

Mike Males homepage - <http://home.earthlink.net/~mmales/>

Wiretap - <http://www.alternet.org/wiretapmag/>

Youth Speak - <http://void.oblivion.net/youthspeak/>

Stupid News - <http://www.stupidstupidnews.org/>

Youth Power - <http://www.youthpower.net/>

YELL - <http://www.actupny.org/YELL/YELL.html>

Building Blocks for Youth - <http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/>

Fight Crime/Invest in Kids - <http://www.fightcrime.org/>

Safe & Responsive Schools Project - <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/>

go teen go - <http://www.geocities.com/sunsetstrip/mezzanine/8829/>

Z Magazine Youth Watch - <http://www.zmag.org/youthwatch.htm>

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