

A picture tells a thousand words, but should it?

 By Leigh Andrews

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With #ChildProtectionWeek observed from 2 to 9 June and #YouthMonth underway, what better time to put the focus on how to more ethically report on violence against children? Here's my second report back from Media Monitoring Africa and the UCT Children's Institute media workshop on 22 May at the Doubletree Hilton.



Image source: Gallo/Getty.

Taryn Hinton, Media Monitoring Africa's legal consultant continued the workshop with a reminder that the best ethical practices come from making a decision yourself, coupled with backing by the larger team. This means you often start with a grey issue on what to publish, wrestle with it on your own, then debate it with your colleagues to make an informed decision.

As a journalist, Hinton says this is what you need to keep in mind:

“ Your role is to seek the truth and report on it as fully as possible. You need to give a voice to the powerless and hold the powerful accountable. ”

The best way to do so is to acknowledge your intentions, be transparent and independent, and do your best to tell the most truth, while you minimise harm and serve the citizens.



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It's a big task, filled with ethical wrangling. Most of all when it comes to reporting on issues that concern children.

Green light ethics vs red light ethics

Remember that people are never just a means to your journalistic end, especially when it comes to children. Their stories are our work, and when you work to add their authentic voices, it automatically changes the angle of the story for the better.

Unfortunately, Hinton said many media see ethical reporting on children itself as a grey area so they choose to simply not report on the case – that's red light ethics.

Green light ethics, on the other hand, is to take every possible step to incorporate children's voices in your reporting through ingenuity and craft, rather than keep them out.

That said, there's more and more red tape in this regard, making it harder than ever before to tell the important stories. That means there's no better time to re-acquaint yourself with the law and ethics involved.



#FairnessFirst: Refreshing the legalities of ethical reporting on children

Leigh Andrews 27 May 2019



Speaking specifically of images, Hinton mentioned the case where an [18-year-old Austrian](#) successfully sued her parents for 'violating her privacy' by posting images of her to social media without her consent. *The Telegraph* reports: "The woman said she had repeatedly asked her parents to remove more than 500 pictures of her from Facebook, but they had refused."

In a similar case in 2018, *The Independent* reported: "Under Italian law, the subject of the photo owns the copyright, rather than the person who took the picture, as is the case in the UK."

So it's a fine line for parents, but where should the media stand when it comes to a visual portrayal of children?

What's really in the child's best interest?

Hinton says if it's inherently positive with no issues of vulnerability, use the opportunity to tell the story. Children tend to be shown in the media either as learners, heroes or offenders, but not as active citizens.

But it's hard stories consistently done ethically well that are the only way to truly change the current way of reporting.



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These social media law cases highlight the importance of understanding the evolving capacity of the child to make their own decisions, and to act in the best interest of the child.

“ Simply put, the best interest of the child is not an objective issue. Instead, it is subjectively based on best interest in these individual circumstances. Don't sacrifice the child as the poster girl for the greater good or the bigger story if it means you're putting them at risk. ”

Hinton said this involves debating whether the story is just of interest to the public, or truly a case of public interest.

You need to take a step back and consider the value of the information disclosed in the story before deciding to publish.



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When this involves identifying a child, make sure you're first allowed to do so by law and that you have informed consent from both the child and their guardian. Only then does the process begin of protecting them from harm, and that the information shared adds news value to the story.

If you're grappling with this, ask yourself who is served by revealing the information. Hinton added that you no longer need to reveal your sources when reporting, but a pseudonym is often used to show compliance with the law.

Do you need to see the picture to understand the story?

Similarly, when it comes to selecting images to accompany the words, Hinton says just because there's an image available, you shouldn't necessarily use it – even if it's already been shared by all and sundry on social media, without any blurring of identifying features.



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Another tip: The act of not showing the image may tell the story better than the actual visual.

To apply these tips practically, Hinton says to follow Franz Kruger's best practice book, which serves as an ethics roadmap – *Black, White and Grey: Ethics in South African Journalism*.

Usually, not every part of the story is an ethical nightmare, it's usually just one aspect. Hinton says to clearly define the issue at hand, then think through whether it's actually of public interest.

Think through the following:

- What's the bigger story?
- Who are the stakeholders?
- What's the agenda of the person who brought the story to you?

Then make your decision. Once you commit to a course of action, you need to be willing to defend it.



Put truth first in news reporting and information-sharing in general

Leigh Andrews 18 Oct 2018



Delving deeper into the ethics involved in publishing images of children specifically, Hinton concluded:

“ Consider the iconic picture of Hector Pieterse. Would you ethically publish that image today? Or the dead migrant boy that washed up on the beach in Italy. Or Kevin Carter's image of the little girl and the vulture. There are no easy answers as ethics are personal, but the outcome of the picture is sometimes so huge that it changes history. And so, the debate rages on... ”

I'll be covering further aspects covered in the workshop over my next few #FairnessFirst articles. Until then, follow [MediaMattersZA](#), [#MediaMonitoringAfrica](#) and the [UCT Children's Institute](#) for further updates.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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