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## Media



On the 7<sup>th</sup> April 2008, YACSA ran the YOUTHink Forum for young people across South Australia to discuss issues important to them. YACSA identified the issues of **bullying, media, social networking sites, body image, debt and the environment** for discussion.

Participants of the YOUTHink forum recognised the significant impact the media has on their lives, particularly in its tendency to stereotype young people.

### Why is the media an important issue for young people?

The way young people's participation in society is represented by the media is important, because of the considerable power the media has in influencing the public's perception of youth and what they are capable of.<sup>1</sup>

It is generally understood that the portrayal of young people in the media is unbalanced, with too much attention being paid to negative issues and not enough to positive events and achievements. The result of this has been stereotypes created of young people that does not accurately reflect the diversity of backgrounds of young people and their life experiences, but rather places them into categories. It is the opinion of many young people that these stereotypes have been created because the media ignores the overall views of young people in discussions about social issues. A few young people have actually penetrated into mainstream media, although these people only represent a very small portion of the younger demographic. When they are quoted in the media, approximately 81% are female, 65% aged between 18 and 25, 50% have some form of connection with government or community organisations, and 39% are studying or are graduates.<sup>2</sup>

### Negative stereotypes in the media

There is also a perceived link between the way young people are portrayed in the media and the way they are perceived by the rest of the community.<sup>3</sup> These negative stereotypes have led to other community members feeling afraid and suspicious of young people, which can leave young people feeling misunderstood and discriminated against.<sup>4</sup>

Media items which have a youth focus are predominantly controversial and highlight the problems associated with young people, which merely reinforces the negative stereotypes surrounding them.<sup>5</sup> Uncontested media practices often discriminate or misrepresent young people.<sup>6</sup> Usually only limited and pessimistic information is available about young people in newspapers and magazines, with a bias regarding topics such as criminal activity accounting for the greatest proportion of media coverage. Negative connotations about young people now surround use of the word 'youth', such as in 'youth gangs', and although problems surrounding young people are often emphasised, there is an absence of youth opinion. It is also common for the achievements of young people to either be completely ignored, patronised or trivialised, with sport being the most widely acknowledged achievement.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kuehn, R & Yarlett, K 2001, *Media presentations of youth participation*, paper presented at the Second National Youth Development Conference 'Our future now, Empowering people through youth development', AusYouth, South Australia, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, N 2000, 'Live wire: young people and the media', Youth Affairs Council Western Australia, West Leederville, WA, p. 6

<sup>4</sup> YACVic n.d, *In the spotlight: young people and the media*, policy issues paper, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, p. 2

<sup>5</sup> Australian Centre for Independent Journalism 1992, 'Youth and the media: a report into the representation of young people in the New South Wales print media', University of Technology, Sydney, p. 7

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 5

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 43

Negative stories of young people are often in the media because they are controversial, dramatic, extraordinary and/or shocking; there are often newsworthy visual images produced; they reinforce the opinion of society that young people are problematic and trouble-makers; and young people usually cannot discredit the stories written about them.<sup>8</sup>

As a group, young people generally do not have a lot of authority, economic or social status, political influence, power, or voice in most forms of media.<sup>9</sup> Little or no attention is paid to the young person's perspective when presenting issues which have an impact on them in the media. Young people are not included in naming their own social issues, or in the process of creating responses to the issues the media distributes.<sup>10</sup> They are not viewed as being legitimate and credible sources of information. The media has already developed strong relationships with other, seemingly more credible sources, such as the government, police, or large organisations in order to produce news.<sup>11</sup> Most of these organisations already have well-established media units that exist specifically to deal with media, whereas the networks and skills of younger people are still being developed.<sup>12</sup>

It has been agreed that the media has significant influence over public opinion and in turn policy development. It does this by ignoring or highlighting events, and because consumers of media generally accept what the media reports as fact, the way in which an issue is defined by the media can influence public debate and therefore affect decision making regarding policy.<sup>13</sup> There is a danger if negative stories about young people continue to be reported in the media that decisions regarding public policy will only be in response to media stereotypes rather than addressing young people's needs directly.<sup>14</sup>

### Recommendations

Young people felt disillusioned in terms of their ability to influence the media and work on those negative stereotypes created about them, but came up with strategies such as encouraging wider youth participation, providing positive youth story content, and writing letters to the editor as some strategies for action. Others include:

- Advocating for reporting about young people to become more accurate, positive, honest and realistic
- Advocating for more opportunities to be made available for young people to participate in the media
- Advocating for the development of necessary skills for young people and workers with young people through education in order to communicate more effectively with the media, as well as to be able to understand it and analyse it
- Encouraging young people to publicly promote positive images
- Liaising with media to focus on how young people are benefiting the community

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<sup>8</sup> YACVic n.d, *In the spotlight: young people and the media*, policy issues paper, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, p. 6

<sup>9</sup> Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, op.cit

<sup>10</sup> Crane, P 1997, 'Whose views? Whose interests? The absence of young people's voices in mainstream media reports on crime', in *Youth, Crime and the Media: media representation of and reaction to young people in relation to law and order*, eds J Bessant & R Hill, National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Tasmania, p. 93

<sup>11</sup> Sercombe, H 1997, 'Youth crime and the economy of news production', in *Youth, Crime and the Media: media representation of and reaction to young people in relation to law and order*, eds J Bessant & R Hill, National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Tasmania, p. 50

<sup>12</sup> YACVic n.d, *In the spotlight: young people and the media*, policy issues paper, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, p. 7

<sup>13</sup> Franklin, 1999, p. 2, cited in YACVic n.d, *In the spotlight: young people and the media*, policy issues paper, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, p. 2

<sup>14</sup> YACVic n.d, *In the spotlight: young people and the media*, policy issues paper, Youth Affairs Council Victoria., p. 2