

## **Media Portrayals of Young People**

### **Abstract:**

Understanding the way various types of media outlets portray young people requires more sophistication in assessing the media enterprise than is common. The author argues that moving beyond conspiracy theories and assumptions of ill will, and focussing on the nature of editorial judgment, the importance of networking, the complexity of social discourse and structural impediments is likely to be more productive. He argues for a media of young people for young people, rather than just media about young people.

*3LO Presenter and Social Commentator, Terry Laidler has a background in theology, psychology and law. He has worked as a university chaplain, a health policy officer, an editor and a broadcaster. His interest in risk taking behaviour and young people grows from his work with the Victorian Road Safety Co-ordinating Council, the Victorian Ministerial Advisory Committee on AIDS and the Victorian Community Council against Violence.*

*He spoke at YACVic's Annual General Meeting on May 8 1996. Here is a transcript of his speech.*

### ***“Young People”?***

When we talk about the portrayal of young people in the media, we're talking about what old people say about them. I'm using old in the very generic sense. My two producers, who are fairly young by 3LO terms, are both in their early thirties. Initially they started on my program when they were in their mid twenties, but even then a lot of them are out of touch with what a lot of us would probably mean when we say “young people” because even if we describe twenty five year olds as young people we know there is a lot of other young people who aren't represented in that group.

Further, even those targeted outlets that give the best chance for young people to contribute directly to the discussion have fairly restricted opportunities for a range of young people to get involved. In the main, it would be fair to argue that most media treat “young people” as consumers rather than participants.

### ***“The Media”?***

Let me make a point: there is no one thing called “the media”. It's not just a matter of semantics to say that media is a plural noun even though it's easy to believe it is a single entity. However, what we're really talking about are a whole range of organisations, institutions and people doing a whole range of different things, with very specific mediums.

I'm one of those who has serious concerns about the concentration of media ownership in Australia, and I'm actually positively involved in few initiatives to try and stop it happening more. But despite my concerns about the concentration of media ownership, I don't picture a dark room somewhere where the magnates get

together and smoke their cigars while deciding what the media will treat and what they will ignore.

There may well be many more subtle cultural influences shaping a general tendency - I'm prepared to acknowledge that. But if you want to look at the portrayal of young people in the media, don't start by assuming a conspiracy.

Take 3LO for example. It works like this: I compete day by day with my other colleagues. I want stories before the Peter Couchman program gets them. I don't want Doug Aiton's program to trump me. It's not that we don't get on well - we happen to be mates as well as colleagues. But beyond that, the daily dynamic is one of real and healthy competition.

### ***Daily decisions***

Nor do we work day by day under very direct editorial control (and that's true even in commercial media). You certainly work within a set of parameters, sometimes in the form of a written, formal program brief, sometimes a less formal understanding of the general structuring and targeting of the outlet. You have a rough sense of when you step over the line.

Nor is "stepping over the line" the end of things. You know that if you step over the line, what you'll have is a fight to justify what you have done in terms of the program brief or the less formal understanding of the outlet's purpose.

But no one comes to me or my producers day by day and says "You must do this or that type of story," or anything like that. I work with a creative, innovative and generally hard working bunch of people, ordinary human beings, making judgments about what is of interest in the public discourse. Don't assume that the bulk of us who work in the media industries are either under such direct editorial pressure or so incompetent that we don't want to do the best job that we can.

### ***Editorial judgment***

A lot of the material that finally gets media coverage is "fed" to journalists and program makers well in advance through the medium of PR machines and general press releases, listeners letters and that sort of thing. When we arrive for the day's work, the first thing that confronts us is a huge pile of letters, faxes and press releases that have come in.

Again no conspiracy in the way we deal with this mass of material: if I could take the example of my own program, when we pick this pile up each day we are looking to plan about two thirds of the structured part of the program well (that is, days or weeks) ahead. (We prepare the other third of the program "hot" each day from news that "hits you in the face" in the press, other media, wire services etc).

We scan each of the letters, press releases and faxes and, to be very frank, if the headline is no good it gets thrown in the rubbish bin. If the headline is good, then the first paragraph gets read: if by the end of the first paragraph there is no story starting to shape in our mind or no immediate talent jumping of the page at us, then it's competing with a lot of other bits of paper that will do exactly that. Believe it or not,

some of us in the media have social consciences; some of us even dig through the pile and see if there is an “ought to do” story in there, but not everyone does. There is indeed variation in how people shape their editorial judgment, from pure and sheer commercial motives, right through to some refinement of social conscience. But unless the material is in there, unless a story has “got legs” in it’s own right, it probably won’t get a run, simply because of the many other stories that present themselves that do.

### ***Social conscience in the media***

There are lots of people who work in the media who would be prepared to help get issues of social concern run, but I think sometimes there’s this sense in various areas of social concern that the media “owe us a bit of space”.

Well Yeah! We might owe Yooralla a bit of space but we also owe it to domestic violence, and the issue of how we promote AIDS education in our community deserves a bit too, as does tenants rights, young people and suicide, road safety etc. Good causes line up along side many other good causes, and unless the story jumps off the page or you are going to provide talent (as we call it in the trade) that will instantly grab us, you are probably up against a bit of a barrier.

### ***Networking***

The other thing I should say is that like many businesses, yours included, the media works through networking. Looking around here today, I can see half a dozen faces of people who if they rang me and said “Terry, I’ve got a story” would get a hearing. They’d have to have a story but not necessarily a “show stopper”. Because we’ve met somewhere else and chatted and there is some relationship established, I would at least say “I’ll hear this one out”.

I think this impinges on why young people themselves don’t get broadcast and print space even if their issues do. They’re networks are “in development”!

Perhaps, there is an issue of advocacy there. Perhaps, it’s important for people who do exercise some advocacy function to use the networks that they have developed to start to find some space for young people themselves in the media.

### ***The “Power” of the Media***

As somebody working on the inside, I feel as powerless as most people at different stages in effecting real social change. This may seem surprising to people outside the industry because we do operate in a very privileged part of the social discourse. By the same token, the power we have is often overstated.

We certainly have the ability to put things on the agenda, and to maintain them on the agenda. But beyond that don’t be over optimistic about what the media can do. I get a bit frustrated sometimes when I hear about the ‘power of the media’ because I know it’s not like that from the inside. There is nothing I can do on radio tomorrow to radically change the situation of young people in our society. It doesn’t work that way, and I’ve got to balance that capacity to keep things on the agenda against other issues.

Remember the nine blokes who were burnt to death in a fire at Kew Cottages three weeks ago? We would have followed that story in a way that was editorially responsible. It wouldn't have been done to death each night. We would have taken different angles on it, heard different voices about it. We would have tried to keep the discussion alive over a period two or three weeks from a genuine sense of social concern, ultimately hoping to get a minister or someone like that to come on the program to say "Well, I'll have a look at these issues". That's the agenda setting thing as far as it goes.

Then Port Arthur happened and the Kew Cottages story was swept from sight. So it's not as though, even with the capacity to set the agenda, the agenda is entirely within the media's own control: sometimes it takes on a life of its own.

And even if there is a level of public interest, or support for what you're trying to put on the agenda, you can still end up "running a story into the ground" or sometimes "short-circuiting" it when people have a lot more interest than you think it's really worth. The judgment is "fine" and mistakes are made even where there is good will.

I think that's what happened with the Paxton case a bit. Some of my colleagues in the media did atrocious things in the coverage of that story. I think where it eventually went was even beyond their control, that they had opened up something without the structure it needed to lead to informed discussion. And so that's exactly what they got: ill informed discussion.

### ***Young people in the media***

Having spent a long time setting some context, I'm only going to say a few brief things directly about the portrayal of young people in the media. First, I think that the various media are so dominated by people in our age group that no matter how open minded and empathic and sincere they may be, we are almost always basically telling someone else's story, a young person's story. Your invitation to me to be here today actually got me thinking about my own program: the number of people between 12 and 25 that we have had on my program is really very minuscule. By and large we tell the story from "outside" rather than having developed structures to allow young people to tell their story themselves.

Secondly, perhaps surprisingly given that we are coming at it from "outside", I would argue that what you see when the media tries to tell stories of young people is generally sympathetic and understanding, especially when compared with other issues also told from "outside" that get much rougher treatment. Nevertheless it could hardly be disputed that it would be far better if it were informed by young people themselves.

Thirdly, I'd argue that the structural issues are paramount. That is, we really ought to be pressuring organisations like the ABC, other commercial outlets and the government itself to open up opportunities for the media to be the media of young people rather than just the media for or about them. Lots of young people listen to Fox FM, MMM, TT-FM, JJJ but very few young people (in the sense we are talking about) work at these outlets.

This, I think, is what HITZ FM (public broadcast youth radio) hit on. Young people were working with each other to make sure they were part of the social discourse, rather than having other people talking about them, and we oldies got a bit scared that it worked so well. Commercial radio stations got when in a couple of ratings results the “other FM” category had suddenly leapt through the roof. The only thing that had changed was that HITZ had come on air in a test broadcast. They saw their market being swallowed but they haven’t changed much as a result. The pressure that commercial music outlets and radio stations have been able to bring to bear to stop the government permanently licensing an undertaking like that is something that should be countered. Lots of us, including myself, backed off too easily on that and let them have their way. What we actually had was a sudden outburst of popular culture saying something significant is happening here! Perhaps it’s not only the media that doesn’t listen to young people enough!

This article first appeared in YACVic Bits, June 1996. Reprinted with permission from the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.