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REFLECTION ON THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

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1. Introducing notes on experiences of Humanrights.ch / MERS

I am representing Humanrights.ch/MERS, an association dedicated to information and education on human rights, providing online information service on Switzerland's compliance with international human rights treaties, collecting media reports on human rights issues on a daily basis and providing basic information on international human rights instruments and policies. Our goal is to raise awareness and spread knowledge. The website is available in English, French and German. We developed various programs for human rights education and developed a German language online version of COMPASS, the manual for human rights training by the Council of Europe. We promoted COMPASS in Switzerland and trained many teachers on how to work with the experience oriented manual.

An example of experiencing media in human rights education: A classroom visit

I had a chance to teach a human rights work shop for a week with a class of 13 year olds in Zürich, Switzerland. This was shortly after Switzerland became famous for the "black sheep campaign" where foreign nationals were negatively depicted in the parliamentary election campaign of autumn 2007, showing three white sheep kicking a black sheep out of Switzerland. It was the campaign of the Swiss Volk Party, their famous former leader, Christoph Blocher, was Switzerland's Minister of Justice at the time.

When the class discussed the right to protection from discrimination, the children took a strong position, stating that the sheep campaign was racist. The class tried to find a way on how to react to the campaign, respecting the dignity of others. They decided to write a letter to the Minister of Justice. It contained many questions, critique and also a proposal to resign in case he would not stand up against discrimination. The students further decided to send a copy of the letter as a press release to many newspapers and radio stations in Switzerland. The classroom turned into a media centre for a few hours. We defined a speaker based on the experiences at the internal "press conference" where the children exercised their ability to express themselves verbally. A radio station called; the 13 year old boy gave a very clear statement, adding that the class was not happy with the work and the values of the Justice Minister and sees resigning as an option.

I didn't work with the class anymore by the time the Justice Minister was not re-elected just a few weeks later. I am sure though, some of the children wondered if their speaking up had had an influence?

This was an example of how media can be integrated in the process of human rights education. A case of empowerment: The children learned about the basic human rights., about their own rights and the rights of others. They learned how to express themselves, how to make their position heard and see that their actions can have an impact.

Our experience with the media connected to projects in HR education

For our media work it is very important to use the relevant human rights days as "hooks", special days that can be used for media coverage, such as Dec. 10, the ratification of the convention of the child, the UN year of human rights education. They serve the media as hooks to report on a certain issues.

Our experience is that media is not too interested in reporting on human rights education projects, but rather reports on the violations of human rights. When we can give it a hook like mentioned above, we experience openness, as images of children and young people (our future..) are attractive to publish. In times when topics like violent juveniles, sexual abuse among juveniles, racism amongst juveniles are in the media, human rights education can be more attractive for the media, showing that there are ways to address these issues.

2. The complexity of the role of the media

There is not just one role of the media. Media can take on many roles, which makes the discussion on how to link media with human rights very complex, depending on the question:

Media in the role of the victim:

Is the questions, **how we can protects journalist?** The recent murder of the Russian journalist Natalja Estemirowa is just one out of many sad examples of how dangerous it can be to expose human rights violation or report on sensitive political issues.

Media in the role of the perpetrator:

Or is the question on **how to stop media from violating human rights?** In many cases the media has an important role in heating up conflicts, using propaganda towards minorities. Also the use of language in terms of reproducing stereo types or the media violating the rights to privacy are important issues to consider.

Media in the role of the agenda setter / gate keeper:

An important question can also be on **how media set the agenda and act as a gate keeper?** The media has a lot of power to turn an issue into a public debate or to ignore it. That concerns national and international topics. Let's take an example of a hunger crisis in South Sudan in the early 90ies during the Golf war. There was a big lack of media reporting resuting in no active aid involvement from the international community. One of the many examples in which a crisis was forgotten by the international press because of other ongoing events that were given priority.

There can be a particular interest of the owner of a media, economical motives and also personal preferences and specialization of a journalist that influence what ends up on the agenda.

Media in the role of the entrepreneur:

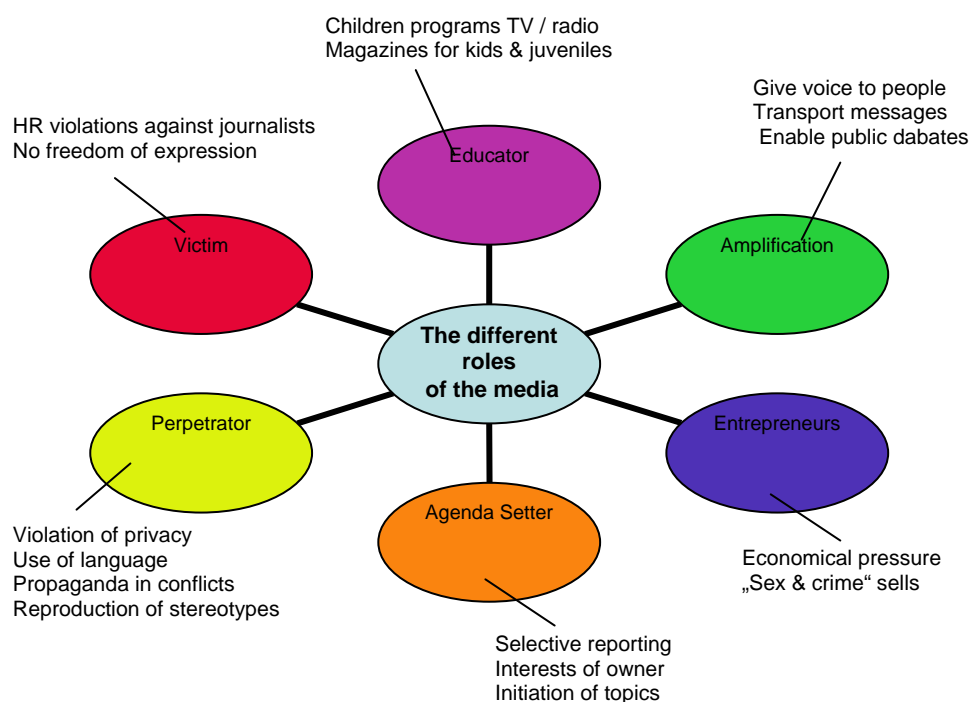
Another possible question is **how media act as entrepreneurs?** “Sex and crime” sell, as we know. It’s not only the responsibility of the media but of course the one of the readers who influence the quality of a medium, supporting it’s existence as consumers. In times of economical crisis the competition factor is high, cutting back jobs of journalists influence the quality and media don’t want to take risk in their agenda setting.

Media in the role of the “amplifier”:

Who has access to media? Is there a variety of media? If we think about that, we come across the problems of illiteracy, education, available technology (internet). A democracy needs a broad media landscape in order to enable public debates on relevant topics. In that sense the media is an important factor for a healthy immune system of every democracy. The media can “amplify” people’s voice, it can make their positions, questions, needs or demands heard.

Media in the role of the educator:

Should media take part in educating people / children? If so, who sets the content, the standards? Media can be active in reporting on human rights issues, for example on the situation of minorities in a country in order to decrease stereotypes and increase understanding. A TV program can educate children on their rights, a TV soap can transport values through their characters. The choice of movies shown in TV and in cinemas can influence people’s perspective.



Guaranteed **freedom of expression** is the base for media to take a responsible role of protector, promoter and educator in human rights, and also to expose human rights violations while protecting the reporters.

A diverse media environment **with independent media** and **no monopolization** is crucial in avoiding media getting into the role of the perpetrator and limiting the effects of agenda setting.

An ethical codex for journalists or an ethical commission for media affairs can help to set **standards for ethical journalism**. So does the **training of journalists** through setting up human rights education programs for schools of journalism. **Quality standards** for licences (TV, radio) can be set by a state in order to secure quality.

Access to information is a condition that facilitates public debate and enables public participation. The fight against illiteracy or access to internet / radio / TV / press are two additional criteria to mention in that regard.

Media policy in state or private media can set educational priorities, addressing the values of human rights, as mentioned above.

3. Conclusions for the UN-Declaration on Human Rights Education

Given the complexity of the roles of the media in human rights it would be favourable to create some kind of monitoring, information services, educational programs on a national level. For example a **position for “Media and Human Rights”** should be created **at the Independent National Human Rights Institution**, dedicated to:

- Information / news services on Human Rights
- Monitoring the media concerning disrespecting human rights
- Recommendations for educational programs on national radio / TV
- HR education programs for the students of journalism
- Program to empower children in using media for information and action