Informative or Not? Media Coverage of Child Social Policy Issues

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It is well known that news coverage of a topic influences the public’s perception of the importance of that topic. This “agenda-setting effect” of the mass media (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Rogers and Dearing, 1988) represents one of the key theories about how the news media affect public opinion. Agenda-setting influence occurs at two levels. The first involves the salience or prominence of a given issue on the public agenda, establishing for the public what is important to think about; while the second relates to the specific views or opinions the public holds on a topic, or more simply, what to think about issues that are deemed important to think about (McCombs and Reynolds, 2002).

By serving as gatekeepers of the information the public receives about the condition of children in any society, the press plays a pivotal role in influencing awareness of child-related concerns. Perhaps more important, the messages conveyed by the news media ultimately serve as the foundation for public opinion about the need for policy action to promote children’s interests on a wide range of issues, as well as how to best discriminate between the available alternatives (Gilliam and Bales, 2001). When one couples these ideas with the knowledge that public opinion typically plays a significant role in triggering and shaping policy activity (Glynn et al., 1999; Kennamer, 1992), it is quickly apparent that child advocates who wish to influence the policy agenda would be well advised to not lose sight of the media agenda. The way in which policymakers view children’s needs and interests can be said to flow, at least in part, from public perceptions that are influenced significantly by the media’s coverage of children.

In the United States, researchers have examined the nature and extent of coverage of child-related topics and issues by assessing the broad themes represented in national television and print news (Kunkel, 1994; Kunkel et al., 1999), and in local television news (Dorfman et al., 1997; Parker et al., 2001). These studies have revealed a consistent pattern, with roughly half of all child-related stories reported by the news media devoted to crime and violence coverage. More recently, health topics have received increasing attention, accounting for approximately one-quarter of all stories involving children, with cultural and lifestyle concerns representing most of the balance of child news coverage (Kunkel et al., 1999; Parker et al., 2001).
Child-related news coverage occurs relatively frequently, with major city newspapers averaging more than six stories per edition, and national television networks averaging about one story per newscast (Kunkel et al., 1999). However, very little of this coverage is devoted to policy-related topics that would help to inform the public about important issues affecting children’s lives. On network television, only 23% of all child-related stories include any mention of public policy, compared with 20% of stories in major city newspapers, and 13% of stories on local television news (Kunkel et al., 1999; Parker et al., 2001). Such significant topics as child poverty, welfare, and homelessness go virtually unreported in the news media, accounting for less than 1% of all child coverage, despite the fact that one out of six children in the United States lives in homes below the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).

These data raise the question of how well the news media are informing the public about the important issues facing American children. Most previous studies of the news media’s coverage of children have been primarily descriptive, addressing such questions as how often children are the focus of coverage, and in what topic areas. Much less scrutiny has been devoted to the question of how thoroughly the news media report the stories that are delivered, and the extent to which they convey critical empirical information regarding child policy topics. That is the goal of the present study. Such information can help to illuminate opportunities for increasing the use and enhancing the impact of child indicators as a means of informing the public and policymakers.

In collaboration with the Annie E. Casey Journalism Center on Children and Families at the University of Maryland, the sponsor of this research, the authors selected five key topic areas of critical significance to the well-being of U.S. children: (1) child abuse and neglect; (2) child care; (3) child health insurance; (4) teen childbearing, and; (5) youth violent crime. All of these issues are of prominent interest to both local and national policymakers. Of course, for information in these topic areas to be influential at informing the public, stories must do more than report isolated events. Presumably they must provide a context, helping the reader to place recent developments into a broader base of knowledge that would encompass critical patterns and trends, underlying causes, or potential solutions related to a given topic or issue area.

The research team commissioned Child Trends, one of the leading child research firms in the United States, to provide a summary of the most important information currently available in each realm. That information was then used as a basis to evaluate the quality of the coverage delivered by the news media in these five topic areas. Child Trends, based in Washington, DC, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization that regularly engages in government-funded research in each of these five topic areas. Senior researchers prepared one-page briefing papers in their respective areas. Each briefing paper included an initial overall summary statement, followed by four independent “bullet” points, each representing an important trend or development in the judgment of the Child Trends experts. For example, in the area of child health insurance, the summary statement reads: “The percentage of children with health insurance coverage has remained largely unchanged...