

News coverage of children and young people in ethics codes

A cobertura noticiosa de crianças e jovens em códigos de ética

PAULO MARTINS^a

Institute of Social and Political Sciences, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the norms inscribed in codes of journalistic ethics on news coverage of cases involving underage citizens to identify established values and principles as well as prescribed professional conduct. Research is based on content analysis of 200 codes from around the world. This study concluded that 128 codes (64%) directly reference the subject, such as respect for the best interest of the child, privacy protection, previous consent to contact, or conditions for conducting interviews. The main concern detected refers to the evaluation of damage caused to children and young people. The concealment of identity is the most frequently recommended procedure to ensure their protection.

Keywords: Children, young people, codes of ethics for journalism, news coverage

^a Assistant Professor at Institute of Social and Political Sciences, researcher of the Centre for Public Administration & Policies (CAPP), and professional journalist. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/000-0001-6445-8115>. E-mail: pmartins@iscsp.ulisboa.pt

RESUMO

Este artigo incide na abordagem das normas inscritas em códigos de ética jornalística sobre a cobertura de casos envolvendo cidadãos menores de idade, com o objetivo de identificar os valores e princípios estabelecidos, bem como a conduta profissional prescrita. A investigação baseia-se na análise de conteúdo de 200 códigos de diversas regiões do mundo. Concluiu-se que 128 (64%) destes apresentam referências diretas ao tema, como respeito pelo melhor interesse da criança, proteção da privacidade, consentimento prévio para contato ou condições de realização de entrevistas. A principal preocupação detectada foi a avaliação dos danos causados a crianças e jovens e a ocultação da identidade, o procedimento mais frequentemente recomendado para sua proteção.

Palavras-chave: Crianças, jovens, códigos de ética jornalística, cobertura jornalística



NEWSCOVERAGE OF EVENTS involving underage citizens is often the subject of controversy, as it silences their voices, denies them the right to freedom of expression, or, on the contrary, for providing media exposure, with possible negative effects on their personalities' development. Although it does not neglect the initial question, this article essentially focuses on the second, by analysing the journalists' conduct included in ethics codes, a field to which researchers have not devoted special attention.

A reflection is proposed, predominantly in the field of self-regulation, taking into account the contribution to its configuration for sources of law such as The Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in 1989. Particularly relevant, for enshrining the prevalence of the child's superior interest and, at the same time, respect for the rights to participation and the protection of privacy, honour and reputation, this convention encourages the media to disseminate information that benefits children, while alerting to the need to preserve them from harmful content.

This research aims to fill a gap in the studies on codes of journalistic ethics: the comparative analysis of the guidelines they present, in different countries and media systems, about the performance of professionals, when faced with the coverage of events in which children, adolescents or young people participate. It is not a matter of verifying the degree of compliance with standards inscribed in the codes, but of verifying whether if they have no rules in this area or incorporate provisions about the conditions of newsgathering and dissemination information in such situations.

MEDIA COVERAGE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

When children, adolescents or young people become protagonists of news stories, the journalist is supposed to respect their rights. Being legally minors, it is a matter of ensuring that the journalistic approach does not disturb the development of their personality, still being formed, nor does it compromise, if such is the case, their social integration. Greater care is needed, of course, in risky situations. As Marôpo (2012) points out, academic literature has been identifying multiple traces of the negative impact of media coverage, such as the creation of stereotypes, the "sensationalist exploration of singular cases and the light, individualistic, little politicized and decontextualized treatment of complex issues" (Marôpo, 2012, p. 208).

Hodges' questioning (2009) about professional conduct – "where should society draw the moral line between society's need (and right) to know and the individual's need (and right) not to reveal?" (p. 281) – is even more relevant

when minors are involved. The option implies weighing the values in question. The journalist assesses whether public interest prevails over the invasion of the private sphere. If so, steps must be taken to minimise the impact on the right to privacy, which is understood as the individual's control over personal information concerning him or her.

The ethical decision is made in this context. The duty to reach the truth cannot ignore the potential damage to people involved – and most of all to the youngest. Hence the intervention of the editorial hierarchy. “Leaving individual journalists responsible for responding to situations as they arise is clearly not enough”, argues Fullerton (2004, p. 523). In this author's study, a former newspaper editor recounts how he acted when, in a story on poverty, a photographer presented an excellent photo of a boy eating cereal. The argument that he had obtained parental permission did not move him. He refused to publish, because the family would feel exposed to ridicule and even discrimination.

The assessment can focus on messages, including those written by minors, published on social networks. “Certainly, there are times to expose secrets and more individuals should become aware about the information they share about themselves, but that does not mean privacy should be invaded simply because the tools are easily available” (Whitehouse, 2010, p. 324). In certain cases, however, other criteria come into the equation. When, in 2018, the *Daily Star on Sunday* reported that a teenager threatened Muslims through a Facebook post framed in an image showing Nazi weapons and flags, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) recognized exceptional public interest in the publication of the image. In the view of the British regulator, security concerns, associated with hate speech and the ability to access weapons, made the intrusion into the minor's privacy justifiable (IPSO, 2018).

The perception that media attacks on young people can have devastating effects is amply demonstrated. Failing to preserve the anonymity of juvenile offenders tends to affect their recovery. Identifying, even though indirectly, a child raped by a family member causes double victimization. As Mackay (2008) points out, identification doesn't just affect privacy; it can contribute to the stigmatisation of young people or to them being discovered by predators or estranged parents.

The attitude of journalists concerning identification lacks uniformity as shown by several surveys (Elliott, 1990; Mackay, 2008; Silvestre & Ferreira, 2013). It is even possible that absolute guarantees regarding the respect for privacy are not always genuine. “Journalists need to know if their good intentions are reflected in their practices or not”, concluded Coleman (2011, p. 258), in a study in which 99 North American professionals participated. Most of them proclaimed



respect for ethical principles, but when asked to make choices regarding the publication of photographs of delicate situations, such as drug use, they did not adopt different criteria for children or adults. Recommendations are not lacking in this plan: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2018) admits that, in certain circumstances, identification may correspond to the child's interest – e.g., if it is part of a social activism program; Accountable Journalism (2016) warns of the risk of exposure to retaliations.

“The decision not to identify children and use maximum care in interviewing them are restrictions that do not exempt journalists from ensuring that, in specific circumstances, they are the story – with a face and right to be heard” (Martins, 2014, p. 194). Ultimately, the option is imposed by circumstances. “Talking to children takes time to go to places, to break the ice, to listen. You cannot interview them by phone or email”, wrote a Portuguese journalist, about the story of a man who, after a separation, raised his daughter alone, as he started a homosexual relationship. She omitted the identity of both: “We didn't even need to talk to each other [the photojournalist] to realize that, in that case, we would have to do it” (Pereira, 2018).

PROFESSIONAL CODES AND PRACTICES

The first cross-sectional study on journalistic conduct standards in children related matters, published by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), concluded that “tackling the issue of general failures to acknowledge the human rights of children falls outside the scope of most systems of media regulation, and can only be resolved through education, dialogue and other collaborative strategies” (International Federation of Journalists, 1977, p. 17).

The issue is ignored in historical documents, like the Bordeaux Declaration (1954) and the Declaration of Rights and Duties of Journalists, known as The Charter of Munich (1971) (*Appendix III*, 2021).

Few codes focus exclusively on covering events of this nature. The Italian Treviso Charter, approved in 1990 and today incorporated into the Unique Text of the Journalist's Duties, subordinates journalistic treatment to the child's best interest, which overrides all other interests. Among the rules, anonymity is included, when facts harmful to their personality are at stake, even if without criminal relevance (Ordine dei Giornalisti, 2016).

In 2001, the IFJ created the Guidelines and Principles for Reporting on Issues Involving Children. The guide rejects sensational presentations and gathers basic rules: minimize any damage resulting from the publication of

material, protect visual identification, except for public interest; use fair, open and direct methods to obtain photographs.

Some of these guidelines are reflected in the Nicaragua code for the *Informative Coverage of Topics on Children and Adolescents*, which recommends respect for the right of children not to participate in stories against their will, especially when related to their personal condition and, in particular, if they are at risk or vulnerable (Colegio de Periodistas de Nicaragua, 2005). The *Code of Self-Regulation for the Defence of the Rights of Minors* [RTVE], n.d.), from Spain, determines stronger protection. The Code of conduct-safeguarding, from BBC (2021) states only ten rules, among which treat children and young people fairly and without prejudice or discrimination.

Several academic studies on media monitoring tools (Fidalgo et al., 2022; Himelboim & Limor, 2008; Thomass et al. 2022) leave the topic out. Those that address it, in the context of codes of ethics' analysis, are essentially based on two lines of thought, which are not antagonistic: protecting minors or creating the conditions for a greater participation in the media, in order to empower them as active participants in the public debate.

Based on the issue of privacy, Christofolletti and Gaia (2018) point to a set of recommendations for behaviour, which partly coincide with those identified in this research. Christofolletti et al. (2021) frame the issue within the principle of transparency, briefly mentioning the journalist's attitude when in contact with minors who may not be aware of the repercussions of their statements, as well as the reproduction of content made available by them in a digital environment, also mentioned by Díaz-Campo and Segado-Boj (2015). Himma-Kadakas and Tenor (2023), who are openly critical, argue that most of the documents subject of their research (Swedish and Estonian) stipulate an unjustified exclusion of young people. They need to be updated because they prioritise protection over representation and freedom of expression.

According to Aldridge and Cross (2008, p. 212), "the fact that children and young people are not seen as competent social agents by journalists, news editors and producers, is reflected more broadly in the 'disappearance' of childhood thesis". The media have a very important role to play in reporting on the abuse of children, "educating the public on the reasons behind it, giving it a profile and ensuring that society at large has collective responsibility to deal with the issue" (Reid, 2002, p. 140). However, when coverage gives way to emotion and dramatization, the media can also provoke feelings of fear, guilt and distrust in children (Ayre, 2001).

The issue of identity reservation has also caused reflection. In face of criminal situations, Tompkins (2002) defines a set of questions, which the journalist must ask himself, such as whether the public needs to know the identity of minors



¹James Bulger (2 years old) was murdered by two ten-year-old boys, and allegedly beaten to death. The two murderers were the youngest convicts in the history of modern English justice. Imprisoned until the age of majority, they were then paroled indefinitely, with new identities (Asquith, 1996).

and what damage it can cause them. Regarding the Bulger case, which occurred in 1993 in England¹, Aldridge and Cross (2008) recalled that the publication of photographs of the perpetrators fed the climate of public condemnation. The *Daily Star* titled: “How Do You Feel Now, You Little Bastards?” (Aldridge & Cross, 2008, p. 18). *The Sun* filed a petition, demanding: “Bulger killers must rot jail for life”.

Children displaying by the media can awaken consciences, as the French organisation Observatoire de la Déontologie de l’Information (2017) acknowledged, regarding the photographs of the Syrian boy found dead on a beach in 2015. One showed the body in the sand; the other being transported by a policeman. BBC released this, integrated in a video framing the news. Portuguese daily *Público*, which chose the most shocking, opposed arguments. On the one hand, image violence or respect for the child’s dignity; on the other, some questions: “Isn’t it just as painful to read about these tragedies? In writing, we do not hide reality . . . Why do we use different criteria with image?” (“Porque publicamos”, 2015). Having made the same choice, *The Independent* asked itself: “If these extraordinarily powerful images of a dead Syrian child washed up on a beach don’t change Europe’s attitude to refugees, what will?” (Withnall, 2015). The images have in fact changed public perception of refugees.

The use of minors as sources of news often creates ethical dilemmas. In addition to the reliability of the information, there are most sensitive aspects to consider. Are they able to assess the impact of their statements or determine what information they should reserve for themselves? What impact do they see from their participation in stories? In the case of children, to what extent do they confuse reality with fantasy?

Journalists’ positioning is no less complex. From interviews with 21 Portuguese and Brazilian professionals, Marôpo (2015, p. 13) concluded that “they do not feel prepared to interview children and have doubts about the circumstances in which they can and should listen to them. They feel both criticised for showing children’s images and identities, and for not giving them a voice”. McBride (2003) exposed her perplexities as a young journalist: “I thought children were impossible to write about, mainly because they are so hard to quote. They speak in one-word answers and nonsense sentences”. Having overcome her prejudices, she recognised that “in a child we find the opportunity to suspend judgment and blame”.

Several organisations have designed good practice guides for interviewing children. Media Monitoring Africa (2011) gives journalist a basic recommendation: do not make promises you cannot keep or use bribes. In addition to stressing that the interview length must be age-appropriate,

the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma (2013) advises against questions that induce guilt and interviews in crime or disaster scenarios, arguing that children in shock need support, not questioning. Teichroeb (2009), for whom minors under 13 should not be sources of detailed factual information's, gives the journalist the responsibility to clearly inform victims of tragedies as to the consequences, if they accept to be identified. The fact that a victim agrees to be identified does not exempt the journalist from assessing what might happen if this is done. "There may be circumstances where the potential harm is greater than the benefit" (Teichroeb, 2009).

Children's disturbance is one of Unicef's concerns and advise: "try to make certain that children are comfortable and able to tell their story without outside pressure, including from the interviewer" (Unicef, 2019). The organization gives its opinion on informed consent, which implies explaining the objectives of the interview and the intended use. For Accountable Journalism (2016), for interviews and images collection, permission must be obtained from the children or those responsible for them, by making the request in their language. If possible, permission should be in writing.

MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

This study is based on two research questions:

1. What values and principles do journalistic codes of ethics and deontology set out as having to be considered in media coverage of events involving underage citizens or when making editorial decision about their dissemination?
2. What professional conduct do codes recommend for these circumstances?

Using the content analysis technique (Bryman, 2012), which aims to implement a both quantitative and qualitative methodology, the objective is to identify patterns.

The corpus of content analysis focuses on the versions retrieved on 24 and 25 September 2023 of 200 ethical-deontological documents. The non-probability sampling, without pretending to generalize results to the universe, gathers 80 European documents, 49 from America, 32 from Asia, 28 from Africa and 8 from Oceania, in addition to four created by supranational organisations (IFJ, Frontline Freelance Register, Photographers Without Borders and Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers), selected according to two criteria:

1. Geographic representativeness, taking into account the media systems in which they operate; and



2. Diversity in scope – that is, nationwide or limited to media outlets; private and state-owned; from Press, Television, Radio and digital platforms; from regulatory or self-regulatory bodies.

The goal is to analyse ethical-deontological documents in different contexts. While the United States of America (USA) favours codes adopted by media outlets, some countries in Latin America have professional orders and Africans, as a rule, follow the models of the former colonial powers. In Europe and in Asian countries, national codes, many of which were created by press councils, coexist with those of different media, which, even though internal, sometimes host other – such is the case of Le Monde Group in relation to The Charter of Munich.

The content analysis was elaborated from the exploratory reading of the corpus, which includes norms on journalists' conduct. Each code was codified in terms of the number of recommendations related to the subject. The content analysis matrix is based on categories related to the essential moments of journalistic activity (newsgathering and dissemination) in cases involving minors.

The first category comprises the subcategories *information collection*, *images collection* and *sounds collection*, as well as *conditions for conducting interviews*. The second comprises the subcategories *general dissemination*; *information or statements dissemination*; *images dissemination*; and *identification*. Common indicators for the subcategories were defined: *general references*; *full inhibition*, *consent – previous as a rule* (from parents or legal guardians); *consent – in certain conditions or circumstances*; *invocation of the public interest*; *invocation of well-being / minor's protection*; *invocation of privacy protection*; and *damage evaluation*. The subcategory related to interviews does not include indicators related to consent, incorporated in the *information collection*.

Global analysis

Of the 200 codes analysed, 128 (64%) have direct references to news coverage of minors. The remaining (72) include 9 French, 7 from USA (including from newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*), 4 of the 5 Brazilian codes and the IFJ, but only one out of the 8 from UK.

Some codes (Table 1) have both direct and indirect references – in this case, 30 in the field of privacy and 58 in the field of non-discrimination (26 refer to all types of discrimination and 32 refer to age). 73 codes include a specific part, article or chapter about children and/or young people – those from the Press Council of India (PCI) and the Online Publishers Association (Greece) are the most detailed. However, it should not be ignored either that The Treviso

Charter is part of the Unique Text (Italy), or that the BBC and Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) have child protection policy regulations, which were taken into consideration in the present research.

Minors appear, in 15 codes, mentioned in parts that also include other citizens, such as victims of violence or crime. In eight, it is equivalent to people with limited capacities, serious illnesses, special or vulnerable needs. It should be noted that 28 codes explicitly allude to the vulnerability or fragility of children and young people.

Table 1

Global analysis

References:	
Direct on minors reporting	128
To minors on privacy parts	29
General to non discrimination	58
To age non discrimination	32
To vulnerability or fragility	28
Parts:	
Specific on minors reporting	73
On minors and other citizens	15

Some type of potential damage caused to minors (Table 2) is pointed out in 99 codes (77.3% of those addressing the media coverage of these citizens), enough to justify journalists' assessment.

Table 2

Transversal analysis of indicators

General references		50
Full inhibition		2
Consent	Previous as a rule	33
	In certain conditions or circumstances	36
Invocation	Public interest	33
	Well-being/minor's protection	26
	Privacy protection	26
Damage evaluation		99

All these 99 codes are in the category "dissemination", 31 of which are also in the "newsgathering". The issue is linked to subcategory "identification" in 84 codes (Table 3).



Table 3
Transversal analysis of indicators

Categories	Subcategories	Indicators							
		General references	Full inhibition	Consent		Invocation			Damage evaluation
				Previous as a rule	Certain conditions or circumstances	Public interest	Well-being/ minor's protection	Privacy protection	
Newsgathering	Information collection	25	0	24	23	7	17	5	11
	Conditions for conducting interviews	7	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0	1	2	20
	Images collection	9	0	14	14	5	15	3	5
	Sounds collection	2	0	1	3	1	1	1	1
Dissemination	General dissemination	21	0	0	2	6	2	11	29
	Information or statements dissemination	4	0	3	3	4	2	4	7
	Images dissemination	5	2	4	6	4	4	6	24
	Identification	3	2	3	17	12	5	5	85

Note: values correspond to the number of codes in each indicator. The same code may be included in several indicators

Public interest and protection

Public interest is connected with news coverage of minors in 33 codes. Assuming greater relevance in *identification*, the principle is invoked by RTÉ in all subcategories of dissemination and is inscribed in the South African Press Council code to support the information and images collection, but also the identification.

In three British codes (from IPSO and the newspapers *The Guardian*² and *The Independent*), as well as the Seychelles Media Commission, only an exceptional public interest can outweigh the child's primary interest. *The Guardian* requires robust reasoning for significant intrusions into children's private lives without their understanding and consent. BBC's Editorial Standards requires strong

²In this research, the 2011 version is used. Currently, the newspaper is regulated by the IPSO code.

editorial justification to disseminate material related to the identity of under 18-year-olds as defendants, before the legal process begins.

Child's interest is explicitly mentioned in 17 codes. The Single Text (through The Treviso Charter) gives it the status of superior interest, to which all others must subordinate. The Principles of Charter of Journalistic Ethics (Georgia) bind professionals to respect children's rights. They should refrain from publishing stories that could harm them.

The authorization of parents or legal guardians for contact or news editing is relevant in this area. The Press Council from Moldova protects identity in events with negative connotations, even if they are only witnesses. However, if the journalist considers that it is more favourable to the child, this rule can be ignored, with or without the consent of others. Only after recognizing that there is clear public interest, that the option is better for the child's interest and with the permission of the minor himself does the Editors' Forum of Namibia allow the identification of survivors of kidnappings and gender-based violence, victims of abuse or exploitation, HIV-positive and accused or convicted of crimes.

The PCI presents a set of situations in which identification is in the best interest of the child, as long as the accuracy of the statements is verified and risks such as stigmatisation are taken into consideration: "a. When a child initiates contact with the reporter wanting to exercise their right to freedom of expression and their right to have their opinion heard; b. When a child is part of a sustained program of activism or social mobilization and wants to be so identified; c. When a child is engaged in a psychosocial program and claiming their name and identity is part of their healthy development" (Press Council of India, 2022, p. 100). Children and young people's right to freedom of expression and to be heard also appears in BBC, RTÉ, CBC News, Bulgaria, Albania, Azerbaijan, El Salvador and Uruguay codes. CBC News is clear: "their realities and concerns cannot be fully reflected without being heard in our reporting" (CBC News, 2018).

Direct reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is made in 10 codes: from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Cyprus, Uruguay, El Salvador, Mexico (National Chamber of Radio and Television Industry [CIRT], Greece (Online Publishers Association), *The Guardian*, and New Zealand Media and Entertainment – and indirectly in three: Panhellenic Federation of Journalists' Unions (Greece), Antena 3 Televisión (Spain) and Order of Journalists (Italy).

Only 15 codes mention respect for minors' decision about their involvement in reporting. In the Armenian code, it concerns all interviews, videotaping and



for documentary photographs. El Salvador code clarifies that the journalist cannot divulge, expose or use the image against the will of minors.

Among the codes that invoke the protection of minors, restrictions are common to make it effective. Interviews on issues related to their well-being require the presence of parents or guardians, in the Albanian code. The code from the Portuguese newspaper *Expresso* adopts the rule on matters related to the personality of the interviewee or other minors. Croatian code considers unacceptable to interview or photograph a minor if it endangers his well-being.

Privacy

References to children and young people in parts about privacy protection, intimacy or individual rights appear in 29 codes. It is not very often invoked principle, reaching a maximum of 11 codes (in the subcategory *general dissemination*). 23 codes refer to privacy in minors' related parts. Defending the right of privacy protection takes precedence over the news value in the Austrian code, one of nine that subordinates the approach to private matters to the verification of public interest.

BBC's Editorial Standards associate the legitimate expectation of privacy with media coverage of minors. The concept involves a set of factors – such as the place of the event and the nature of the information – to support the editorial decision to deal with private matters. Hence the responsibility for evaluating proposals for disclosing personal information of minors without their consent is assigned to the senior editor. *The Independent* follows an identical perspective: even if the information or pictures have not come directly from the child him or herself, “we should consider whether their use without permission might infringe their privacy” (The Independent, 2012, para. 62). The code of the British regulator Office of Communication (Ofcom) is one of eight that excludes the status, fame or notoriety of the family or legal guardians as a justification for addressing privacy. This group includes some codes from the United Kingdom – or influenced by their culture, such as that of the Seychelles – but also that from Sri Lanka, allowing the exceptional public interest to overlap.

Six codes consider the invasion of privacy by social media. The Canadian Association of Journalists warns to the risk that minors may not understand the public nature of their posts. CBC News undertakes not to provide information that could identify them, to prevent exposure to online predators. The Council for Mass Media (Finland) notes that the public availability of information does not necessarily imply free disclosure. If they display children, the so-called

used generated contents deserve the attention of France Press: to publish, it requires, as in other circumstances, written authorization, except in situations of wars or disasters.

Potential damage

“Shall show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). The advice to the journalist, included in the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists (USA), reveals the special care that contact with minors requires, considering the damage that the coverage itself can cause. The problem is raised in 32 codes. The Media Association (Turkey), whose code is the only one that mentions photojournalists, recommends sensitivity when capturing or using photos or videos of victims of crimes or traumatic events. The word sensitivity is, in fact, very common in codes.

Radio Television Digital News Association (USA) addresses the issue of the newsgathering consequences, even if the information is not made public. Codes of different origins – Nicaraguan, Armenian, Albanian, Slovakian – include provisions on contact with minors as information sources, either underlining that they do not always know how to deal with the media or are able to understand the effects of their statements, or regarding the protection of their interests. The German Press Council alerts that journalists shall not take advantage of the fragility of not fully capable people, including children. Codes either from the South African Press Council and the Editors’ Forum of Namibia share this view: “If there is any chance that coverage might cause harm of any kind to a child” (Press Council of South Africa, 2018, para. 18), contact or identification can only occur with the consent, also from the child, their capacity being assessed.

The safeguard of future development, foreseeing the impact of news coverage on personality, is a concern expressed in few codes. Unique Text (The Treviso Charter) is the code that most values anonymity, which is not imposed only if it is about giving positive emphasis to the child. Various ethical documents impose caution in misconduct reporting, crimes committed by young people or investigations and legal proceedings, or in relation to the disclosure of harmful or negative facts. BBC’s Editorial Standards states that the divisional Working with Children Adviser must speak out if it is suspected that minors may be at risk. The Press Council from Serbia grants the decision to the journalist, who must ensure that the child is not endangered by the publication of his or her



name, photograph or recording with his or her image, home, community in which he or she lives or environments that can be recognised.

Few codes refer to stigmatizations and stereotypes or the possibility of causing fear, suffering or sadness. Ecuador's *El Comercio* and Mexico's CIRT encourage journalists to refrain from inciting the emulation of dangerous behaviour. The Unique Text, one of the four codes that allude to minors in the coverage of suicides, requires that details of the act not be published.

Consent

Among the conducts in the codes, the one stated by the indicator *full inhibition* is residual. It is only foreseen in Benin and Togo, in the categories of *images dissemination* and *identification*. Both codes, in force since 2005, were produced by media observatories.

Prior authorization, as a general rule, is required in 32 codes. It can be requested from parents; family members in general; tutors or legal guardians; whoever assumes the status of *loco parentis* (latin expression that means he who replaces the father), as stated by the BBC's Editorial Standards, or the minor himself. A more common situation is consent subject to certain conditions or circumstances, as crime reporting (36 codes). Crime reports are predominant in this indicator, but other situations are also involved. The coverage in the school context is regulated in 22 codes, determining the intervention of the officials of the school, in addition to the family or whoever has authority over the students.

Four British Isle codes (from RTÉ, Ofcom, *The Guardian* and BBC Editorial Standards) and from Zimbabwe and Eswatini refer to informed consent, including that of the minor. Indirectly, informed consent is also inscribed in the Uruguayan and Armenian codes. The latter underlines that "permission must be obtained in circumstances that ensure that the child and guardian are not coerced in any way and that they understand that they are part of a story that might be disseminated locally and globally" (Yerevan Press Club, 2021, p. 4).

"Children and young people are often eager to contribute to our output, but many lack the judgment necessary to assess the longer-term impact it could have on their lives. Parents may also not understand the full implications of their child taking part", stresses the BBC (2019, p. 185). According to RTÉ (2020) code, any proposal to maintain the participation of a child after the refusal of parental consent, or in the absence of it, must be referred to the relevant director, who is responsible for assessing whether the involvement: (i) is justified by the

public interest; (ii) can be achieved in a way that will not be harmful to the child's welfare; and (iii) in all circumstances, if it is appropriate for the child to contribute to output.

Concerning human immunodeficiency virus victims, a common concern, the Press Council of India and the Swaziland National Association of Journalists converge: "The purpose of the interview or photograph and the context in which these may be utilized and the potential ramifications for the individual, their family and their children shall be stated", whenever possible in their language, according to the Eswatini code (Swaziland National Association of Journalists, 2005, p. 46).

Ten of the 14 codes that recommend obtaining consent for images collection (mostly Africans and Asians) also do so for information collection. Only the Nepalese code imposes an absolute ban on interviewing or photographing without authorization. According to the Tanzanian code, without permission or in the face of refusal, contact must be based on an overriding public interest. France Press and the Yerevan Press Club allow written consent, if possible and appropriate.

There are no cases of specific provisions about *sounds collection* – the few detectable in this subcategory are almost always common to the information and/or images collection. Two exceptions: the RTÉ code disallows filming in a school setting without the consent of the school principal and parents; only Armenia code imposes prior consent as a rule.

Subcategory *conditions for conducting interviews* intended to analyse the type of restrictions specifically foreseen for that activity. That is why indicators about consent do not integrate this subcategory, which includes 24 codes, almost all of them proceeding in some way to assess the damage. Ten codes argue that issues beyond their comprehension should not be addressed – above all due to lack of experience to understand the consequences of their statements or unpreparedness to speak to the media. The Lithuanian code notes that questions must be carefully asked and age-appropriate; the Tanzanian rejects the abuse of credulity or trust.

The situation of the interviewees is often considered. In the case of HIV-positive children, the PCI warns for the possibility of them being unaware of their status, which requires prior verification, to prevent questions from being perceived as intrusive or insensitive. Preventing the interview from reactivating the pain caused by past events is a care foreseen in some codes. About trauma victims and child soldiers, Reuters Standards and Values stress that the "the description of the suffering of children may suffice to convey the drama" (Reuters, 2008, p. 555), so direct contact is only justified if it is crucial to the story. The important thing is to avoid exposing a minor to harm.



The risk of certain questions or comments being interpreted as a judgement, ignoring minors' cultural values, putting them in danger or exposing them to humiliation, is raised by the Uruguayan Press Association. Papua New Guinea Media Council's code – the only one that invokes well-being when conducting interviews – seeks to prevent the approach of topics that could have legal or moral effects.

Identity concealment

The subcategory *identification* – which includes anonymity, the most effective way to protect the persons involved in news stories and reports – is the one with the highest figures: 89 codes.

Only three make the identification dependent on prior consent: the Journalistic Ethics Council (Belgium), the Independent Online group (South Africa) and the Croatian Journalists' Association, which also imposes, as conditions to reveal identity, public interest and absence of danger to the well-being. In 17 cases, consent is imposed in certain conditions or circumstances, most of which related to crime. However, even with permission, the NRC (Netherlands) puts on the journalist the decision to publish photographs with (recognizable) children on controversial topics.

78 codes, all of which included in the *damage evaluation* indicator, place the problem of anonymity in the area of coverage of criminal cases. Of these, 51 restrict the identification of minors, whether they are perpetrators, suspects, victims or witnesses to crimes – 27 refer, exclusively or not, to sexual crimes. The protection of the identity of victims is predominant: including in 48 codes, it is materialised in formulas such as the prohibition of disseminating images.

In some cases, confrontation between law and deontology is detected. “Do not divulge the identities of children who are under 18 years old and are victims or witnesses in sexual offences to the media”, advises the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (2020, para. 41), which elsewhere in the code seems to contradict itself: “Do not report the identity of the victim, especially juvenile victim, of sexual harassment, unless it is legal” (para. 56). IPSO and *The Guardian* prevent identification of minors (in the first case, 16 years old; in the second, 17 years old) in sexual abuse cases, even if legally allowed. The same attitude is adopted by the Portuguese newspaper *Expresso*. Tanzania and Sri Lanka codes require a double “brake” – the law and the public interest. The Associated Press' decision is based on criteria such as protection of public safety, seriousness of the crime, official knowledge of the name of the person involved and the existence of a charge as an adult. *San Francisco Chronicle*

hides the name of suspects under the age of 18, but it also allows exceptions, such as if they stand trial as adults, evaluated by reporters according to the nature of the charges.

In the Portuguese-speaking world, the Portuguese newspaper *Expresso* is limited to guaranteeing the strictly protected identity of children or adolescents in conflict with the law. The codes of *Visão* magazine, the Portuguese Union of Journalists and the institutions from Cape Verde and Angola mention the indirect identification, appearing among the 28 presenting ways to avoid it. The code of the Brazilian group RBS prohibits the display of the face, other parts of the body and even clothing, in addition to the individual's name, even if only the initials.

The Mexican newspaper *El Universal* proposes the use of technical resources to guarantee anonymity. Argentine and Uruguayan codes refuse nicknames. Argentine and Uruguayan codes refuse nicknames. The Single Text does not allow to publish information about parents, residence, school, parish or association attended, messages and images online that facilitate identification. In the case of sexual crime in a family environment, four codes (of Ofcom, Seychelles, Cyprus and Jamaica) prohibit the use of the word incest.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It is a meaningful fact that 64% of the codes analysed include direct references to news coverage of cases involving minors. However, among the values and principles to be respected, only *damage evaluation* reaches a high value: 77.3% of the 128 codes dealing with the matter and almost half of the analysed codes. Regarding recommended conducts, restrictions within the scope of the identification subcategory are relatively common, but not very significant in the others. It is therefore legitimate to conclude that, although they generally recognize the ethical issues raised by this type of news coverage (73 reserve a specific part for it), most codes do not include measures to ensure effective protection of children, adolescents and young people.

Standing out from the rest of the indicators, damage evaluation is present, in various forms, in 99 codes. In almost all, it is included in the category *dissemination* and in 85 in the subcategory *identification*, predominantly linked to restrictions imposed by the approach in criminal contexts. It is residual the reference to other potential damage domains, such as stigmatization and induction of negative feelings. 32 codes enounce the impact directly caused by journalists, while reporting. Few mention the risk affecting the personality or development of minors. This does not mean the absence of protection, provided by the identity concealment.



Invocation of public interest, well-being and privacy protection reaches very close records – always less than a quarter of codes referring to minors. The public interest, as a journalistic value, is particularly striking in the British universe, because in the regulatory framework of IPSO, which influenced others, this type of coverage is part of the set of subjects considered, from the outset, as being of public interest, whose existence has to be demonstrated by editorial officials. In the 200 codes analysed, note to the almost total absence of references to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the children's interest or the respect for their decision to participate in reporting.

On prior consent, results are also not significant, regardless the subcategory, except for *identification*. The indicator with highest value – *consent in certain conditions or circumstances*, in 36 codes – represents 28.1% of those incorporating references.

As the last frontier for safeguarding rights, preservation of anonymity is the most relevant rule enshrined in ethics documents, because it intends to protect individuals – minors, in the case – to avoid harmful consequences of media exposure. It is no surprise, therefore, that 89 codes (68% of those dealing with this type of news coverage) fall into the subcategory *identification*.

Content analysis indicates a greater tendency on the part of audiovisual media groups to include rules on minors in their codes. BBC's Editorial Standards is one of the most detailed, but CBC News and RTÉ also pay special attention to this field of journalistic practice. This proves that the type of company is not decisive, although it is likely that the attachment of European state-owned audiovisual groups to public service contracts and the control of regulatory bodies over private ones will influence the format of ethical devices.

“One cannot seek redress for journalistic shortcomings and lack of integrity in a piece of paper; a dialogue with individuals or organisations is needed to achieve that”, point out Fidalgo et al. (2022, p. 226), by drawing attention to codes' limitations. Ideally a place of confluence of values with means to implement them in a professional context, codes do not cover all situations. It is when facing specific cases that journalists and editorial officials make decisions – even because, according to The Charter of Munich, journalists cannot be compelled to perform a professional act or to express an opinion which is contrary to their convictions or conscience *consciência* (*Appendix III*, 2021). That is why they often face ethical doubts such as those referred to by Fullerton (2004, p. 512):

It is difficult to know how children feel about what they may say in an interview. The power dynamic is unequal and they may not feel able to decline comment.

In addition, their parents may have made it clear that they expect their son or daughter to participate and children feel pressure to conform to parental wishes. ■

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