

The voiceless generation – (non-) representations of young citizens in the coverage of education stories by South African newspapers

ABSTRACT

Nyamnjoh (2005:1) argues that "... the media ... can, in principle, facilitate popular empowerment as a societal project". The problem is that the news media do not seem to be doing this for young people in South Africa. This paper provides an analysis of selected news media and their representation of young people through coverage of the education sector in South Africa. The aim is to examine whether the media are fulfilling two key functions in their role as facilitators of popular empowerment in the public sphere: Do they provide citizens with the information they require to engage in issues that affect them (such as education), and secondly, do the media provide a space for citizens to voice their concerns and debates about those issues? A content analysis of print and online media provides an overview of the kind of coverage young people are exposed in reports on education. On the strength of the evidence thus acquired, this paper argues that the news media are failing to enable young people to be active citizens because they do not provide information that engages the youth in respect of education coverage and, when they do cover education, the reports do not feature the voices of young people.

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INTRODUCTION

Young people in South Africa find themselves in a difficult public space. They were born free of the weight of growing up in a racially based society. Yet they find that things have not changed to the extent they may have expected: the society in which they live is still largely structured around race and inequality. Moreover, the legacy of apartheid is still very much theirs to deal with.

This paper examines the possibilities for the news media in South Africa to engage with young people in developing their identity as citizens of the 'new' South Africa. In 2014, South Africa has celebrated 20 years of democracy and many young people will have voted for the first time in the national elections – a key milestone in the transition from being a child to being a citizen. In democratic societies, the media are regarded as a tool, on the one hand to help citizens engage in public debate and in political activity, and, on the other, to help them voice their concerns (Rheingold, 2008). Through the news media, citizens are informed about the political processes and spaces in which they can engage. The media are also a space where citizens can engage with the political elite by being represented, having their voices heard and 'speaking' to those in power.

The media have potential to link marginalised citizens to political discussions and political participation (Hartley, 1996; Hermes, 2006), and thus they play a key role in citizenship. Through the consumption of media, it is argued, audiences are spurred to participate and engage in democratic processes. In a country like South Africa, where the media have in one way or another been central to the ideology of 'nation building' after the end of apartheid, this role is perhaps even greater. This paper examines how the news media in South Africa represent the youth in their coverage of educational issues. It argues that the media are not only failing to engage the youth with notions of citizenship in their education coverage, but also fail to play a significant role in the formation of citizenship identity and active citizenship through their exclusion of the voice of the youth in reporting about the latter in education stories. The paper examines the news media as an institution of democracy and as a vehicle for invoking notions of citizenship. The research comprised an examination of media coverage in education stories about youth in South Africa.

The National Youth Policy of South Africa defines *youth* as those South Africans between the ages of 15 and 35. South Africa's newest generation of youth are often called the 'born frees' and would include many of those between 15 and 35. The born frees are

... the 'first generation to come of age politically after the end of apartheid' and a generation whose members have 'no official limits to where they can go, work or live, or on whom they may date or marry. They have experienced a series of peaceful democratic elections that increasingly turn on new issues and personalities with diminishing links to the past. They consume news provided by a reformed public broadcaster and have increasing access to privately owned radio and television broadcast news, as well as to increasing amounts of private and international news on subscription satellite television' (Mattes, 2011:7).

The argument being made by Mattes is that this generation is free of the burdens of the past. They are also fortunate enough to have a plurality of media with which to engage, media that are 'reformed' and thus offer a space for public debate, informing citizens and thus engendering active citizenship. Karppinen (2009:9) deftly summarises the imperative: "In theorizing the relationship between media and democracy, citizens' access to a wide range of information in the public sphere is unarguably a key condition."

1. REPRESENTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA

During the turbulent height of apartheid in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, young people were regarded as the instigators of much of the political and social unrest in the country. Young people were protesting against the imbalanced schooling system – Bantu education – in which education was used as a tool by the National Party government to ensure both segregation of races and the continued power of the white minority in the country. The philosophy behind Bantu education meant teaching black youth in a way that ensured that they were taught "the value of their own tribal cultures [and] that such cultures were of a lower order and that, in general, the blacks should learn how to prepare themselves for a realistic place in white-dominated society, namely (at that point in time) to be 'hewers of wood and carriers of water'" (Christie & Collins, 1982:60). As opposition to apartheid grew, so did dissatisfaction among young South Africans with the inequality in education. School children began to protest against the injustice of their poorly equipped schools and of segregationist policies. This "led to the bloody Soweto uprisings of June 16, 1976, in which several pupils lost their lives" (Kamwangamalu, 2002:2).

As young people protected their rights, their representation in the media was often contradictory. On one hand, they were regarded as the heroic 'young lions' who defended their rights and helped to bring about the end of apartheid (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006). As the 'young lions' they were the social force behind the political struggle, urging change. They were seen as the leaders of the struggle and as martyrs prepared to "give their lives to the cause" (Abdi, 1999:157). On the other hand, they were the 'lost generation' who lived "outside of the social structures" and were "devoid of the values deemed essential for 'civilized' society" (Seekings, 1996:103). In these representations, the young warriors who were rallying for their rights became 'shock troops' who resorted to untold tactics to gain the upper hand and win the war against apartheid, and in the process they became militant, ungovernable and savage (Seekings, 1996).

As South Africa has moved further away from its apartheid past, representations of young people have remained unclear and often as contradictory as those during apartheid and the early 1990s. One current characterisation styles young people the 'born frees', that is, the first generation born without the burden of racial segregation as the political backdrop to their growing up in South Africa. Boyce (2010) argues that this is a generation that does not relate identity to race and that its members are optimistic about the future and their place in building that future. One often reads or hears the sentiment expressed here: "This generation is frankly not faced with the racial discrimination that previous generations struggled with. When I walk in the malls, I see inter-racial friendships, I see a black boy holding hands with a white girl. Although this still turns heads from

both races of the older generation, the country is certainly warming up to this reality, that we are a democratic country. That a new generation has arrived, one that is less and less concerned with racial prejudices" (Khanyile, 2013:54).

On the other hand, as in apartheid, there are those who are regarded as the 'lost generation', the generation that needs to be fixed, one that is plagued by too many problems (HIV/Aids, unemployment, crime, illiteracy) to be integrated into society in a functional manner (Boyce, 2010). As Everatt (2000: 1) argues, 'the lost generation' returned in media stories and everyday speech.

2. MEDIA AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

According to Wahl-Jorgensen (2006:198), Jürgen Habermas – in his work on the public sphere – creates "one of the most influential narratives of the relationship between media and citizenship". While much of Habermas's work on the public sphere centred around the notion of face-to-face discussion, it also placed a strong emphasis on the role of the print media such as newsletters and newspapers in facilitating public debate. In liberal notions of the public sphere, the media play a central role in facilitating what happens in the space between citizens and the government by providing information, promoting debate and allowing people to articulate their ideas and grievances: "The media are thus the principal institution of the public sphere or, in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century liberalism, 'the fourth estate of the realm'" (Curran, 1991:29).

The Habermasian argument centralises the media as a tool for invoking notions of citizenship and for providing citizens with information enabling them to participate and engage in political and civic action. Mediated citizenship has been examined from a number of theoretical perspectives including political communication and more recently cultural studies. Authors have written both in favour of and against the media's centrality in invoking notions of citizenship. While one should not take for granted the centrality of the media in democratic participation and citizenship identity, the relationship between the media and citizens should however not be dismissed. Wahl-Jorgensen (2006:199) contends that "by paying more attention to how citizens actually engage with politics through media, we better understand the strengths and limitations of existing opportunities for participation". Dahlgren (2006:275) engages with these notions in a useful way. While he does not suggest that the media are central to the process of public engagement, he regards the media to be a 'catalyst' for the way in which audiences "coalesce into publics through the processes of engagement with issues and discursive interaction among themselves, either via face-to-face settings of various kinds or mediated ones".

One way in which the media facilitate engagement in the public sphere and invoke notions of active citizenship is through their role in informing citizens on issues, processes and opportunities for engagement. Coleman and Blumler (2009:42–43) hold that "the media is crucial in enabling citizens to encounter and make sense of events, relationships and cultures of which they have no direct experience". The work of Norris (2000) illustrates that individuals who have been exposed to more news on television and in the printed press are more likely to be politically active and more knowledgeable about politics.

Another function of the media in a democratic society is to provide citizens with space to voice their concerns and their opinions about issues related to the public and the national interest. Couldry (2010:1) regards the ability to have ‘voice’ or be able to tell others about ourselves and our place in the world as “crucial to the legitimacy of modern democracies”, and while the media can offer a space for ‘voice’, he notes that it is failing in this regard. Other researchers point out that in order for the voice of young people to make its way into the public sphere, they need to create their own ‘youth media’ (Levine, 2008; Soep, 2006). In a libertarian framework, one could see the media as a megaphone that enables citizens to engage in political debate and activity in a way that makes them feel valued within democratic society. In South Africa, the media have a strong perception of their own role as the ‘voice of the voiceless’, a champion of the poor. However, as Wasserman and De Beer assert, this is more as a result of its strong opposition to the government than of a sense of duty to the public and a need to inform citizens: “While the media claims it serves the public interest, this is seen in terms of a “Hegelian state versus civil society dichotomy” (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005:363), in which the public – and the media by virtue of being its advocate – is seen as somehow distinct and even opposed to government” (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005:46). The problem with this kind of perception is that rather than actually champion the voice of the marginalised, the media ignore those voices and simply oppose the government as a confrontational space. The public space is thus open only to those who have access to the media and who have the power to be heard.

The difficulty is that in order for the media to operate as spaces that facilitate engagement, the media need to be seen to be listening to more voices than simply those coming from people who occupy spaces of power. Too often, journalists are perceived as only listening to those in power, the government official, the business person or the NGO spokesperson without moving beyond the obvious (Wasserman, 2013). While South Africa’s youth may be termed as the ‘born frees’, they are certainly not the powerful in society. Their marginalised status means that they often go unheard in the mainstream media. The commercialisation of South Africa’s mainstream press has meant that the ideology of the powerful elite is often at the forefront of coverage on all issues and has resulted in a “public sphere [that] has become more commercialized” (Duncan & Reid, 2013:496). The voice of the marginalised is neither heard nor being listened to in mainstream public debates in the mainstream media. Listening here is not just the auditory sensation of hearing sounds, but what Couldry (2009:579–580) explains as “the act of recognising what others have to say, recognising that they have something to say or, better, that they, like all human beings, have the capacity to give an account of their lives that is reflexive and continuous, an ongoing, embodied process of reflection”.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research aims to provide some insight into how the youth in South Africa are represented in education stories by a range of different news media across the country. The newspapers were chosen as being samples typical of their media type – one community newspaper, a regional daily, a national weekly and the online website of a large media organization. The *Grocott’s Mail* is a weekly community newspaper serving the town of Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape

Province of South Africa. The *Grocott's Mail* website puts its readership at approximately 12 100 per week (Grocott's Mail, n.d.). The *Daily Dispatch* is a regional daily newspaper based in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. It describes itself as a newspaper that "endeavours to open discussions and highlight issues that should be a priority on every Eastern Cape reader's agenda so that positive change can be initiated. The paper covers a region that is the birthplace of many prominent South African politicians but remains one of the poorest provinces in South Africa" (*Daily Dispatch*, 2012a). The most recent AMPS (All Media and Products Surveys) figures have the readership of the *Daily Dispatch* at around 237 000 readers (SAARF, 2012:2). The *Mail & Guardian* is a national weekly newspaper with a readership of 425 000 (SAARF, 2012:2), which has a long history of in-depth and analytical reporting on key aspects of South African society. News24 (2007) regards itself as "Southern Africa and Africa's premier online news resource" and, according to the international marketing firm Effective Measure (Spacestation, 2014), has approximately 50 million page views and just more than 3.5 million unique browsers per month. A recent study (Malila et al, 2013) has shown the consumption by young people of news media to be high enough to justify a content analysis of print media (approximately 55% of young people surveyed said they used newspapers for news consumption). Their use of online news websites was lower (approximately 40%).

The content analysis was conducted over a three-month period. Rather than focusing on any story that mentioned the youth, the aim of this research was to examine how the South African youth are represented in media coverage of education issues in the sample. As learners, stakeholders and participants within the education system on a daily basis, one would expect both the youth and youth voices to be at the centre of education coverage. The analysis covered the first three months of 2012 (3 January to 30 March) and included not only all the reports relating in any way to education but also coverage of school, college or university education or education to learners and students. January, February and March are the busiest months in South Africa's education calendar in that they represent the beginning of the academic year in schools and tertiary institutions. The bias this choice may incur is intentional for it provides insight into both how the education system in the country works and how this is covered by the media.

A total of 562 articles were coded based on a number of criteria ranging from wider publication-based criteria, which included:

- The page and section it occupied in the newspapers
- The location (national, regional or local)
- The setting (urban or rural)
- Whether the article included a picture

The content analysis also included article-based criteria, among which were:

- The characters in each article (these were the people who were featured as actors in the article)
- The sources/voices for each article

- The tone adopted towards the characters
- The tone adopted towards the voice
- Whether the article had an element of youth action (i.e., were the young people portrayed as undertaking an activity?)
- Did the article include mention of citizenship or the young people as citizens?

While the content analysis did investigate quantitative aspects such as the number of articles and the kinds of actors represented, it also aimed to gather more qualitative information by investigating the tone of the stories towards the youth, towards the characters and towards the main voices/sources in each article (latent content). This provided the study with not only information about the numbers of youth quoted or the numbers of youth featured as characters in the stories, but also how the youth were represented and how they were portrayed in the stories gathered.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The content analysis discussion was aimed at examining how the media fulfilled the two roles regarded as important to its functioning in a democratic society (i.e. informing citizens and providing a space for young citizens to express themselves in the public domain through media coverage and representation).

The topics most prevalent in the reports were those that were primarily concerned with the intervention by the national government in educational issues (8.3%). This is indicative of the turmoil in which the country's education sector at present finds itself. Taking into account the fact that the sampling period coincided with the opening of schools and universities, it was not surprising that the second main topic was admission of learners and students to schools and universities, respectively (8.1%). In addition to admissions, two of the other most prominent subject categories were the performance of schools or universities (7.2%), sports (7.1%) and stories regarding the provincial education departments (6.9%).

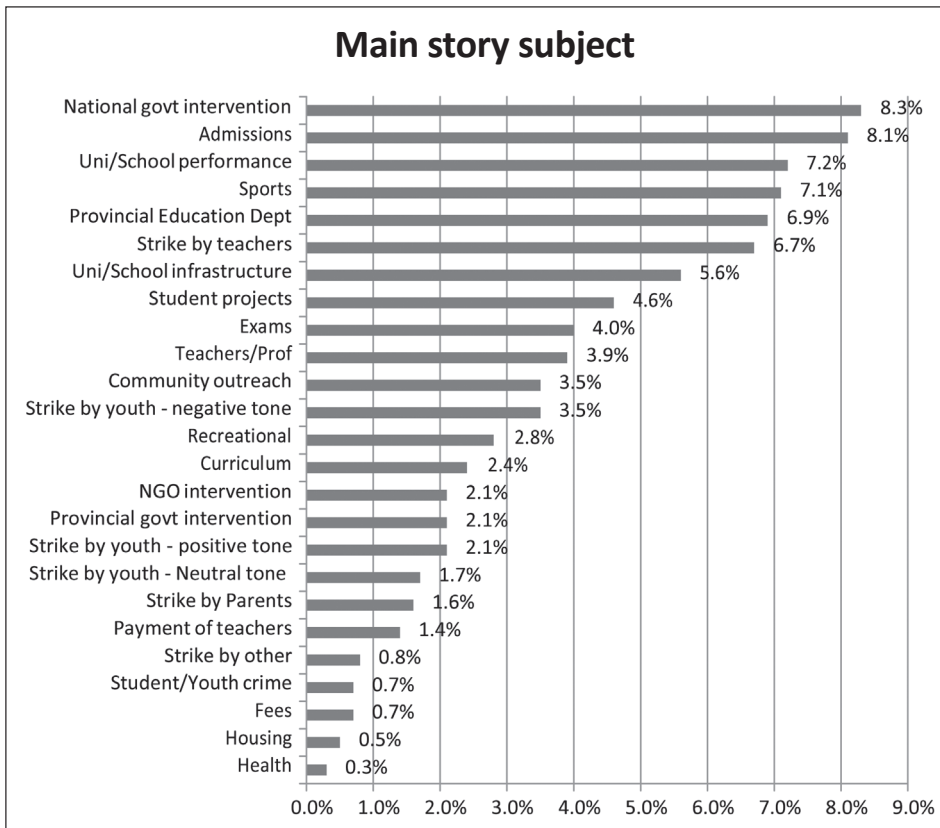


Figure 1: Main story subject represented in the analysed stories

Many of the stories were focused on macro-level issues within the education sector – such as school infrastructure, admissions and the performance of schools at the regional and the national level – and fewer stories focused on topics that directly related to young people within the system (such as protests by students, examinations or sports). This points to information about education at a level beyond those people who are at the centre of education, i.e. young people. This would make the kind of information available in the media to young people less relevant than stories about their work and the issues that impact on them directly. Despite this, young people were the main characters in more than four out of ten reports (41.8%). This is significant in that it shows that young people seem to be central to the stories themselves and feature as prominent characters within many of the stories. The second biggest category of main actor coded was government officials (21.1%). Other significant main characters were university or school management (10.6%), teachers or lecturers/professors (8.1%) and union members or officials (6.5%).

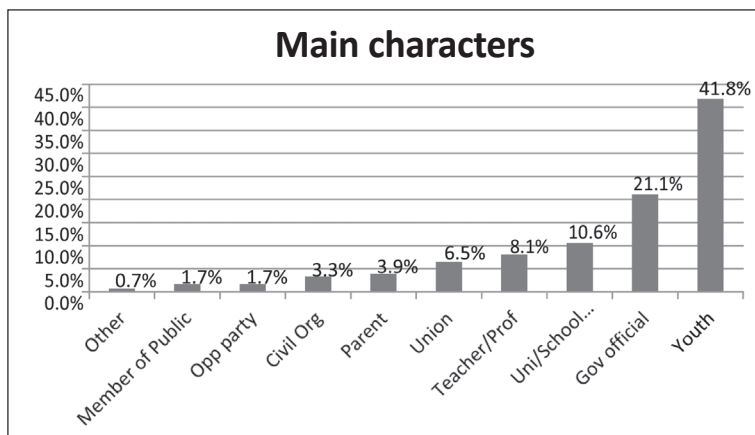


Figure 2: Main characters represented in the analysed stories

More than 35% of the stories were coded as having a neutral tone towards the main character in the report, while 33.2% were coded as adopting a negative tone towards the main character (either mostly or slightly negative). Closer scrutiny of these negative stories revealed the government to be the main target of negative tone. In a number of stories a negative tone was also adopted towards the youth. As main actors, however, the youth were largely written about in positive or neutral terms.

One of the issues being examined in this paper is whether the media do make a connection between education and how it manifests in being a citizen or what education means in terms of civic engagement. Education and particularly curricula across both basic and higher education have been targeted as key areas for teaching notions of citizenship in South African schools. This teaching includes what it means to be a responsible citizen and the notion of engagement in civic and political action. Through analysis this paper aims to establish whether the media reiterate these links and whether this is represented in how the media report on young people. The findings indicate education coverage to be largely formulaic, event- or issue-based and that it makes very few links between education and citizenship. Each report was examined for references to citizenship or whether it depicted young people not simply as characters in the story (i.e. as students or learners) but as citizens learning to function as ‘good’ citizens. Only 19 of the 562 stories (3.3%) mentioned citizenship or the responsibilities of the youth as citizens or established any link between education and the learning and teaching of citizenship. Of the 19 that did make specific reference to citizenship, very few (3.3%) established a direct link between the youth and citizenship and merely referred to citizenship in general terms. Examples of those that did relate to the youth and citizenship include:

- “A key purpose of schooling is to prepare our young people to take up their place in adult society” (*Daily Dispatch*, 2012b).
- “These SGB elections represent grass roots democracy at its best” (*Daily Dispatch*, 2012e).

- “Mazibuko also presented alternative interventions she said her party would put in place to make education work for citizens”(Daily Dispatch, 2012c)

More general references to citizenship include:

- “This government, chosen by South African citizens, is failing them. Hopefully the citizens will realise which direction to take” (Daily Dispatch, 2012d).
- “A spirit of public accountability and a citizen’s entitlement to quality, timely service for all has to be recreated” (Mail & Guardian, 2012).
- “We hope you will seize this opportunity to build bridges of understanding between the communities so that we can all be better citizens of our community” (Grocotts Mail, 2012).

One of the categories examined for both school and university level throughout the analysis was youth action. This aimed to examine whether stories contained an element of political action, civic action, recreational action (such as sport), educational action (such as writing examinations or taking part in a learner/student competition) and criminal action (such as stealing school equipment or drug taking). When examining the entire body of articles coded, the majority (64.2%) did not represent action taken by students. This means that, despite the fact that the stories should be focused on the youth and their engagement with education, the majority of the stories lacked an element of action by the youth. In the coverage of university-level education, the level of reported activity taken by students did not increase. Political activity by youth at university-level was found to be significantly higher than at school level and accounted for 19.2% of the stories coded in this category. School-level political activity accounted for only 6.7%. No action (which had been a large majority for all the stories coded) came in at 49.6% at the university level. This shows that while youth at school level fail to engage in activities related to education, this seems to change once they enter university, where there appears to be an increase particularly in political action. At school-level education, action by the youth was found to be largely absent. More than 68% of the stories (68.5%) that were coded at school level reported no activity by the youth.

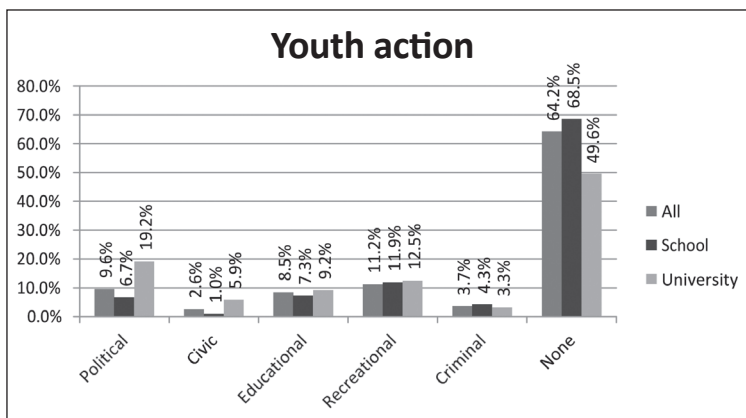


Figure 3: Youth action across different levels of education as represented by the sampled media

In addition to the kind of information being provided by the media for and about young people within the education sector, this research investigated the kinds of voices being represented in the coverage. This was done so as to establish whether the voices of young people are being heard in stories about education. If, as argued earlier, we regard the media as a space for society to hear the voice of the marginalised, do we hear the voice of young people in the news media studied? Stories were analysed for the voice or source of information for each story to establish who was being quoted, or whose voice was being heard in each story¹. In the stories that were coded, the voice heard most often was that of a government official (26.5%). This is perhaps understandable as journalists using traditional, liberal reporting styles will look to officials to substantiate events, reports or incidences. This was further supported by the fact that the second-most quoted voice was someone who was involved in school/university management (19.5%). The youth voice was found to be noticeably absent. Only 8.5% of the reports used the youth as the main voice.

There seems to be a reluctance or inability on the part of journalists to consider the voices of the young people who are central to the stories they write about. Voice has to be inextricably linked to listening, because as Couldry (2009:580) argues, by voice we mean “that [which] is embodied in the process of mutually recognizing our claims on each other as reflexive human agents, each with an account to give, an account of our lives that needs to be registered and heard, our stories endlessly entangled in each other”.

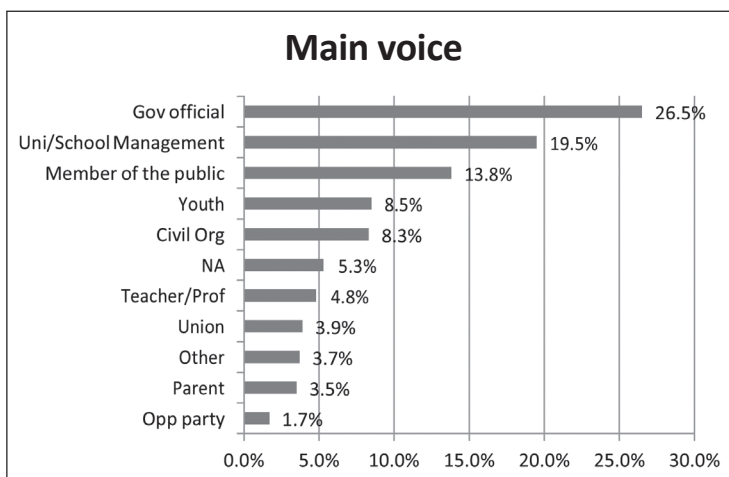


Figure 4: Main voice represented in the analysed stories

Among the stories in which young people were the main voice, almost half of the stories were related to a positive event in which the students were involved – such as winning a competition,

¹ This is coded separately from the 'character' of each story, who is the central person or organisation being written about, rather than the person or organisation being quoted as the source of information, the 'voice'.

sports or other recreational activities. The other half of the stories were related to a negative representation of the youth, where they were, for example, identified as ‘a mob’ or protesting students or angry students or a naughty child. In coverage related to protests by students, the voices being reported on were those of representatives from student bodies such as the Student Representative Council (SRC) or the Learners Representative Council (LRC). This follows the trend of journalists looking for ‘official’ voices to listen to and to represent the young people who feature in their stories.

5. CONCLUSION

This research is a snapshot of how young people are portrayed in the news media in South Africa. It is clear that although the youth have a place as the main characters in stories about education, they are however neither being spoken nor listened to with regard to education or citizenship in news stories. There seems to be a disjuncture between the normative roles of the media in terms of informing citizens in ways that could lead to a sense of citizenship and civic action, and the kind of information that is being provided about education and youth in the news media. This is perhaps further reflected in the actions of the youth who do not engage in civic or political action in relation to education and learning. Although education revolves around the youth, the reporting in the news media is written in an events-based style and written not for the youth or to elicit the voices from the youth, but rather about the youth as neutral actors. The voices of South African youth are marginalised within the news media’s coverage of education. This reinforces perceptions of young people about themselves as being the ‘lost generation’ and as people without agency who do not speak up for their rights – a voiceless generation.

For South Africa’s youth to be active citizens, they need not only to practice new skills and learn key understandings of citizenship and democracy, they also need to have access to information that engages them on the issues that influence their daily lives (such as education). If one takes the findings of this study into account, the South African youth could see themselves as and could be seen by others as voiceless, inactive and disinterested – as citizens who contribute little to democracy. Their voices as heads of social clubs, political clubs or civic organisations are not being heard within coverage of the education sector. They are moreover not being heard in the press despite their strong presence as actors. These results suggest that the South African news media are not only failing to engage the youth within their stories on education, but in doing so are marginalising their role in young people’s civic and political identity.

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