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Children should be protected from media influence.

The passive consumer wants packages, but those, [Francis Bacon] suggested who are concerned in pursuing knowledge and in seeking causes will resort to aphorisms, just because they are incomplete and require participation in depth. (*McLuhan 2001: 34*)

Introduction

Children may not need to be protected from media influence because the media, especially television, might have bad influence on children's behaviour or development. Instead, protection may be anticipated because the amount of time spent with media does not allow for other activities that would be more important in a child's life. Thus, children need to learn how to use the media to their advantage by growing up as 'media literate' individuals.

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Media influence

It is not definitive that media do have influence on children's behaviour – be it negative or positive. Media influence is not easy to determine – if verifiable at all². Quantitative research has found that boys and girls between the age of two and 18 spend an average of around three hours watching television per day. Taken other media also into account this time adds up to around six hours per day – the 8-18 year-olds a bit more, the 2-7 years-olds a bit less (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999). Children spend more time with TV than with any other medium. Therefore, the prevalent influence is expected to emerge from television use. A lot of research has been done to examine the influence of television on children – with diverse results. Significant associations between media exposure and negative health effects have been found as there are: violence and aggressive behavior; sexuality; academic performance; body concept and self-image; nutrition, dieting, and obesity; and substance use and abuse patterns (Rich and Bar-on, 2001: 156; Bar-on and others, 2001: 423).

The good

Media influence is not a priori bad. Reflected media consumption can promote positive aspects of social behaviour such as sharing, manners, and cooperation. “Watching educational programming [...] is associated with high levels of school-related and language skills, and watching a lot of general-audience programming is associated with low levels of the same skills” (Wright and others, 2001: 1364). Status among friends benefits from television consumption at the age of eleven since in this age TV programs are popular topics for conversations and increases peer interaction (Johnsson-Smaragdi, 1983: 189). A more sophisticated relation between TV viewing and self-esteem that even affects children's self-esteem after the adolescents have grown up has been found by a later study conducted by Johnsson-Smaragdi and Jönsson in 1994 (Rosengren, 2000: 163). According to these findings the impact differs among boys and girls: television correlates positively with the boys' self-esteem, but negatively with the girls'. For the former it might be important just to talk about individual scenes and special-effects of the program whereas the girls see immaculate idealised bodies in advertisements and soaps which might make them feel unsatisfied with their own appearance without realizing the cause, though.

² No empirical approach can come to ultimate exact and final results due to its inductive nature and the impossibility to consider all variables.

The bad

Eighty-two percent of parents are “deeply concerned about sex and violence on TV” and half of all parents believe the portrayed violence affects the children’s behaviour, says the Kaiser Family Foundation (2001). Even “television news can traumatize children or lead to nightmares” warns the Committee on Public Education (Bar-on and others, 2001: 423).

The most prominent (yet not state of the art) study emphasising the relationship between viewed violence and violent behaviour was conducted by Albert Bandura in 1963 using inflatable *Bobo* dolls as ‘target’ for children’s aroused aggression by ‘violent’ clips. Like in many other studies, methodologies were not perfect. “The anti-television violence advocates base their policies on scientific evidence of harm but, in practice, choose the evidence selectively” (Fowles, 1999: 49).

The violence debate has brought forth contrary views, too. According to studies by Ronald Drabman and others in the 1980’s watching violence on screen reduces the violent behaviour by desensitizing the audience, i.e. people grow callous and unconcerned to real-life violence. The arousal and catharsis theory, a term coined by Feshbach and Singer in 1971, states that viewing violent content lowers levels of arousal and induces a momentary lassitude, as Jib Fowles (1999: 29) describes it. David Gauntlett (1995: 21) argues that these findings are flawed insofar that some children in the control-group were not allowed to watch their favourite programme which led to an increase in aggression. Fowles, too, did not find any studies in the literature that test for a cathartic effect (or the lack of it) from viewing (cartoon) violence that suffice his methodological concerns (Fowles, 1999: 90).

A third point of view on the influence of television apart from good and bad is, that there is *no* influence: The inhabitants of the St. Helena island in the South Pacific received television for the first time in 1995, but there is no evidence of any adverse effects on the children. The St. Helena research project showed that not television programmes do “unequivocally or inevitably influence children’s social behaviour in adverse ways” but adult people affect the children’s behaviour (Charlton, 2000). The influence of family, neighbourhood, schools and communities is considered of higher significance in shaping behaviour than media influence. Stable conditions seem to make the children immune to what they are watching.

The ugly –why spend so much time with poor content?

Since there is no ultimate prove that media have *no* effects, it is surely better to err on the side of caution proposes David Buckingham in (Barker and Petley, 2000: 67). And David Gauntlett regards it logical that children behaving antisocial and

disruptive are more interested in violent and noisy television programmes, but “the idea that their behaviour is a *consequence* of these programmes lacks both rational consistency and empirical support” (Barker and Petley, 2000: 56, original emphasis). Spending the mentioned amount of time – a quarter of each day – with television and other media does not leave much room for alternative activities in the children’s lives. Time spent watching television is time where children do not (need to) speak a lot and thus do not train this capability. One need not to wonder that knowledge of vocabulary decreases when children-shows such as *Teletubbies* and *Dragon Ball*, for example, lack qualitative language (Gaschke, 2000; Wainwright, 2002). It is during unstructured play time that children develop creativity and interests in a variety of fields. Apparently, a child’s time would be better spent otherwise.

Alternative activities often need the supervision of parents, though. Television is seen as a very effective means for parents to keep one’s children quiet and get some rest from care. This might be one reason why children spend that much time with media, especially television. The primary reason for consumption should be the interest in the portrayed content, but it could also be that it is only the fascination that goes out from screen³ media. Here the medium might triumph over the message. It is easy to spend much time consuming media – the effort is not very big to turn on the TV or use other⁴ ‘hot media’ as Marshall McLuhan (2001: 25) called media that are ‘high in definition’ and ‘low in participation’. The hot media are easily consumed in a passive manner without reflecting much upon the content. This kind of laziness prevents children from thinking about alternative activities. Lack of ideas, spatial constraints, or even monetary issues could be reasons, too. Toys get more expensive as they are affixed to current cinema production or are highly sophisticated technological devices. It is the interactivity, i.e. not simply being at the receiving end, offered by ‘new media’ that not only excites children (Nadin, 1997: 322). Not being very active physically, children on the one hand get more and more lazy, but hyperactivity on the other hand increases at the same time – children “miss the experience of movement” (Nadin, 1997: 340).

³ Do not fascinate all light-emitting media? Are they not like the stars in the sky, the open fire, or just the headlights of approaching cars by night that make us stare into them, attracted like mere insects?

⁴ In 1964, McLuhan classified TV, “when really used” (2001: 34), as cool, compared with ‘the movie’ being hot. Since television technology gained in quality (e.g. colour became standard) it now can be seen in its everyday use as a hot medium, high in definition and low in participation.

Protection

Whether it is the violence and sex portraying content or just the amount of time spent watching television that needs to be reduced for/by children – the means to accomplish this goal remain the same. If the violence or sex as appealing factor is not available anymore the children will lose interest in the medium. Not without reason it is said that “sex sells”. The means of protection are three-fold and can be classified within the sender-transmission-receiver model as follows:

- Primary: content is changed at the source.
- Secondary: content is filtered.
- Tertiary: use is prohibited by parents.

The most absolute way to protect children from media influence would be to remove the TV set(s) and all other media in the child’s environment. But this approach firstly would not be possible in a media society and secondly not help the child to become a media literate person.

Change

The average user cannot do much to change the provided content – s/he could appeal to broadcast companies to favour informational, educational, and non-violent programming, for example. As usual the laws of the market (offer and demand) dominate the field, and demand for low-quality shows seem to exist. Governmental censorship as an absolute protection is not a favourable solution in a democracy. Notably, Bill Clinton, in his 1996 State of the Union message, urged the media to create “movies, CDs and TV shows you’d want your own children and grandchildren to enjoy” (as quoted in Vercammen, 1996) and thus indirectly stresses article 17d of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: “Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child” (United Nations, 2003).

Filter

More and more new media devices allow filtering content by way of technological means. New TV sets nowadays have a V(iolence)-Chip installed. The V-Chip permits parents to block out programming that exceeds preset levels for violence, sexuality, or strong language. Of the forty percent of all parents that have a V-Chip-equipped TV in their home, only half of them do know it, and just about a third of the latter use it (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001).

Today concerns about the ‘new media’, especially the Internet get stronger since a third of the older teens (15–17) use the Internet for six hours a week or more

(Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002b), and “the Internet has made it too easy for children to access pornography, hate literature, violent content and so on” (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002: 403). A variety of software applications exist to filter out different levels of unwanted content. There are two different approaches to content filtering. The first is a voluntary international rating system where the actual website contains specific mark-up that rates the site which is then taken into account by special software plugged to the web-browser. The drawback of this approach is that “not only ‘objectionable’ content, but *all unrated sites*” (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002: 403, original emphasis) are blocked which by far are the majority of websites. The second approach is to filter out specific sites by checking for keywords, which can be done via the content provider, i.e. the ISP (Internet Service Provider) or again via the browsing application on the user’s machine. For either approach the parent has to be aware of these possibilities and need to have the knowledge to install and setup these filter applications. Especially the access to health information depends on how the filters are configured. Also, not all pornographic web sites are blocked, so determined children will find some, argues (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002a). One can hope that PICS⁵ (Platform for Internet Content Selection), a new way to help restrict content for children recommended by the World Wide Web Consortium, becomes more available in the near future.

Rating systems

Rating systems help parents decide which programmes their child should be allowed to watch, or more general, which media content might suit them at which age. Rating systems are in force for a variety of media: Television, Entertainment Software/Video Games, Motion Pictures, and Audio CDs. Far more parents use a rating system than the V-Chip, and find it useful – although many of them do not find that shows are rated accurately. Unfortunately, a majority of parents still do not know what the ratings mean (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001), but maybe the children know and are so more attracted by some rated items to see their likely unsuited content.

Good role models

More secure than using tools is a good education, and to keep an eye on children still is the best protection from media influence whatsoever. Children tend to imitate parents and other adults. Thus, it is crucial to act as good role model, but also rules for using the media should be set up.

⁵ <http://www.w3.org/pub/WWW/PICS>

The Committee on Public Education presents parents some recommendations in (Bar-on and others, 2001: 424). According to these children's total media time should be limited to no more than one to two hours per day, which is roughly a third of the current consumption time. Children should be monitored when they view shows – consequently there should not be a TV set in their bedrooms – or even better, programs should be watched together and their content discussed. That way parents do not only learn about the watched content by the child but also about the child's reaction to it. To oppose obesity and eating disorders, it is recommended to switch off the TV during breakfast, lunch, and dinner, since “children coming from families who are used to having television on during meals show a worse food intake than that of children coming from families where television is off during meals” (Caroli and Lagravinese, 2002: 224). Generally, a good idea for parents is to not watch/use content themselves that they consider bad for their children. Regarding computer and Internet use, similar rules apply: Time spent on the computer and/or Internet should be tracked in combination with how this time is used. Also, putting the computer in a family/community area makes it easier to know how and what it is used for. Children on the Internet using e-mail, newsgroups, and chats, for example, face dangers that they have to be aware of. Just as in ‘real-world’ the same common sense rules about caution with strangers apply. A child should never give out personal information such as her/his name or address, school name or anything else that could identify one personally. Since people met on the net do not need to be who they say they are children should never arrange an in-person meeting without accompaniment. In January 2003, Britain launched a £1 million advertising campaign addressing these issues (Homeoffice.gov.uk, 2003).

Media education

Applying these portrayed recommendations and sets of rules hopefully will help educating the children to reflect upon media use themselves.

Interpretation of media content has become a vital skill for everyday life. To distinguish between reality and fiction consumers need to be able to ‘read’ various types of contents, in particular ads, and determine their intention. Especially on the World Wide Web advertising gets harder to distinguish from journalism or other content since there advertisements are hidden as user-specific and user-dependent content – it is not only anymore distinctive banners counting ‘hits’ and ‘clicks’. Today barely facts like ‘We reach the right audience’ or ‘We can measure brand equity more accurately’ sell in online advertising, says Bob Ivins, the research director at Yahoo! Europe in (Bulkley, 2003).

Literacy

Not only literacy in the notion of the ability to decode written material is needed to truly understand such media. One has to discriminate, to evaluate, and to assess evidence. Richard Hoggart (in Cox, 1998: 58) defines this 'critical literacy' as a "literacy which is critically aware, not easily taken in, able to 'read' tricks of tone, selectivities, false *ad hominem*⁶ cries, and all the rest." In 2000, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) researched on international level to compare student's performance. Among others, reading literacy was evaluated. For PISA reading literacy is defined as "the ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society" (OECD, 2001: 21). Thus it questions whether the children can discover the structure of a text, interpret its meaning and link it to other resources, and whether they are aware of stylistic methods such as irony and humour. As said above these capabilities can hardly be achieved through passive television watching.

Doris Lessing (in Cox, 1998: 48) emphasizes the importance of reading books. People today are ignorant to about anything outside their speciality and do not know any history because they did not read books as adolescents. Even from bad novels one could get a huge amount of information, for example about other people's history and culture. But becoming a reading person for life, one who might even prefer 'low defined cold media with high participation' over 'hot media', involves that parents read to their children at an early age and that the children read books by themselves for pleasure before the age of twelve (Gaschke, 2001; Cox, 1998: 134). It is an unjustified view on books that they always have to be 'for' something – enjoyment ought to be enough and positive side-effects may arise even decades later.

Media literacy is the ability to 'read' television or other mass media. Media literacy maps with reading literacy for the later stages of comprehension such as understanding of meaning and interpretation. So if there is a literacy which is specific to one medium, it is manifested only in the earlier phases of processing, i.e. decoding a message (Buckingham, 1993: 29; Meyrowitz, 1998). Educating media literacy results in less vulnerable children and thus protects children and adolescents from possible media influences – without being dependant on other instances, be it content providers or technological tools. That it is not wrong to keep children's amount of media consumption low can be also seen in the negative correlation between 'high' media users (more than ten hours a day using media) and

⁶ *ad hominem* (Latin): "To the man" (criticizing one's opponent rather than her/his ideas).

contentedness (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999), i.e. children spending less time with media seem to be happier.

These are some reasons to encourage children to read a book or even to embark on some alternative activities. In today's media society it is said that media creates our reality, but still there is a 'more real' reality to experience; one that is not only grasped by visual and aural senses.

Conclusion

Instead of concentrating on protection from media influence or 'bad' content like pornography and graphic violence it is of higher importance to lead and educate children to a considerate and reflected use of the media to their own advantage (and not as waste of time). By experience they will eventually learn to 'protect' themselves, if necessary. Being media literate persons, *the children* use the mass media as tools – not vice versa!

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The open-mesh silk stocking is far more sensuous than the smooth nylon, just because the eye must act as hand in filling in and completing the image ... (McLuhan 2001: 31)

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