



Media As an Influence on Young Children

MASS MEDIA VERSUS NEW MEDIA

IN THIS ISSUE

The Media's Role and the Impacts Brought Upon on Children and Family

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ABSTRACT *"Television is a very potent, intimate presence in many homes...Scientific studies and test fall short of capturing this reality of how individual human beings live with television."* (Nietzke 1978, cited in Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p.69). The once supposedly safe and secure homes to many young children have taken a turn at the century into a high-definition of digitalized stage! The media is the awakening giant startling the audiences with yet another leap into the emergence of new technologies and functional screens. The media has as much potential for good as for ill. Research over the decades has shown much unabated and significant results in children's television viewing and their overall development. This article presents an overview of media's role and the impacts brought upon on children and families in how television viewing shapes everyday experiences. A closer look at how the mass media advancement into new media has led to the development of theoretical perspectives and the implications for early childhood educators will also be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 20th century the home environment has undergone evolutionary change. Gone were the nostalgic days filled with conventional picture books and traditional toys. Anderson & Evans (2001) note that apart from the hustle and bustle of daily activities spent together with family members, homes were probably quiet and safe places for young children and family members provided audiovisual entertainment in the form of story telling and music during the times of leisure (Anderson & Evans, 2001, p.10). Today, with the ever-changing demands and needs of the society, rapid competitions arise with the critical need to perceive and deliver information



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accurately. The media now plays an important role and one of the tools is – television. It has entered steadily into billions of homes and according to Gunter and McAleer (1997):

"The standard of television set now represents the receptacle for a plethora of information and entertainment channels delivered through a variety of distribution system." (Gunter & McAleer, 1997, pp.vii-ix).

Evra (1998) notes that research into the relation between children's television viewing and their cognitive, social and emotional development has continued unabated and the results are significant (Evra, 1998, p.ix). In Buckingham (1993), he notes the intense relationship caused by the media – television:

"The relationship between children and television is a topic that provokes considerable anxiety for many people. Television is held to be the root of most, if not all, evil among the young. It destroys the imagination, provokes delinquency and violence, undermines family life." (Buckingham, 1993, p.vii).

Television has indeed continued its explosive growth with very significant implications for the media experiences of children and their families. Hence it is important to start examining the nature of children's television viewing and to examine the basic underlying concerns about how viewing shapes everyday experiences.

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview on television's role in and impact on both children's development and the family context. In addition to discern the complex and significant interplay of how new media forces in a child's life along with the television viewing experience. In this paper, we will also look at how the influence of media on different aspects of children's television experiences has led to the development of theoretical perspectives and the implications for early childhood educators.

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA'S ROLE

Striking a Balance of 'Good' and 'Bad' Media

Barret (2000) defines media's role as one that seeks to increase children's critical and creative powers through analysis and production of media artifacts. He believes the creation of media awareness would contribute to democracy in the society by helping people to become more critically aware of the role of media and their power of persuasion (Barret, 2000, p.515). According to Weddell (2001), mass media and its products convey specific messages to its audiences, in particularly with the evolutionary change towards a digitalized arena children have become active consumers of these information and merchandize (Weddell, 2001, p.4). In creative doing and critical understanding, it is also noted by Weddell (2001) the good traits of media:

"Recent studies reveal that media enhances children's global awareness, as well as their understanding of social, cultural and economic differences. Other research indicates that other forms of children's symbolic development (play, words, graphic images,



imagination) are also extended, and children have shown complex understandings and opinions from what they have 'read' via the media." (Weddell, 2001, p.4).

The media here portrays as an inseparable arm establishment to the body network organization that extends to the in-depth communication of the society. In doing so the tension arises to stress between media as *knowledge* or media as *process*. Clearly media has much potential for good as for ill. Evra (1998) cites that media has moderated important impacts on young children and their family:

"Television often has been criticized for undermining important aspects of family life by displacing other important family activities." (Evra, 1998, p.108).

Much concerns and debates revolve around family context and viewing content. Winn (1985) argues that although television has a common ground and activity for family members, the quality time is never the same because each individual remains isolated in their attention to it and diminishes the unique family interaction (Winn 1985, cited in Evra 1998, p.108). Robinson (1990) stresses the importance of 'family cohesiveness' and attributes that television viewing has decreases the social interaction outside the family (Robinson 1990, cited in Evra 1998, p.108). With the many facets of media, it is difficult to establish a positive or negative view of media's role but rather one has to consider the social, cultural, values and economic factors that have come together to create and influence this ever changing trend in our society.



FAST FACTS

The Power of Media

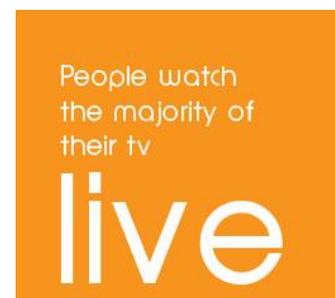
Nevertheless, over the past decades media has entered the homes of billions around the world. Evra (1998) notes that people spend 3.5 billion hours watching television everyday. This is suffice to say that media has become our species' preferred and most powerful means of mass communication (Evra, 1998, p.xi). Our daily communication with the media shapes the way we perceive about information reception.

"What we need to explain are not objects but experiences." (Kohak 1978, cited in Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p.1).

Children are exposed to two kinds of media – the background exposure of media and the foreground exposure of media. Anderson and Evans (2001) advocate the context and the content of media exposure as:

"Background exposure media occurs when the child is present as his mother watches a TV program and foreground exposure of media occurs when the context is designed for young children and the child pays attention to and or interacts with the medium." (Anderson & Evans, 2001, p.11).

Exposure to television is almost universal and there is a good reason to be concerned about its impact on children and families. Although there have been a large scale of research and surveys done to investigate and to curb media influences, the chameleon nature of the society as a whole changes with individual needs and demands over the process of development. Gunter & McAleer (1997) argue that although television may be a universal feature I most homes, it is used differently by individuals who have access to it (Gunter & McAleer, 1997, p.1). Hence it is important to start examining the nature of children's television viewing and to examine the basic underlying concerns about how viewing shapes everyday experiences.



EFFECTS AND CONSEQUENCES

Impact of Media on Children and Family Context

INFLUENCES

"Behavior doesn't take place in a vacuum, it takes place in a world." (Altam 1984, cited in Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p.45).

Evra (1998) believes that media has both positive and negative influence on young children. While it can be used to strengthen positive values, in the same way that it can be undermined (Evra, 1998, p. 108). Depending on the variable components of a child's social context, television viewing can be a motivating factor and a demoralizing factor. Television viewing can be an assisted tool in learning to stimulate imagination, creativity and even teaching prosocial skills. While on the other hand, it can induce fears, anxieties and perception of dangers to young children. Media not only affects children but the family members as well. According to Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) it is believed that family members are more alienated from each other leading to tension and anxiety because viewing acts as a barrier to stop activity and communication with family members (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 112). The Mental Institute of Health (1982) cited in Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that:

"Television seems to have changed the ways in which family interaction occurs. When the set is on, there is less interaction...There is more privatization of experiences, the family may get together round the set, but they remain isolated in their attention to it." (The Mental Institute of Health 1982, cited in Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 118).

Levine (1996) states that the effects of media are not trivial and the consequences are often distressing as:

"The media, a major disseminators of attitudes, assumptions, and values can ill afford to ignore their responsibilities while asserting their rights." (Levine, 1996, p.8).

From this perspective of media influence on young children and families, one assumes that although specific television information is transmitted, the way in which it is interpreted, and even perhaps discounted, depends on an individual's social and cognitive needs, level of development, experience, and these variables change from one situation to another.



TECHNOLOGY

New Media

At the turn of the century, the media seems to be an awakening giant startling audience with yet another new leapt into – new media. The emergence of new technologies includes digital television, standalone interactive toys and functional screens etc. These changes switch to digital high-definition and interactive formats with the potential of its arresting images and sounds for greater social interactions. Hence it will be a great challenge to ensure that the programs these children interact provide content that is age appropriate and developmentally beneficial.



Perspectives Social Learning Theory



The vast experiences of children's television viewing and the much emphasis in the research of the influence of media of young children has led to the development of two theoretical perspectives in which examine a closer look within the child's social context and the variable components of communication.

The social learning theory was one of the first theories to be used to explain television's impact on children. It emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Bandura (1997) states:

"Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling; from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action." (Bandura, 1977, p. 22).

Social learning theory explains human behavior in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. The component processes underlying observations are: (1) Attention, including modeled events (distinctiveness, affective valence, complexity, prevalence, functional value) and observer characteristics (sensory capacities, arousal level, perceptual set, past reinforcement), (2) Retention including symbolic coding, cognitive organization, symbolic rehearsal, motor rehearsal), (3) Motor Reproduction including physical capabilities, self-observation of reproduction, accuracy of feedback, and (4) Motivation including external, vicarious and self reinforcement. Milavsky et al. (1982) and Wackman et al. (1977) state that social learning theory has been applied extensively in short and

CONTEXT

VERSUS ATTITUDE

long term effects in understanding the essential components of a child's viewing experience composing of the elements of observational learning, modeling and imitation may be mediated by a host of other variables (milavsky et al. (1982) & Wackman et al. (1977), cited in Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi 1998, p. 135).

Cultivation Theory



Professor George Gerbner developed the cultivation theory in the mid 1960s to study whether and how television viewing may influence viewers' ideas of what the everyday world is like. It emphasizes that television has long-term effects which are small, gradual, indirect but cumulative and significant. Cultivation theory also of television viewing on the

attitudes rather the behavior of viewers. In other words, cultivation theory predicts and expects frequent viewers to give more answers consistent with television's portrayal of the world shown in mass media than of the real world shown by actual context. Cultivation research looks at the mass media as a

socializing agent and the amount of viewing or exposure is a very important variable in television's impact on thought and behavior. It is believed that light viewers are more likely to have many other sources of information (whether social interaction, reading or studying) that take up much of their time and displace TV viewing. They have more diverse sources of information and a greater number of behavioral modes and are less likely to take the television content seriously. On the other hand, heavy viewers are reported to have fewer sources and rely more on the reality perceptions that are consistent with television portrayals. In short cultivation analysis is:

"the investigation of the consequences of this ongoing and pervasive system of cultural messages." (Gerbner et al., 1980, p. 14).

CHILD AND THE ADULT

Implications for Early Childhood Educators

As educators we play a vital role in influencing children's impression of the media. It is essential to determine what children interpret and learn from what they watch. The implications of both theories suggested that young's children's reliance on perceptually salient cues and their more concrete approach to material may result in different perceptions than those older children. Thus, age and gender differences, as well as personality, experiential, and contextual ones, interact with the television content to affect what is perceived and what the children will response. Hence it is important



to look at the children's perception in the viewing situation. The role of the educator here is seen as one who not only prepares the environment well but one who is sensitive to individual needs and has a sound understanding of child development and applying the three lenses approach which examining an individual's social and cognitive needs, level of development, experience, and these variables change from one situation to another.



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