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Media consumption among Children

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Introduction

Media (including television) has become a very important part of our lives. It has both positive and negative impact on children's development. As parents, teachers and educators we need to integrate media awareness in our thinking and education so that we can create an environment sensitive to our children's developmental needs. A greater awareness on our part will help us benefit from the positive influence of media and steer clear of its negative traits.

Media (including television, internet and print) allows quick transmission of information to the international, national and local communities which may allow families to feel more supported in the face of disaster. Nevertheless, repeated television coverage may perpetuate fear, panic and despair associated with a disaster. A child potentially re-experiences the trauma each time it is witnessed. Many children witness these images without adult supervision.

Moreover, media coverage may create anxiety in caregivers which impairs their ability to comfort children impacted by the coverage. While media serves an important role in delivering news and current events, often there is a degree of sensationalism and insensitivity to such reporting. The following is an example of a tragedy and the response of the media to such an event.

Children are not "miniature adults", as their brains are still developing and their understanding of the world is less sophisticated. However, like adults they must be given the opportunity to gently face the reality of what has occurred, to ventilate thoughts and emotions, to mourn with the care and support of adults and utilize

effective and healthy coping strategies. It is well known that long-term emotional consequences occur when children are allowed to become anxious, frightened and confused for extended periods of time. It is important that we arm our children with the coping skills and resources so that they are not chronically afflicted by these traumatic events. Interventions should include protecting survivors from further harm, reducing psychological arousal, keeping families together, and fostering much needed

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communication and information during these times of distress. Media coverage and rumors are important influences on the coping ability of children and families and exposure should both be monitored and reduced.

Encouragement of continued efforts for mental health practitioners to work together and across disciplines should be supported and interventions utilized should always be developmentally appropriate.

Future research efforts should be directed towards gaining a better understanding of the specific types of news coverage that are most likely to be associated with negative reactions in children. Most of the current literature is based on recalled viewing rather than direct viewing habits. Data on actual news consumption in addition to recollected news consumption would be useful. Finally, a more systematic exploration of the impact of TV coverage of tragic events across developmental levels is necessary. This research can help guide journalists, editors, and publishers to make evidence-based decisions on how to cover a tragedy in a way that will communicate the necessary information and minimize the detrimental effects on the audience and also help parents to make more informed decisions about what their children watch on television.

One of the most powerful transmitters of these messages is of course the television; programs of which can be seen around the world to serve many purposes. In most contemporary societies, television is a highly influential medium of Popular culture and plays an important role in the social construction of reality. (Morgan, 1990) The effects of television should therefore be recognized as having the ability to alter

social, economic and political situations in its places of propagation and beyond. I will be exploring these cultural shifts in detail pertaining to India, a developing nation undergoing a grand cultural shift in part due to the rapid growth of satellite television in the 1990's and its programming.

Television is unlike any other medium of mass communication in that its social effects are prominent, and able to prompt substantial change.

Literature Review

Reasons for watching usually revolve around passing time; for learning; for companionship; for relaxation, escape and arousal (Gunter and McAleer, 1997: 19). Studies in Britain have shown that children watch television when they get bored, and that they expect excitement and pleasure from television rather than education (c.f. Livingstone 2002, Buckingham 1996). According to Hill, 'For children, television is "good" when it is engaging, action packed, funny, and above all, entertaining' (2004: 183). The reasons why children watch television are complex and, like adults, relate to their need to find information, to pass time, to be entertained and to find comfort, with some research suggesting that it can be a way of dealing with hostile social environments (Master, Ford, Arend, cit in Gunter and McAleer, 1997: 28).

Television can be of general benefit to children. It can bring them into contact with aspects of life they would not otherwise become aware of. It can provide a valuable tool in the home and at school not simply to keep children occupied but also, if used appropriately, as a constructive way to use their time.

Television is not a 'one-eyed monster' lurking impishly in the corner of the living room, kitchen or bedroom waiting to exert an evil influence over young members of the household. It is a channel through which a range of entertainment, drama and learning can be obtained and experienced and increasingly these days it is under the control of the viewer (Gunter and McAleer, 1997: xii-xiii).

Television is still an important medium for children and they use television actively. However, while children regard it primarily as a source of entertainment (see Buckingham, 1996: Livingstone 2002), many parents often see media, particularly for young children, as an important educational tool that can assist children's intellectual

development (see Rideout et al 2003: 12). In a recent American study, only 38% of parents believed that television mostly helped children's learning, but they were relieved to make use of media, because they saw advances in the educational quality of media content (Kaiser Foundation: 2006: 32). In focus groups almost all parents pointed to 'learning' as one of the biggest advantages of television, and observed their children learning from television (ibid.). Buckingham and Sefton-Green, writing about the Pokemon phenomenon, point to the potential pedagogic value of non-educational programmes for children as well (i.e. those not particularly produced for educational aims), that show children how to learn (2004). They argue that education should be distinguished from learning (ibid.: 29). Children can learn skills from popular culture (e.g. Pokemon) such as how to behave, what to want and to feel and how to respond (p. 28). This type of learning is distinguished from 'official' educational knowledge. Viewed from this perspective the 'learning' that takes place via television makes it one of the major players in the socialization process alongside more traditional socializing agents such as the family, school and peer groups (Signorielli & Morgan 2001: 333), reflecting society's values and culture (Takanishi 1982: 99).

Children develop different types of media literacy as they grow up. Today children start experiencing television almost from birth even if it is just on in the background, (Rideout et al 2003: 12). As children mature, television viewing increases due to increased comprehensibility. Anderson and Pempek established that children aged 12 to 24 months paid higher levels of attention to Teletubbies, a programme specifically designed for them, than to Sesame Street, a programme targeted at older children (2005: 510). This act of paying attention was part of the process of developing cognitive skills.

Children's responses to melodrama and soap opera also involve a complex combination of 'distress and delight', in which the masochistic experience of pain and suffering is balanced by a utopian desire for the joy and pleasure that might have been. Furthermore, as in the case of horror, these emotional reactions depend upon complex forms of cognitive or intellectual judgment, in which children's developing knowledge of the genre, and of the medium itself, plays a crucial role. And, here again, the social context of viewing and of talk about viewing significantly determines

the ways in which children make meaning and pleasure from what they watch (1996: 140)

Young children start to understand television from an early age. As they mature they learn to draw distinctions between their own world, what is shown on television and whether it is true to life. In a three-year British study of five year olds in a large urban school, Gosling and Richards established that children could talk about what was real in television programmes, and some showed understanding of television's basic technical processes. These studies illustrate the extent to which children (from infants to preschoolers) gradually develop their televisual literacy.

In summary then, children gradually develop different types of skills through watching television. Over time they learn how to understand television, but may not perceive it as adults do. Understanding what children can and cannot do with television and how they perceive it is therefore essential for examining how it impacts their lives. As children acquire more experience of television, their ability to comprehend its content and translate those meanings into learning increases.

Findings and analysis

Most theories on child development suggest that repeated exposure to any stimulus in a child's environment forcibly impacts mental and emotional growth. Childhood experiences contribute to overall development by creating connections and responses within the brain. Appropriate stimuli like close interaction with loving adults; an interactive environment; engrossing play; and age-appropriate learning activities enhance the brain's development. However, environments that encourage intellectual passivity can deprive the brain of important chances to develop and grow. They can stunt social relationships, creative play, reflection and complex problem solving. Many television programs and video games lack an experiential learning environment that engages both the body and the brain of children. This may have negative consequences on children's growth, especially in their early years.

Effects on Health

Although TV stimulates attention it does not encourage any physical action. If children spend long hours in front of the TV and /or the computer, they are likely to

have less time for physical activity. Children without natural physical outlets develop frustration or irritability. Increased hours of watching television can also lead to eye strain and postural problems related to the neck and back.

The fast paced and attention grabbing nature of programming reduces children's natural ability to concentrate and remain actively focused on a TV can give children a restricted picture of what it means to be a boy or girl.

Representations of men and women in the media shape attitudes about masculinity femininity, body images and physical appearances in our society. Commonly portrayed gender stereotypes include - a) downplaying the capacity of women in areas of work outside the home, b) portraying "working women" as unable to take care of their family, c) good looking women being and successful women being portrayed as good looking, d) good looking, strong, rich men having a good car, a big home etc being shown as successful, likeable by women, and happy. It is unacceptable for men to be sensitive or emotional; such men are portrayed as effeminate and less successful, disliked by women.

Media Violence

Based on a five-city study conducted in 2001, the Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR), New Delhi, found that suspense and violence are the most "potent hooks for children in any type of media." The study indicated that children in these cities watch television – all categories of programmes, across channels and throughout the day for 2-10 hours every day, with over 50% of their favourite programs comprising adult family dramas. The study also found that there were on an average four acts of violence per minute on various television channels. Most young people confront thousands of violent acts during their childhood media interactions, mainly television programming and video games.

Good television programming has made a wealth of information available to children, which can enhance cognitive and language development if viewing is mediated by an adult. A good program can help a child learn about different things in a very visual manner – and can lead to more sensorial learning than a book. It is also possible for children to learn about things not available in their surroundings through good television content. Programs specially designed for children actually help relax the

child. Depending on the content being watched, TV viewing produces a preponderance of slow alpha waves in the brain – which are commonly associated with relaxation. This suggests that moderate amounts of TV programming with “good” content can lead to relaxation. The effects of television depend on the content they view and how long they view TV for.

Television has a major impact on toddlers it influences their viewing habits throughout their lives. Since toddlers have a strong preference for cartoons and other programs that have characters that move fast, there is considerable likelihood that they will be exposed to large amounts of violence. Children do not become full-fledged "viewers" until around the age of two-and-a-half. As toddlers, they begin to pay more attention to the television set when it is on. They develop a limited ability to extract meaning from television content.

Children in the age group of birth to five are said to be in the motor sensory phase of development; they are trying to make sense of the various aspects of the world by means of sensory stimuli available around them. Sight, touch, tastes and smells, handling objects, stacking blocks, pouring, washing, bending and moulding, exploring, running, talking aloud and being spoken to, social interaction and imitation are few of the many ways by which children are learning to decode their environment and establishing movement and behaviour patterns that will enable them to become complete individuals eventually. Children learn to apply logic, arrive at solutions, find creative and alternative options for any given problem, and express emotions and opinion related to contextual situations only through engaging and positive interaction with the environment and the people therein.

At the age of eight, children are more likely to be sensitive to important moderating influences of television content, and will not become more aggressive themselves if the violence they see is portrayed as evil, as causing human suffering, or as resulting in punishment or disapproval. However, they are especially likely to show increased aggression from watching violent television if they believe the violence reflects real life, if they identify with a violent hero, or if they engage in aggressive fantasies.

One major group which television watching has effected is the age group between 5-13 years of age. Television violence is accompanied by vivid production features;

preschoolers are predisposed to seek out and pay attention to violence—particularly cartoon violence. It is not the violence itself that makes the cartoons attractive to preschoolers, but the accompanying vivid production features. With this preference for cartoons, preschoolers are being exposed to a large number of violent acts in their viewing day. Moreover, they are unlikely to be able to put the violence in context, since they are likely to miss any subtlety conveyed mitigating information concerning motivation and consequences. Preschoolers behave more aggressively than usual in their play after watching any high-action exciting television content, but mostly after watching violent television.

Another important group that has faced major identity transformations, sparked by the engagement in television is women. In recent years, viewers of Indian film and television have witnessed a shift from portrayals of females as innocent and subordinate in nature, into independent sexual beings. (Malhotra, 2000) While India's strong traditional heritage has always been significantly characterized by the traditional roles of women as homemakers and mothers, the portrayal of women on television has challenged this ideal, and therefore cultivated a new perception of womanhood for the Indian woman.

Conclusion

We need to encourage children and youth to:

- Recognize how media messages influence and manipulate us.
- Develop critical thinking about media messages—to uncover hidden messages and values.
- Children can get into the habit of analyzing TV programs. Their analysis does not have to match yours exactly but it is important to start
- Interpret media messages in ways that do not damage their self esteem.
- Media literacy and education is useful when children reach stages of cognitive development where they can analyze, think logically and in abstraction. As mentioned before media use starts much earlier and it is crucial for parents to regulate children's use of media at home, even before getting into media education.

But amid all the gala time we're having, what we fail to realize, is that we're harming our naive ones big time. Children with their impressionable minds and over sensitive nature susceptible to the slightest of forces, become hapless victims of these scripted realities. Having no sense of discrimination between right and wrong, reality and fiction, they tend to believe in whatever they see on the television screen and try to emulate the protagonists instinctively. And this, most of the times becomes dangerous, both to their moral system as well as to their precious lives. Shows like Emotional Atyachar, Khatron Ke Khiladi and Roadies are very much responsible for these kind of mishappenings. Recently a game show, Sach Ka Samna starred by the TV channel Star Plus was taken off air by the government for showing unethical and corrupt content harmful for the innocent minds and unacceptable to various strata of our society.

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