

## THE SOCIOCULTURAL ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND SCHOOL IN TRANSFERRING INFORMATION AND FORMING VALUES

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### **Abstract**

*One of the new problems that the countries and educational policies face is related to the "intertwining" of education in the entire "cultural life", including the media, and the "intertwining" of the media themselves in education, which through them is able to outbuild and expand knowledge, to form a more profound view of life and culture in the young generation, including values as well.*

*On the one hand, media can be useful for the education of young people being creators of original cultural values, and on the other, as distributors of such values among the numerous audience of students.*

### **Key words**

*socio-cultural, media, school communication, values, media education, media literacy, media competence formation*

*Today the media literacy is as important for the active and sustainable people as literacy was in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

*It is also important for the introduction in the contemporary and high-speed world of a content that can be accessed from everywhere and at any time.*

***Viviane Reding***

***Commissioner of the Information Content in the European Commission***

### **I. An attempt to introduce through the hypothetical image the new media user, or generation 3.0**

I decided to start with these introductory sentences because when talking about the role of the media and school in transferring information and forming values, in my eyes emerges the image of the future user of information who is currently playing on the climbing frames nearby.

What will he / she be in 10-15 years? A *user* with a certain media culture and literacy, bearer of certain global and national values, or just a *user* of the information the way the media introduce it to him / her? Now is the time to realize that they will be such as the media create them, and the media will be such as the users need them. This means that in just a few years the boomerang effect will be triggered and whether it will be devastating for the media depends on itself because user 3.0 will have such expectations of the media as they create in them nowadays. As we know, the first seven years are extremely important for the child's upbringing, and this weighs with the formation of the media values and attitudes in the children.

A long time has passed since the classical "cell" of the society (the family) adopted the media as its "legitimate third parent." The fact that another more conservative institution - the Church, in the person of Pope Benedict XVI officially recognizes the influence of the media on the education (the

papal speech "Media Influence over the Upbringing of Children") sufficiently eloquently speaks about how strong their impact is on shaping the peoples' personalities in the future.

To start up I will divide the future media users into two categories – passive and active ones.

The 6-8 year old children fall into the first category and the older ones – into the second.

I will focus on the so-called "passive users" as this group is more specific in terms of understanding the media information and consequently the formation of values, as a result of this. The very name "passive" means that children of this age group (6-8) "absorb" everything, because, on the one hand, they still have not learned to work well with the TV remote control and the computer mouse, and, on the other, because they still have not built their own system of values. Even after mastering how to work with these two devices, they keep on being passive.

In the study, completed in 2008 and led by Ezekiel Emanuel (National Institute of Health in Bulgaria), is said that "there is a strong correlation between the exposure to media influence and the health problems of children." The study is based on the best practices of the past 28 years (173 in total).

According to the team the 12-15-year old children spend 45 hours a week watching TV, 17 hours with their parents and 30 hours in school. The effect of the digital media on children has not been studied yet. The study examines the influence of the media on seven side effects: smoking, early sexual activity, child obesity, inability to concentrate, low academic success, alcohol and drugs use.

Consequently, the following question comes out: What do Bulgarian children watch on TV?

According to CEM (the Council for Electronic Media - this is one of the regulators in Bulgaria) currently in the country are produced and distributed by broadcast, cable or satellite over two hundred licensed or registered television programs. The numerous international programs offered by hundreds of cable TV networks join this group. The programs for children comprise about 3% of the total program time (14,133 hours in total out of 498,091 hours). The licensing requirements for children and youth programs per week are not high, but are difficult to implement. The children programs are not attractive to the advertisers, hence – to the TV broadcasters. The commercialization of the programming and the limited opportunity for a good choice among the multitude of programs, which are not of that high quality, causes "injury" to the children's intellectual and personal growth and makes them mere consumers. So, the children at an early age lack a choice – they either watch (endlessly) cartoons, or watch realities that flood the TV channels and which are attractive to the advertisers.

Hence comes another threat - the impact of advertising on children. The studies in this area show that the more a child grows, the more reduces the amount of time they watch TV ads. 44.8% of the children up to 9 watch the advertisements from the beginning to the end, whereas for the 18-year old this number is only 15.9 %.

In an Internet forum a mother said: "I continuously have to explain that "Beethoven" is not a dog, that "Mozart" is not chocolates and that "Always" does not mean a sanitary pad, etc." Increasingly, the experts warn about the harmful effects of advertising on children's physical health.

It may sound extreme, but it is believed that the worrying increase in diseases such as diabetes and obesity is partly due to the advertising of unhealthy fizzy drinks full of preservatives, sweeteners and flavorings.

On the other hand, advertising is undeniably a part of the modern life and a child deliberately brought up in isolation from it can get far more serious psychological problems than a child that has "immunity" against the advertising effects. That's why the children's reactions to the world created by advertising should be studied in children aged 6-8. Having in mind the fact that the children of that age apprehend the surrounding reality unconditionally, probably the heroes in the ads for them are real

characters. The children's consciousness transforms their lifestyle, taste and preferences in a model which to imitate.

What a model for imitation could a child build out of the ads that they constantly watch? Our advertising character will always eat in a gormandise manner, his / her face will be smeared with their favorite product and his / her clothes will be constantly dirty and in stains. He / She will always be busy chewing a gum and untidying the house. And his / her mother will be mainly concerned with how to buy household appliances and detergents in order to clean all the known and unknown microbes, which fill the family home. She feeds her constantly hungry family mostly with powder soups and broths, and from time to time their happiness smiles and they eat sausage meat. She is so obsessed by finding reliable antiperspirants and sanitay pads that absorbe more that one can really consider her mental health. When the future user grows up, he / she will become a complexed one who will suffer from tooth decay and bad breath, dandruff, cough, running nose and brash. But this should not surprise us having in mind the fact that they eat mainly chips, powder soups, sandwiches spread with margarine, croissants, waffles, chocolate, drink beer and grape brandy.

The image that appears before you isn't very pleasant, is it?

Unfortunately, these characters are not just on the screen. Gradually they become a reality. In fact, they are the future users of the media products, and their value systems are formed by what they saw in their early childhood. What worries is the fact that in the "parade" of objects and emotions called "commercial break" the ethical categories are often disparaged. Love, happiness, dreams - everything that requires mental and moral efforts, appear simple and accessible, only provided you have the money to buy this or that.

Experts from different scientific fields are of the opinion that this information-advertising orientation of the media hinders the development of the mental abilities in children. The children's mind, they say, gradually begins to act as a repository of samples, patterns and stereotypes.

Nature is wise. It has foreseen many things, but not the modern industry of mass advertising. Therefore, if we don't want the future user 3.0 to look like the image described above, both the media and the educational institutions should consider what "time bomb" they are setting. Could they dismantle it, postpone its explosion or remove it? Only time can tell. At present there is a red light signaling "Attention."

## **II. About the socio-cultural role of the media and education in transferring information and forming values among the adolescents**

One of the new problems that the countries and educational policies face is related to the "intertwining" of education in the entire "cultural life", including the media, and the "intertwining" of the media themselves in education, which through them is able to outbuild and expand knowledge, to form a more profound view of life and culture in the young generation, including values as well.

On the one hand, media can be useful for the education of young people being creators of original cultural values, and on the other, as distributors of such values among the numerous audience of students.

A few years ago it was thought that it was still difficult to find the actual factors and conditions under whose influence the media form new values.

Today, 22 years after the start of democracy and the transition to market economy in Bulgaria, the theory of cultural norms gets its confirmation in the aspect of changing the basic social culture. Examples can be found in the conditions of political pluralism, which until 1989 was reprimanded and often led to people taken to prison camps or even death. Today this is considered as a priority, promoted by the media; and the changes in the ownership of the production tools, such as the

privatization, are considered as a panacea for our economic problems. These standards actually are not only new, but are the complete opposite of the current notions of what is good and bad. They lead to new understandings of ideals and build new systems of symbols.

The media reflect the current social dynamics and as such they become the face of the socium in every moment of its existence. The topicality and the timeliness of the information they disseminate is not only a major feature of their work, but are imperative for their existence.

The media nowadays are increasingly becoming a place where the information is concentrated. Moreover, they are turning into a center of communication based on the creation of new spiritual values in the field of science, art and culture. In this sense, the today's media actively promote the destruction of outdated stereotypes in the public awareness and help to establish new spiritual and moral values. They influence the formation of the public opinion, although they are not the only and most important factor for impact in terms of its position, development and manifestation.

Education on the other hand also plays its favorable role and function in terms of the media in two aspects. One relates to providing a solid knowledge base in the communication culture of the mass user. The other one concerns the role of education as a field of spiritual culture in which professionals are educated that service the media as functioning cultural institutions.

In this sense, some authors do not accept the thesis that the means of mass communication are "a laboratory" where the public opinion is formed (*Mateeva S. The Power of Media in Society, p. 338, 2003*). In the best case they accept that the media facilitate the emergence and consolidation of one or another thematic emphasis in the public opinion.

The American scientists Melvin Fleur and Sandra Ball focus on the influencing effect of the mass communications and their task to develop new spiritual necessities in people, to awaken the mental processes and attitudes of the individuals. In this respect they come to an integral model of the impact of the media both on the culture of the society and on the public awareness and the individual culture of the people.

These are true and important findings and evaluations of the media also in the context of the theory of education. As far as the theory of education is concerned, the media can be viewed as an integral moderator for exploring the world, for constructing broad and rich communicative basis of the processes of socialization and culture literacy, and their destination through a systematically held and globally carried out by the state and community education strategy.

In this sense we can say that in social and pedagogical terms the media represent a peculiar educational audience and at the same time they are an institution having an educational role.

## **II. About the need for media education, media literacy and the formation of media competence**

Media researches began to be made in the European countries in the mid 20th century and during the past few years the media literacy movement is growing fast there. There are two main factors that trigger the development of media studies in Europe, namely: the technological media development and their ability to influence, and the growing influence of the American media worldwide that causes anxiety and disapproval.

The English-speaking countries feel threatened in terms of the identity of their national culture because of the lack of a language barrier with the American culture. The measures against the spreading of the American media influence in them take the form of obligatory media literacy.

In the mid-90s in Australia was introduced media training in kindergartens and it continues till the students are in their 12<sup>th</sup> school grade.

Since 1996 in England and Canada children in secondary schools have been sitting for compulsory examinations in media studies.

Media training has been introduced in many non-English speaking countries - South Africa, South America, Russia, China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, the Scandinavian countries and throughout most of Western Europe.

In 1999 and 2002 under the aegis of UNESCO were held meetings and consultations after which it was underlined that media education is a fundamental right of every citizen of every country in the world. It was recommended that it should be introduced everywhere within the national educational program, in the university education, informal training and the programs for lifelong learning. A wide range of recommendations and priorities for regional actions was also defined.

According to a survey, in Bulgaria the children spend three hours a day watching TV and dozens of times less in communication with their parents and teachers. The specialized programs for children have a relatively small share in the overall programming in the electronic media. The TV shows are only 3%, and the radio broadcasts - only 2%, according to data from the surveys of non-governmental organizations. At the same time, the operators say that the children are a devoted television audience.

Very often the Bulgarian children and their coevals around the world fall into a virtual world where aggression and violence abound. The numerous studies show that children and adolescents up to 18 watch more than 200,000 scenes of violence on television. When restricting the presence of violence in the media and the dissemination of vulgar language on the radio air, we must try to maintain the balance of rights - on the one hand the principle of primacy of the children's interests, and on the other - the rights of freedom of the media.

The prevention of violence is a constant priority in the work of the State Agency for Children's Protection in Bulgaria. The studies show that the media can be a catalyst for manifestation of aggressiveness in children when the family and the school do not fulfill their socializing function.

However, the influence of the media should not be absolutized. The media cannot be the sole reason for the increasing aggression among children. But the fact is that the media environment and its negative impacts should be continuously monitored.

And here is the place of the media education, firstly because it gives the compulsory for our times media literacy, which has almost no overlap with the linguistic literacy. This can be compared with the following truths, namely: in order the children to communicate in the conditions of verbal communication, they should know the language and rules of the literary norm; in the conditions of a written communication, some time should be spared to get ready for mastering and using the technique of writing. The same is the situation in terms of media communication - children need media literacy that will enable them to perceive and sort out the information that comes from the the media, to "communicate" with other people and cultures through the media and to know how to construct and express their messages.

Secondly, the media education is important because in terms of cultural globalization it is a way to support the traditional, national system of values and to show the young people that those values that promote the products of other cultures are not, and should not be, necessarily their own ones.

Unfortunately in Bulgaria for media education in terms of media literacy, which aims at training the teenagers and adults how to select the media sources, how to decode their messages or code their own ones, how to interpret suggestions about values, perspectives and lifestyle people are still just speaking in theoretical terms and too little is done in terms of the practical and applied aspects. The fact is that here we find it "trivial" to say that the media manipulate and zombie our consciousness, but no one seems to work on this issue with the adolescents or their parents.

The discontent with the media because of the import of foreign media products in the form of reality TV formats, the murmuring against the ads or the provocative content of the billboards remain completely sporadic. They do not have the impact of the organized and targeted measures for continuous learning at an early age, and until such measures are not taken, in the educational institutions a vulnerable, media illiterate generation will be educated that will intuitively try to cope with the daily "bombing" by the media, or, ideally, ignore them.

An important part of media education is tracking and analyzing the ways in which the media products transmit certain cultural values to the audience. These are very specific techniques, such as knowledge on the suggestions of the foreshortening, understanding of the way of impact achieved through montage, understanding the role of music, the use of lights, etc.

Media literacy teaches critical thinking, which can note the techniques and approaches in the media to highlight the meanings, convey mood, suggest viewpoints, ideas, etc.

In the children trained in that way appropriate changes could be monitored in the way they read newspapers and search the Internet for information, in the way they watch TV and movies, which are generally classified as replacing the passive with active perception. The latter is expressed in the detection and indication of the techniques used to achieve effects in a certain movie even at the time of seeing it. This, in turn, opens an opportunity to discuss with the children the validity and reliability of the information they are presented with, the social adequacy of the models of behavior of the characters that impress them. As a follow-up activity different characters and their behaviour can be discussed, etc.

In the context of media literacy the children are trained to accept the media as being their intermediaries in the transmission of messages directed to them by someone else, and in this way a counter action is built not only for the advertising of alcohol and cigarettes (which in Bulgaria is no longer done), but is also built a meaningful and controlled attitude to different ideals and models of behavior, coming from the TV screen.

Acquiring media literacy, the young people are trained how to decode the media verbal-musical-visual messages, while at the same time they estimate their earnestness in conveying the "truth" and also specify their sources and political, economic and cultural interests. This approach to media education is related to the idea that there is no need to deprive ourselves, or someone else, of the pleasures offered by the media as long as we can control the messages they give to us.

Hence, in the media education is emphasized more on the necessity to develop a capacity for more complex and more thought-out assessment of the media content, and the resulting analytical skills to form a critical attitude towards the means of mass communication. Of course this requires systematic work and certain duration of the training aimed at developing the adolescents' capacity to self-analyze the media information.

According to the principles specified by the *Aspen* American institute in order a man to be media literate one must be capable of doing several basic things. They are expressed with four keywords: access, analysis, evaluation and production. In order to be media literate a person: *firstly* should know the media, i.e. have access to them; *secondly* he / she should be able to understand and analyze the language spoken by the media and be able to deconstruct the messages that are often conveyed in the form of powerful and focused images and sounds; *thirdly*, even his / her single participation in producing media gives rich experience on the constructed matter of the media content. A man should be aware that the media information is constructed and this construction belongs to a closed group of people that from the original materials have chosen a small part and have connected it in a way that reflects their attitude or purpose; *fourthly*, media literacy means that a person is able of evaluating the media content. They should be able to assess the importance of the ideas in a film,

program, magazine or newspaper for themselves and for the society, to discover the values, viewpoints and types of behavior that the media shows or implies.

The importance of media education and the development of such skills by the man of the future are explained by the time a person spends and will spend watching TV or reading newspapers, magazines, listening to the news and surfing the Internet.

According to some studies a person who is 75 years old and sleeps eight hours a night will have spent 50 years awoken, about 9 of which will be in watching TV. In terms of time, this comprises a fifth of a man's life – time that they spent in the company of media, so the importance of the training for future communication with the media is enormous.

The purpose of media education is in the development of critical autonomy, i.e. the ability for self-understanding of the distributed by the media ideas, values and norms of moral behavior. The critical autonomy lets the adolescent develop skills to rationally decide on what to believe and what their beliefs are, rather than just copying what they see on the TV screen or on the pages of magazines.

At this stage in Bulgaria we can speak about character training in a school environment only in an indirect way and only in relation to the good will of the teachers. In this respect, media literacy classes will allow to hold discussions on contemporary topics from the media, such as: violence, aggression, lies, nobility, the good and bad in human behavior.

It is the media, which are an integral part of the everyday life of the young people, that stimulate the desire to discuss moral values. It happens not in terms of a lifeless history and foreign in terms of time and space outlook, as it unfortunately often happens in Ethics classes, but in terms of what is happening here and now, before everybody's eyes. The media are a source of countless moral problems where values such as trust, respect, responsibility, honesty, concern for the others, civil consciousness are not just blank paper concepts but socially important examples illustrated by specific people and situations. In this sense what becomes important for the education of the adolescents are the movies with moral dilemmas in them. Of course they should be given meaning, and to do so one should know the rules of their making.

### **Conclusion**

Almost in the spirit of the words that "knowledge is a virtue" the modern education cannot do without media training which is purposefully focused on developing the attention and flair to estimate what moral values the news and movies tangle, how these moral dilemmas are expressed, through what effects the impact is achieved, who has created and sent the specific message, why they do it, which the target audience is, how other people would understand that message in a more different way, what the means are by which conviction in the stated position is achieved, what alternative positions are possible.

The media education develops moral ratiocinations in a situational manner. Specific things, solutions and alternatives, are discussed, which to a greater degree means that if the adolescents fall into a situation similar to the discussed one, they will have options for action in it, or in a similar one. The discussion of the media stereotypes, the comparison of the ways the different media would present one and the same thing in terms of love, relationships within and outside the family, the ethnic and race relations are always related to a specific real situation, so the educational effect is incomparably greater than in the Ethics, History or Philosophy classes, for example. In a culture where the media have considerable impact on the behavior of the young people, and where they are an unprecedented source of imitation, the opportunity of moral and media literacy to go hand in hand is a way out of the social disorientation and controversies that ultimately result in a lack of sustainable moral principles.

The education programs for adolescents who live in an environment dominated by the media need a qualitatively new approach that takes into account the different socio-cultural role of the media and school in the dissemination of information and formation of values.

In the concept of the role of the teacher it must be taken into account that the students are socialized unconsciously in a world where the answers are at their fingertips, and the media in a simplified way give them interpretation of any question. The development of basic skills should also include interpretation of the media content because the development of critical thinking mainly concerns the notions created by the media and are “rooted” from an early childhood, and they subconsciously determine our understandings of the world.

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