

Emerging need for Media Literacy in schools

Seema Khanna

Consultant and Resource person on Youth, Gender and Media related issues; Member of the 'National Adolescent Resource Team' of Rajiv Gandhi National Institute for Youth Development and President, Association for Social Welfare and Human Development

INTRODUCTION

Media is the most important tool to provide information, education and entertainment. It shapes and mobilizes public opinion and also acts as the forum for public discussion and debate. Looking at media's reach and impact on human psyche, way of thinking and actions, it can play positive role in children and young people's growth, development and character building. Although not much research is done in our country regarding the kind of content being made available to children and young people via media and the effect it can have on their psyche, behaviour and overall growth and development, available data (both global and Indian), reports and analysis indicate that since the advent of globalization and satellite boom, media seems to have deviated from its role of a socially responsible medium. Growing number of parents, educators and child advocates are alarmed about the lack of quality media for young people and increasing availability of low quality entertainment featuring violence, sexual content, undesirable role models and lack of diversity. Serious questions have been raised about the short and long term effects of this material.

This paper is an attempt to probe into the issues stated above. On one hand it explores the content available to young people and the impact it can have on young people's overall growth and development, while on the other, it recommends media literacy in schools as a way out and the need of the hour.

CHILDREN/YOUNG PEOPLE & MEDIA IN THE WORLD TODAY

As per the report* (Ref 1) 'Children, Youth and Media Around the World: An Overview of Trends and Issues', prepared & compiled by Susan Gigli for Unicef, a look at the world media landscape for children and youth

immediately presents two opposing themes: opportunities and risks. In many countries, youth have access to a greater number of multi-media choices than ever before—conventional, satellite and cable TV channels; radio stations; newspapers and magazines; the internet and computer and video games. Today there is greater availability of foreign programming and media, and less official censorship and control in many parts of the world. Information, email and images flow around the world faster and more freely than ever.

The Unicef research, which was conducted in the age group 15 to 19 years old in various countries including India further reveals that television is the dominant medium for young people—and adults—around the world. While in industrialized countries there have been recent outcries over rising levels of aggression, obesity, substance abuse, eating disorders and unsafe sexual behavior among youth, increasingly attributed to commercial media aimed at children and youth, in developing countries, where resources limit domestic productions, majority of programs for children and youth are imported. Unfortunately, much of the content contains characters and messages that, at best, are simply not relevant to local cultures, and at worst convey violent images and mass marketing messages.

The report '**Sex on TV - 4**' released by **Kaiser Foundation***, based on a study, which tracked the broad outlines of sexual content on TV since 1998, indicates that the amount of sexual content on television has increased dramatically. There are nearly twice as many scenes with sex today as there were seven years ago in the same sample of television programming. One in every nine shows across the TV landscape – excluding daily newscasts, sports events and children's shows – includes scenes of sexual intercourse either depicted or strongly

Correspondence: Seema Khanna, E-mail: seemarkhanna@gmail.com



implied. Studies also show that: Of the roughly 14,000 references to sex a teen would see on TV each year, only a small fraction (165) will include any reference to abstinence or delay of sex, birth control, risk of pregnancy, or sexually transmitted disease (American Academy of Pediatrics, Sexuality, Contraception, and the Media, 2001).

The report '**Generation M, Media in the lives of 8 to 18 years old**'* concludes that the sheer amount of time young people spend using media—an average of nearly 6 1/2 hours a day—makes it plain that the potential of media to impact virtually every aspect of young people's lives cannot be ignored. The report highlights that media use begets media use: those young people who spend most time using computers or playing video games also spend more time watching TV and listening to music.

LACK OF PARENTAL SUPERVISION

Fueling concerns is the decline of parental supervision over young people's media habits. The Unicef Report reveals that many parents are simply too busy to be closely involved in what their children are consuming. Also, youth programming is sometimes not scheduled when most youth are actually watching, so they end up watching adult material. In addition, it is increasingly difficult for adults to know what young people are consuming. They can't keep up with the changing television fare, electronic games and websites, and they also cannot track where their children are consuming media—in their rooms, at school, at friends' houses, in internet cafes or even just hanging out. In Japan, for example, the majority of young people possess mobile phones and more than three-quarters of them access the internet via their phone. The same concern is also highlighted in the survey conducted in 2004 by Kaiser family foundation, '**Parents media and public policy**'*. The report presents a highly paradoxical situation. It says that, without a doubt, Parents are very concerned that their children are exposed to too much sexual content, violence and adult language on TV yet they are not doing anything regarding it. It concludes that the modern parent has a conflicted relationship with TV: deeply concerned about the impact it is having on their children, yet inviting it into their homes, their children's bedrooms, and even their automobiles; favoring limits on sex and violence in TV shows, but opposing restrictions on junk food ads in children's shows, despite being convinced that such ads influence children's food

choices. These and other seeming contradictions are simply part of today's media landscape, an important but not always clear background against which policymakers, advocates and the television industry itself must seek common ground.

EFFECT OF MEDIA ON YOUNG VIEWERS

In the article **Women and Media***, published in Farzaneh, Journal of women's studies and research in Iran, Dr Shirin Ahmad-Nia discusses Media's effect on gender identity. She says that the presence or absence of role models, how women and men, girls and boys are presented, and what activities they participate in on the screen powerfully affect how girls and boys view their role in the world. Studies looking at cartoons, regular television, and commercials show that although many changes have occurred and girls, in particular have a wider range of role models, for girls "how they look" is more important than "what they do."

The article quotes from a report by the American Psychological Association, made after analyzing some 300 studies which studied effect of variety of media, from television and movies to song lyrics, and looked at advertising showing body-baring doll clothes for preschoolers, tweens posing in suggestive ways in magazines and the sexual antics of young celebrity role models. The report highlights that such images may make girls think of and treat their own bodies as sexual objects.

The article also mentions another recent study on media's impact on adolescent body dissatisfaction which found that:

1. Teens who watched soaps and TV shows that emphasized the ideal body type reported a higher sense of body dissatisfaction. This was also true for girls who watched music videos.
2. Reading magazines for teen girls or women also correlated with body dissatisfaction for girls.
3. Identification with television stars (for girls and boys), and models (girls) or athletes (boys), positively correlated with body dissatisfaction (Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002).

As per the article, some studies show that repeated exposure to media with sexual content may influence teens to have sex earlier. But here's the scary part: those same studies show that the younger a girl is when she has



sex, the more likely she did it under peer pressure, or even coercion.”

Research on the influence of media violence on youth by Craig A. Anderson and others⁵ makes conclusions after studying various previous researches. The report mentions that the research on violent television and films, video games, and music reveals unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behaviour in both immediate and long-term contexts. The evidence is clearest within the most extensively researched domain, ‘Television and film violence’. Short-term exposure increases the likelihood of physically and verbally aggressive behavior, aggressive thoughts, and aggressive emotions. Recent large-scale longitudinal studies provide converging evidence linking frequent exposure to violent media in childhood with aggression later in life, including physical assaults and spouse abuse.

Similarly various studies point out towards direct and indirect effects of media on adolescent smoking and alcoholism. As per JAMA and Archives Journals young people who view more alcohol advertisements tend to drink more alcohol. According to a another study published in the of Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, Young people are beginning to drink at an earlier age than ever before and their actions can have consequences ranging from poor grades to alcoholism and car accidents⁶.

INDIAN SCENARIO

Although not much research has been done regarding the kind of content available to Indian youth belonging to various regions and socio economic background and the effect it can have on their thoughts, behavior and overall growth and development, the following articles and data reflect a concerning situation.

In the discussion forum initiated at dimdima.com on ‘**Role of media in the society**’⁷ Amarendra Kishore mentions, “Today television channels and newspapers are making fast money by cashing on the news in wrong sense and wrong way. In the race to become more popular and to make money they have broken all the limits media must follow while serving to build a healthy and progressive society.”

*Justice Markandey Katju a Judge of the Supreme Court of India in his article, ‘Ideal and reality: media’s role in India’*⁸ writes, ‘What do we see on television these

days’. According to him, some channels show film stars, pop music, disco and fashion parades (often with scantily clad young women), astrology or cricket. He thinks it is a cruel irony and an affront to our poor people that so much time and money are being spent on showing cricket, film stars, disco-dancing, and pop music. Some TV channels show cricket day in and day out. What is important is not the price rise or unemployment or poverty or lack of housing or medicines. What is important is whether India has beaten New Zealand (or better still, Pakistan) in a cricket match, or whether Tendulkar or Ganguly has scored a century. Is this not sheer escapism?

In the article ‘**Electronic Media Misleading youth**’⁹ published in The Hindu, noted film director, Mr G V Iyer comments that electronic media is misleading the youth by imparting a kind of culture that is unacceptable to our society. “We should create an atmosphere that is conducive to the pursuit of self-evaluation, rather than one that seeks self-pleasure.”

*In the article ‘Trivial Pursuit’*¹⁰, Seema Khanna shares the experiences she had while addressing gathering of adults and parents in various programmes regarding media and young people. She writes, ‘Head of institutions, teachers, counsellors, parents and others asked several questions. How could children be protected from smoking, drinking and pre-marital sex? Who would they approach to protest against the exploitation of nudity and implicit and explicit sex? Globalisation and satellite TV expose Indians to Western lifestyles. The media accords space for vulgarity, nudity and consumerism to compete with others, unconcerned about the fact crass materialism destabilises the economic situation and value system of most of its middle class patrons. Women are encouraged to dress indecently in the name of high fashion. Columns dwell on quirky subjects: How many times should one have sex? What is the right age and way to kiss or to initiate a physical relationship? How can one keep one’s partner? Should cricketers’ wives be allowed to accompany their husbands on the World Cup tour? Should cricketers have sex the night before a match? Provocative headlines are common, even on front pages. Reams are written glorifying homosexuality, pre-marital sex and promiscuity.’

The article says, ‘The ‘hip and happening’ crowd might argue that the media reflects society’s tastes. If society



wants sex and sleaze, why should the media not cater to this demand? The question is, at what cost?’

*The article, ‘Media must introspect’*¹, mentions about the public interest litigation filed in the Supreme court against two newspapers. The PIL outlined how newspapers today are publishing titillating SMS jokes, articles on pornography, sex and other adult material like obscene pictures and advertisements of massage parlours. Because newspapers are readily available to minors, and due to guardians’ inability to monitor their children against such exposure, the PIL proposed that newspapers be classified as ‘adults’ and ‘universal’.*

OPINION OF YOUNG PEOPLE REGARDING MEDIA

As per a study done by VIMHANS*² on 1240 school children in the age group 14 to 17 years, nearly 92% said that they were confused and dissatisfied with the media. Nearly 17% felt that media propagated negative responses by showing frequent drug and alcohol abuse. In a survey done by the organization, Association for Social Welfare and Human Development*³ on ‘Projection of women in media’, 65% respondents comprising educated men and women (including youth) felt that increasing display of sex and sleaze in media is negatively affecting the psyche, values and beliefs of young people. 80% wanted women development issues related to rural and urban women to be given more importance than models, actresses and glossy stuff. 62% wanted television channels to be more gender sensitive and true in the perception on actual status of women and achievements.

In a pilot study carried out by Association for Social Welfare and Human Development in collaboration with Department of Women Studies, NCERT on ‘Effect of media on adolescents sexual beliefs/ behaviour’ in the states of Delhi and Manipur, 75 percent of the 133 students, in the age group 13 to 16 years, belonging to urban, rural/semi urban background felt that sexual content including display of nudity and female form in newspapers, magazines, movies, music videos is increasing. More than 80% of students found such kind of display sexually provoking, vulgar and obscene. Approximately 85% respondents of Delhi and 65% of Imphal felt that increasing sexual content in movies can push boys and girls of their age to indulge in sex. 80% boys and 90% girls in Delhi and 77% boys and 86% girls in Imphal felt that sexually explicit pictures displayed

via columns of newspapers as advertisements or news related to Bollywood and Hollywood film actors can push young people of their age into sex. In group discussions both girls and boys felt that today’s media including news papers and news channels are not playing a positive role. They are presenting information in such a way that the message they are trying to convey becomes unclear and misleading. There is a lot of drama and sensationalism. Most of them emphasized that since the impact and influence of media is immense on adolescents, thus media and media persons should act responsibly.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The above data and findings conclude that media plays a major role in the life of young people and has tremendous power to impact upon their psyche, thoughts and behaviour; although varied kind of content is available for youth via media, a substantial amount might prove to be detrimental and harmful for their overall growth and development and media needs to exercise restraint and understand its social responsibility.

The findings also focus upon the need for better understanding and research into the issues related to Media and young people in our country, especially related to the content available via media and its effect on them. They stress upon the need for immediate measures to be taken by the government and media itself, towards decreasing the content containing sex, consumerism, violence, glamour, fashion, celebrities as it can have a negative effect on psycho-social well being of the young people.

Most importantly the above facts and findings emphasize upon the need for parents to pay a lot of attention on their children’s media habits and schools to focus upon counseling both parents and students regarding the same. Last but not the least, the need for initiating ‘Media Literacy’ workshops in schools, related to creating awareness and promoting critical thinking regarding media content is strongly indicated.

Why Media literacy?

Media literacy can be defined as the process of understanding and using mass media in an assertive and non-passive way. It is the ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and utilize mass communication. It also gives all consumers the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media messages.



Media literacy consists of three stages:

The first stage is to become aware and realize the importance of managing one's own media diet, that is self analysing as to how much time is being spent with television, video games, films, magazines etc and if needed, reducing it willingly.

The second stage is to do critical analysis of the content that one is reading or watching. This would include questions like how it is constructed, what is in the frame etc.

The third stage is to go behind the frame and explore deeper issues. Questions like who produces the media we have interest in, for what purpose is it being produced? What profits would he/she gain from it?

Although 'Media Literacy' is a new concept in our country, global reports suggest that it does have a positive impact. There is evidence to suggest that it can not only help in understanding media and its functioning but also help shatter myths and illusions about glamour, consumerism, fashion, and celebrities to a large extent. By critically analysing media content and messages, a young person can experience media without getting negatively affected by it. Thus, schools should organize workshops on 'Media Literacy' for students, teachers and parents with the help of various experts including communication/media experts, counselors, mental health professionals and doctors so that the negative media influence on young people can be lessened. Also 'Media Literacy' should be made an integral part of all awareness programmes started by the government and other organizations which aim at educating young people and providing them with skills and information related to their development and well being.

SUMMARY

In today's age of information explosion and satellite invasion, young people are bombarded by thousands of media messages be it via television or radio or internet, posters, billboards etc. Number of researches done all over the world on media content and its effect on young people highlight that substantial percentage of the content available via media and the messages conveyed through it might prove to be detrimental towards their overall development and well being. Thus it becomes important for young people to realize that there is an intended purpose for which the content is developed and that creative techniques have been applied by professionals and technicians in order to fetch their attention. That is why they should not accept the messages given via media at face value and be critical of each and every one of them before accepting. Since

Media literacy can provide them with skills to analyze media, and decide whether they should accept the messages being offered or reject them, it needs to be propagated in the schools.

REFERENCES

- 'Children, Youth and Media Around the World: An Overview of Trends and Issues', prepared & compiled by Susan Gigli, InterMedia Survey Institute for UNICEF for the 4th World Summit on Media for Children and Adolescents held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil/April 2004.
- (Source: http://www.unicef.org/voy/media/Inter_Media_2004_textversion.pdf) (Website last searched in Dec; 2009)
- Note: The research was conducted in various countries including Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Uganda, Nigeria, Zambia, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Egypt, Jordan and Qatar.
- Website: Kaiser Family Foundation: Sex on TV 4 — November 2005 <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/index.cfm> (website last searched-Dec;09)
- Women and Media, By: Dr Shirin Ahmad-Nia (Ph.D) website: <http://www.farzanehjournl.com/archive/farvol13/arti04.htm> (website last searched-Dec;09)
- The report Generation M, Media in the lives of 8 to 18 years old (website:<http://www.kff.org/entmedia> entmedia030905pkg.cfm) published published by Kaiser Foundation in March, 2005 (website last searched-Dec;09)
- Report: Parents, Media and Public Policy, published by Kaiser Family Foundation (year 2004) : Website address- <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/Parents-Media-and-Public-Policy-A-Kaiser-Family-Foundation-Survey-Report.pdf> (website last searched Dec; 09)
- Research on the influence of media violence on youth by Craig A. Anderson, Leonard Berkowitz, Edward Donnerstein, L. Rowell Huesmann, James D. Johnson, Daniel Linz, Neil M. Malamuth, and Ellen Wartella (http://www.psychologicalscience.org/pdf/psp/psp_43.pdf): http://www.mediaawareness.ca/english/issues/violence/violence_entertainment.cfm (website last searched-April;09) Indirect effects of media on adolescent smoking and alcoholism, website: (http://www.journalism.wisc.edu/mpi/gunther/smokin_g.pdf) and (www.jamamedia.org) website last searched-April;09)
- Role of media in the society', by Amarendra Kishore, (http://dimdima.com/forum/newmessage.asp?Tid=1043&q_title=Role+of+media+in+the+society)
- Ideal and reality: media's role in India (The Hindu, August 19, 2008) Website: The Hindu. <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2008/08/19/> (website last searched-Dec;09)
- 'Electronic Media Misleading youth', The Hindu, Feb 12, 2001) website: <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2001/02/12/stories/0412210n.htm> last visited- Feb,2009 (website last searched-Dec;09) (website last searched-Dec;09)
- Trivial Pursuit', Edit page, second opinion column, 5th march, 2003, Seema Khanna
- 'Media must introspect' (10th sep, 05, The Pioneer, Second opinion column, Edit Page), Seema Khanna

