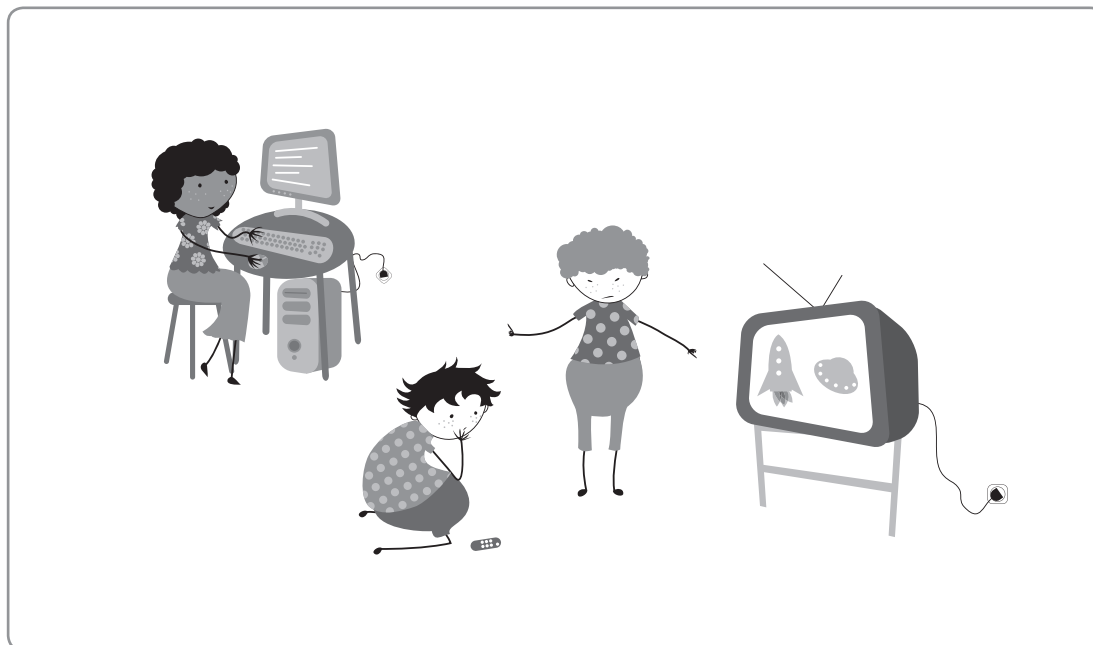


9. MEDIA AND INTERNET

The Council of Europe recommends ... a coherent information literacy and training strategy which is conducive to empowering children and their educators in order for them to make the best possible use of information and communication services and technologies...

Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers Recommendation REC (2006) 12¹



The media have become so important in our societies that they are sometimes called ‘the fourth power’ by analogy with the three traditional powers in a democracy: legislative, executive and judicial. Some people refer to Internet blogs as the fifth power as they increasingly compete with traditional media in raising issues and serving as ‘watch dogs’. Although these heightened powers of the media can serve to increase participation and enhance access to information, they also have inherent dangers, particularly for children. The sophisticated technical skills that give children access to information may make them vulnerable to online risks.

Article 19 of the UDHR establishes the freedom of expression to all, including the right to receive and share information and ideas through all means. Article 13 of the CRC extends that rights to children. Other international treaties and most national constitutions develop this right and guarantee freedom of the press, as well as imposing some limits on the press to protect people’s right to privacy and reputation. Two further articles of the CRC establish children’s rights to get and share information (Article 13) and to obtain safe, reliable and understandable information from the mass media (Article 17). This places a responsibility on the media that information aimed at children should be appropriate and clear.

QUESTION: *How does the media influence the children you work with? What are some positive effects? Some negative effects?*

Media, information and communication technology play a central role in the lives of children today. Children sit for hours every day watching television, but they spend even more and more time online, using skills they pick up quickly from their peers. Children use online tools for playing, chatting, blog-



ging, listening to music, posting photos of themselves and searching for other people to communicate with online. Because a real gap exists between children's and adult's media literacy, most adults have little knowledge of what children do online or how they do it.

This virtual world can offer children both opportunities and pitfalls. Using electronic, digital and online media has numerous positive effects on children's development: it is entertaining, educating and socializing. However, it also has the potential to harm children and communities, depending on how it is used. This virtual world can shape children's lives as powerfully as real life, with the same pressures to fit in, to be cool and to have a lot of friends.

Exposure to mass media, particularly television, has negative effects that have preoccupied parents and educators and been the object of many studies:

- **Time spent in front of the television:** there is clear evidence that children who spend more time in front of the television show poorer performance in school, while children whose families use both electronic and print media more carefully tend to do better in school.²
- **Violence:** How does violent subject matter affect children, whether from television, films or video games? Does it make them more aggressive? More insensitive? Does it have a cathartic effect? Do these effects happen in all children or only in some more vulnerable children and only in some contexts?
- **Consumerism:** Advertising in its different forms has been blamed for manipulating children, and through them their parents, to buy certain food products (often associated with child obesity epidemics), clothes, and even cleaning products for the home, or cars and trips!
- **Stereotypes:** The media have been blamed for perpetuating social stereotypes, especially gender roles and ethnic characteristics.

In response to these concerns, some countries forbid advertising during children's programming. Some countries have established a 'curfew time' before which violent and pornographic images cannot be shown. Parents in a few countries can buy filters to prevent children from viewing certain programmes. However, in the new technological context of mobile phones, multiple TV channels and the Internet, most of these measures are not effective.

More interactive media, such as the Internet and mobile phones, produce additional dangers for children: children may provide personal data that may be used for unwanted advertising and provide rooms for online predators. Children sometimes use the unsupervised online environment for sending cruel messages and degrading photographs aimed at other kids. 'Cyberbullying' is easy and especially harmful because online mistreatment of this kind is mostly anonymous.

Right to information versus right to protection

The media raise human rights issues of both children's right to protection and children's right to information. For example:

- **Access and its inequalities.** Access to the Internet is unequal and will probably reinforce inequalities amongst children of different social origins. How can this 'digital divide' be addressed and overcome?
- **Undesirable forms of content and contact.** Recent research show that more than half of young people aged nine to nineteen years old who go online at least once a week have seen pornography online and mostly unintentionally. Some of them are 'disgusted' or 'bothered', as they are also with other unwanted content, such as violent pictures or a site hostile to a group of people. How should we deal with this? To what extent would censoring children's access to the media compromise their right to information? Or another's right to expression?



- **New Internet and media literacy.** Children usually consider themselves – and are considered by adults – to be more expert than their parents in Internet use, thus gaining self-esteem and social status within the family. Nevertheless, most children lack the experience and judgment for adequately evaluating online content or sources, searching and treating information or using it to communicate. How could educational initiatives address the different media literacy needs of children and adults?³

QUESTION: *In what ways have you developed use of the Internet and media so that children have the maximum access to information and learning? How do you protect these children from inappropriate material and exploitation via the Internet?*

Media education

One answer to these issues is to educate children to become more critical and sophisticated media consumers and communicators. Media education aims at making all children – and all citizens, if possible – aware of the importance and power of the media. Techniques of media education include making children aware of what they see and how that may affect them. For example children might be asked to count the violent acts they watch during a set period, to analyse the persuasive strategies of advertisements or to consider different ways of conveying the same information in order to understand how different senses of reality can be created.

In the last 50 years there have been three significant trends in media education:

- **The ‘vaccination’ approach**, which aims to make children immune to the effects of the media;
- **The critical mind approach**, which aims at developing children’s critical judgement towards the negative content of the media;
- **The decoding approach**, which considers the media indispensable for understanding the contemporary world and tries to help children understand the economic and social context of media production and consumption, and the techniques of message coding.⁴

In the sequence of these approaches one can detect a change in the perception of the child as media consumer, moving from the child as vulnerable subject to the child as participating citizen.

As new information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet, have developed, so have both the benefits and perils of easy access to these media. The Internet is a fantastic means of access to all kinds of information and to communication at a distance. There is no guarantee, however, that the information it provides is true or that a communication has not been made with malicious intentions.

Thus, media education needs to keep pace, developing children’s critical skills and understanding of this powerful tool. Media education also aims at making children better communicators of their ideas by providing opportunities to use and learn different media, including desktop publishing, radio and TV programming, websites and blogs. However, media education is also crucial for adults who work with children. Parents, teachers and other educators should invest time and energy to learn about and observe how their children communicate and live together.

The Council of Europe has made the following recommendation with regard to media education:

Conscious of the risk of harm from content and behaviour in the new information and communications environment which may not always be illegal but which are capable of adversely affecting the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of children, such as online pornography, the portrayal and glorification of violence and self-harm, demeaning, discriminatory or racist expressions or apology for such conduct, solicitation (grooming), bullying, stalking and other forms of harassment ... [The Council of Europe] [r]ecommends that member states develop ... a coherent



*information literacy and training strategy which is conducive to empowering children and their educators in order for them to make the best possible use of information and communication services and technologies...*⁵

The Media Division of the Council of Europe has a project on how children and their parents and educators gain the knowledge and skills necessary for the ‘information society’. ‘The Internet Literacy Handbook: A guide for parents, teachers and young people’, a publication of the Media Division, provides relevant background information and fact sheets on this complex network of information and communication.⁶

Relevant human rights instruments

Council of Europe

The **European Convention on Human Rights** guarantees everyone the right to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority (Article 10). This right extends to children as well as adults, with the exception that children have a right to be protected from exploitation and exposure to inappropriate kinds of violent and pornographic media. The ECHR recognizes this in including among the duties and responsibilities that go with this right “the protection of health or morals”. It does not, however, specify how and by whom ‘inappropriate’ is determined.

Article 9 of the **Convention on Cybercrime** refers to offences related to child pornography and states that member states shall adopt “legislative and other measures to criminalize the various specified uses of computers involving child pornography”.

United Nations

The right to information is a fundamental human right codified in Article 19 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Of course, when the Universal Declaration was written in 1948, no-one thought of the Internet as one of the media channels. Even by 1989, when the UN General Assembly adopted the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, the use of the Internet by the general populace, much less children, was inconceivable. Interestingly, however, the Children’s Convention separates freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of information into three separate articles, stressing the importance of each: Article 12 guarantees the child’s right to an opinion and to have that opinion taken into consideration; Article 14 guarantees the child’s right to thought, conscience and religion.

Article 13 contains the main statement of a child’s right to freedom of expression and information:

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.

This article does not, however, give the child unlimited access to information. Balanced against it are safeguards such as protection from exploitation (Articles 19 and 36), specifically sexual exploitation (Articles 19 and 34).

The Convention also recognizes the **evolving capacity** and maturity of the child, so that what may be inappropriate for a child in elementary school may be acceptable for a youth. As with many rights issues, freedoms are often in conflict with protections in this area and require thought and negotiation. In every case, however, the child’s best interests should be the deciding consideration.



Useful resources

- *Family Guide to the Internet*: Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centres, 2004.
- Gentile, Douglas A. and Walsch, David A., 'A normative study of family media and habits' in *Applied Developmental Psychology* 23 (2002) 157-178: National Institute on Media and the Family, 2002: www.mediafamily.org/research/index.shtml
- *Recommendation Rec (2006) 12 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Empowering Children in the New Information and Communications Environment*: Council of Europe, 2006: <http://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1041181&BackColourInternet=9999CC&BackColourIntranet=FFBB55&BackColourLogged=FFAC75>
- Frau-Meigs, Divina, *Council of Europe Pan-European Forum on Human Rights in the Information Society: Empowering children and young people*: Council of Europe, 2006: www.euro.who.int/document/mediacentre/fs0203e.pdf
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- Livingstone, Sonia and Bober, Magdalena, *UK Children Go Online: Final report of key project findings*: Economic and Social Research Council, 2005: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/28_04_05_childrenonline.pdf
- Masterman, Len and Mariet, François, *L'éducation aux Média dans l'Europe des Années 90: un guide pour les enseignants*: Council of Europe, 1994.
- Piette, Jacques, *Education aux Média et Fonction Critique*: L'Harmattan, Paris, 1996.
- Richardson, Janice, ed., *The Internet Literacy Handbook: A guide for parents, teachers and young people*, 2nd Edition: Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 2006: www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Media/hbk_en.html
- O'Connell, Rachel and Bryce, Jo, *Young people, well-being and risk on-line*, Council of Europe, 2006: [www.echr.coe.int/Library/DIGDOC/DG2/H_INF/COE-2006-EN-H_INF\(2006\)5.pdf](http://www.echr.coe.int/Library/DIGDOC/DG2/H_INF/COE-2006-EN-H_INF(2006)5.pdf)

Useful Websites

- European Charter for Media Literacy: www.euromedialiteracy.eu/index.php
- The National Centre for Technology in Education: www.ncte.ie/Internetsafety
- National Institute for Media and the Family: www.mediafamily.org/index.shtml
- Media Wise Trust: www.mediawise.org.uk

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- 1 *Recommendation Rec (2006) 12 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Empowering Children in the new Information and Communications Environment*: Council of Europe, 2006.
- 2 Douglas A. Gentile and David A. Walsch, 'A normative study of family media and habits', *Applied Developmental Psychology* 23 (2002), p.174.
- 3 Livingstone, Sonia and Bober, Magdalena, *UK Children Go Online: Final report of key project findings*: Economic and Social Research Council, 2005
- 4 Masterman, Len, and Mariet, François, *L'éducation aux Média dans l'Europe des Années 90*: Council of Europe, 1994.
- 5 *Recommendation Rec (2006) 12 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Empowering Children in the New Information and Communications Environment*: Council of Europe, 2006: <http://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1041181&BackColourInternet=9999CC&BackColourIntranet=FFBB55&BackColourLogged=FFAC75>
- 6 Richardson, Janice, ed., *The Internet Literacy Handbook: A guide for parents, teachers and young people*, 2nd Edition: Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 2006.

