Mass Media Effects on Social Development Issues with Children
Mass Media and its Effects on Social Development Issues with Children

**Defining the Problem**

People develop values and beliefs from experience, culture, society, and religion. The media has become such a prominent part of today’s society and a resource on how the world functions. For young viewers, social meaning and behavior are easily influenced by how the media portrays the “real world”. Mass media rapidly increases in popularity due to its realistic portrayal of life and society values. Mass communications theories aim to explain the mass media’s effects on the ideas, beliefs, and thoughts of the public and their behaviors. Cultivation theory suggests that individuals who are exposed to greater amounts of television are more likely to accept the representation of reality as presented on television. Agenda setting theory proposes that news media influences the salience of topics on the public agenda. Theories such as these aid in forming a correlation between the audiences’ thoughts and their behaviors. With televisions’ use of ordinary people in extraordinary situations and news organizations ability to deliver real world news “truthfully”, the audience develops connectedness and trust in media information. Results from media research call into question the conclusion that young children who are exposed to certain types of mass media are under the impression that the ideas and behaviors displayed, are actual accounts of how the real world functions and as a result, adolescence’s social development are affected.

With the constant emergence of new and innovative technology, the role of media has greatly changed causing research to be focused toward documenting adolescent involvement with various forms of media. Research shows that the daily activities of adolescence and youth are influential and are influenced by their everyday experiences. According to *An Ecological Perspective on the Media and Youth Development* by Susan McHale, Aryn Dotterer, and Ji-Yeon
Kim, “in directing attention to the processes through which daily activities may have an impact on youth, including (a) providing chances to learn and practice skills, (b) serving as a forum for identity development, (c) affording opportunities to build social ties, (d) connecting youth to social institutions, and (e) keeping youth from engaging in other kinds of activities”. Daily activities are important influences of the social development of relationships, behaviors, skills, and abilities of youth. There is a strong connection between the influences of daily activities, such as the media, and personal identity development. Therefore in identifying the processes of the activities that impact youth, researchers will be able to discover the specific social developments that could be affected by the media.

According to Baran and Davis (2009) due to mass media, “family, school, and churches have become of little importance to children”. This shows that the values and beliefs of people is also being influenced by the mass media and not just by experience, culture, society, and religion. Mass media has always had an influential effect on the social development of children. The increase of the economy after World War II gave Americans the opportunity to spend more money on things of leisure, “because more consumer goods were competing in the marketplace, there was a greater need to advertise which provided the economic base for the new television medium” (Baran & Davis, 2009, p.190). This gave advertisers the opportunity to target different demographics and therefore spreading their messages through to different markets. Baran and Davis note, “Parents and the church have been the primary socializing agents for prewar American adolescents, but by the mid-1960s, media and peers shared top billing in the performance of the crucial function” (Baran & Davis, 2009, p.190). Adolescents were beginning to retrieve information and search for answers outside of their homes. The media and their peers became prominent sources for quick information. In the late 1960s there were arguments about
the media’s role in “fomenting social instability and instigating violence” amongst people. It is said that “humans learn from observation”, and mass media has a direct correlation to the effects of social development of children.

Susan Pitman says that, “Children spend an average of 8 hours per fortnight on electronic and computer games”. The issue of mass media and its effect on the social development of children has always been a concern amongst scholars and has been stated as having a huge impact on today’s society. It is said by Pitman that children who have emotional and development problems, “are more likely to have difficulty understanding television and advertising in the same way as their peers,” thus making children with these developmental issues more susceptible to the harmful media content. This suggests that the media has effects on the social development relationships on children who have already had emotional and developmental problems and not children who don’t. As stated by Susan Pitman, “children up to the age of 10 years are able to understand the full reality of television programs depending on their life experiences and knowledge of television. The more TV children watch, the less likely it is that they will have a mature understanding of how television works”. This results in children believing that what they view on TV is the reality of how the outside world functions and how they should function too. They are incapable of making the distinction between what is real and what is not and have a hard time distinguishing reality and fantasy. In 2009, 12-year-old Lionel Tate was sentenced to life in prison for killing 6-year-old Tiffany Eunick because he imitated wrestling moves that he saw on television (Canedy, 2001). Tate was unable to identify that wrestling portrayed on television and in real life is just an illusion. The violence that is portrayed on television can have harmful effects on children if they cannot make that distinction. Tate viewed a simple wrestling move as harmless, fun, and innocent; however his life was horribly
affected because of the misperception of reality.

The violence portrayed on television is not the only characteristic being portrayed through the media as “realistic” that can have different effect on children. In the United States, “it has been calculated that by the time children reach age 18 they will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence on television alone,” (Pitman, 2008). Studies have shown that this leads to the increase of violence within the communities. Children are unaware of the fault in their actions because television and the Internet portray them as harmless. This alters children’s idea and definition of what is right or wrong and good or bad. The mass media’s perception of what constitutes as beauty, can also affect the body images of young children. Young children are highly impressionable and young girls, in particular, are highly susceptible to what the media portrays is the standard of beauty. Mass media gives can produce a distorted view of outer beauty, and fail to highlight the importance of inner. “In 1997, a US analysis found that alcohol, tobacco or illicit drugs were present in 70 percent of prime time network drama, 95 percent of top grossing movies and half of all music videos,” (Pitman, 2008). Media exposure has been directly linked to usage of harmful substances with one longitudinal study directly linking the amount of media exposure to level of alcohol use in teenagers. The music and movie industry both promote the use of harmful substances and sexual behavior. Some children idolize and attempt to mimic rappers, actors, and models as a result of viewing them from different media channels. Connecting and trusting in the media as a reliable and creditable source for information only enhances the effects that mass media has on youth.

Analyzing the Problem

We are very limited when it comes to solving this problem. Solving the problem would require monitoring every youth’s media intake and moderating it. Parents are usually
responsible for the regulation of television programs and supplying most of the mass media that children are exposed to. However, in this day and age mass media is everywhere and easily accessible to nearly anyone. Affordability is no longer an influential factor when it comes to the use of mass media. Access to internet, television, newspapers, radio, etc. can be found locally for free. We can start small by bringing awareness to the effects of mass media on the social development of children in local communities and George Mason University’s campus.

There are several obstacles that hinder our group’s efforts from succeeding. Our first problem is the size of our group. We are a group compromised of only six people which it would make it extremely hard us to cover each household in the United States. Going door to door to spread one message is very time consuming so it would have more effective to start small then grow it into something bigger. Another obstacle the group would have to overcome is the influence and role of the parents that are in the lives of the children. Parents are the key to our operation; they have the power and influence over their children. Parents can decide what their children watch and do not watch. Television is another obstacle our group would have to overcome. Television programmers are very important because they determine the content that children watch. According to Susan Pitman (2008), the Senior research officer for Ozchild, “television networks see children as huge financial investments”, networks do not think about the effects that certain programs and content have on children and how those effects might distort their outlook on the world. Internet is another barrier because it can be accessed by anyone. You cannot filter everything that is on the Internet; this is where parental influence is also important because they play the role of regulator.
Establishing Criteria for Evaluating Solutions

Learning of the harmful influence that the mass media has on children, it is necessary to come up with a set of criteria to evaluate any possible solutions. While the need to protect children is great, hasty decisions may result in more harm than good. The problem at hand is a serious one that has plagued society for decades. It is in the best interest of children and parents to craft a solution that addresses most, if not all, facets of the problem.

First, every proposed solution should be evaluated for its outlook of effects. A solution that only provides short-term benefits might be a waste of resources, as the effort to shield children from the media’s damaging effects will be an ongoing proposition. Now, this does not mean that all short-term solutions yield short-term benefits. A cognitive assessment is needed to make these judgments. For example, two ideas for month-long campaigns would be (1) a community outreach plan to share a message directly with children and parents, and (2) a letter-writing campaign to the appropriate public officials which lobbies for helpful policy. If both were successful, the second would likely have longer-lasting effects even though the first may have stronger immediate effects.

Another bit of criterion to consider is how realistic the solution is. Time, money, and manpower are never limitless. Proposed solutions should be evaluated for the amount of resources they require. And even when resources are abundant, it is worth the effort to ensure they are used wisely. If a great idea is presented but demands a lot of work and investment, a sound decision should be made as to its merit. Also, choosing a realistic solution involves making sure it can be successfully carried out. If resources are limited, perhaps a simple solution that is sure to be successfully executed can do more good than an incomplete, elaborate solution.
The solution should promote parent involvement. Children respond best to new ideas or programs with their parents’ encouragement (whether they realize it or not). Consider the good student whose parents regularly meet with his or her teacher to monitor their academic progress, versus the student whose parents are largely uninvolved with their schoolwork. The solution should not take parents out of the equation. An example of this is the parental controls that are available on computers and cable television. Parents are able to restrict their children from watching programs by ratings, which basically relieves them of their duties to monitor their television consumption. Instead, parents should be empowered to take the lead in their children’s defense against the mass media.

Identifying Possible Solutions

The impact of mass media on the social development of children has a very strong influence on how children view social media. Children are very influential creatures and are not able to distinguish what is good or is bad information that they see on television. After researching multiple problems about this topic, our group has established a few solutions to aid in lessening the impact of social media on children:

1. *Increased parental involvement*

   One problem that happens frequently in many families is in regards to the involvement of parents within the household. Parents use television as a way to keep their children busy throughout the day, instead of doing more hands on activities like playing outside or taking them to a park. As a form of a solution, parents would need to be encouraged to be more involved in their children’s lives by creating more activities for their family to engage in. Whether it’s going to a park or a beach or signing their children up in doing extracurricular
activities. Extracurricular activities will not only help them later on in the future, but it prevents children from getting bored and watching too much television.

2. **Independent grading system**

The amount of violence and mature content featured on children networks has grown substantially over the past few decades (Signorielli, 2008). The problem is, children are exposed to violent activity in the media and do not know to distinguish that its bad content they are watching on television. As a solution, television networks need to realize that children do watch their programs and by refraining from violent or mature content within their networks, this will help with the ongoing problems parents face with raising their children. Establishing an independent grading system would provide a rating for television shows and websites on the virtue of its content. It would be administered by an independent organization, not funded or endorsed by government, to help parents’ better gauge the maturity of content on a certain program.

3. **Campaign against harmful ads**

Another problem mass media has on the social development of children is the amount of inaccurate information produced in different ads on television. Children watch different shows and ads believing everything they hear not knowing that it may not be coming from a credible source. As children engage in these different television shows, parents need to make sure that their children know that everything they see on TV is not real. By implementing a campaign against harmful ads, this would target media companies in children's entertainment. Companies would be encouraged to implement higher standards for television ads and web ads. Recently, Disney stopped airing ads on their television network for junk foods and any food related
sponsors would have to pass certain nutritional requirements (Chmielewski, 2012). The same concept should be applied to the media content feature on certain ads as well.

4. **Campaign involving celebrities**

Last but not least, the amounts of influence celebrities have on children make a very big impact on their social development. Mass media has created a problem in ways which children try to be more like people they see on television. Children look up to celebrities as positive role models and try to be more like them. Celebrities have a lot of influence on not just children, but people in general which make it hard to distinguish what to and what not to partake in. A positive solution for celebrity influence would be a campaign to promote positive role models within social media. By implementing a campaign to promote positive celebrity role models, children will witness positive acts within their community and engage in a healthy lifestyle just like the role models they see in these campaigns.

**Evaluating the Solutions**

1. **Increased parental involvement**

While this solution may provide positive effects after a short-term segment of parental involvement, it is not very realistic or practical to apply. Due to the size of our group, and the number of families that occupy the US, implementing this solution would require an abundant amount of resources to reach even 50% of the population of parents. In addition, even if we would be able to reach a large number of parents, this solution would compete with the demands required of parents to support their families. By asking them to increase their involvement to monitor every ounce of media their children consumed, we are also asking them to sacrifice the responsibility they have to provide for their family- i.e., work, purchase food, make dinner, etc.
In a final report for the European Commission by a University of Oxford Department, the following statement agrees, as noted in their statement that assisting parental control “not only reduces earnings” but also slows the parent’s career growth (1997).

2. **Independent grading system**

This solution has the possibility of providing positive short-term effects, while at the same time promoting parental involvement. This solution does not ask parents to sacrifice every other second to monitor their children’s media consumption. Instead, it provides parents with a guide to knowing what types of media their children can consume, which they can trust is appropriate because it has been assigned a grade. All they would have to do is allow their children access to certain graded media, and be comforted in knowing their child is not consuming harmful material. There are many independent organizations already in place that have the desire to promote positive growth for children, so the resources are already available to implement this solution.

3. **Campaign against harmful ads**

This solution may not be implemented as quickly, due to funding for campaign ads. This would delay the measurability of the solution delayed and possibly lead to inaccurate results. The largest resource required for this solution would be funding for ads- and the time spent pitching the ads to networks for airing. Possible business-related issues could arise if there is a conflict in what a network already airs, and what the ad targets. Shows like CSI, which regularly display gruesome and violent situations, may cause CBS to choose not to air a campaign ad against violence. In order to reach a wide audience, these ads would need to be aired on national networks, which may not be so eager to lose viewers who do not agree with the ads. No parental involvement would be included in this solution.
4. Campaign involving celebrities

This solution is similar to the solution to campaign against harmful ads. While the long-term results may prove to have limited effects, the resources required to pursue this solution are expensive and may not yield the intended results. As Barrett et al state, “this strategy requires planners to go to the expense of producing and airing the Public Service Announcements before knowing whether or not they are likely to be effective” (2004). Parental involvement is absent in this solution.

Selecting the Best Solution

As a group the best solution we identified is the independent grading system which would provide a rating for television shows, websites and other forms of media on the virtue of its content. The system would be administered by an independent organization, not funded or endorsed by the government. The independent grading system would be very effective as it will include in depth information about a media that would land in one of the category of grades. Regular parental guidelines do not tell you how good a program is, it only informs parents of violent, sexual, or graphic content within the media. This solution would provide a system for parents to be able to gauge how good or bad a show, website, etc., is for their children.

The independent grading system is inexpensive and can be implemented as soon as possible because it is a system of grades and its requirement involves the display of a grade towards the form of media. The grading system should include what the youth and parents are already familiar with, such as the regular grading system schools use. An ‘A’ is very good and shows how well the person is doing in class, while an ‘F’ is the opposite. The independent grading system for the media would also include grades A to F. Media that has an ‘A’ rating will have in depth information about how that media is completely suitable for the youth, an ‘F’
would display why the content should not be viewed by the youth, and everything else would fit in between with detailed information of each grade.

The media shapes and influences youth culture in many ways in our society, but sexual content is among the highest in influencing the youth. Access to sexual content that the media provides will be highly scrutinized in the independent grading system. Author Cloete (2012) argued that the sexual development of the youth is one of the most important areas of their journey into adulthood and can easily be influenced by media messages on sex and sexuality. The independent grading system would place great importance in monitoring the sexual content in our media by placing the rating ‘F’ on media with inappropriate sexual content not suitable for youth, or a ‘D’ on content that is sexual but not explicit. Wright suggests facilitating content sensitive research by providing a review of what researchers can use as a reference point regarding the effects of sexual entertainment media on young people (2009). We would use his ideas of researching and referencing the effects of sexual entertainment media on young people and help inform parents the importance of the content provided within the grades. Popular programs with adolescents include soap operas, music videos, talk shows, feature length films, and magazines (Wright, 2009); so the grading system would be used in all those forms of media.

According to author C.J. Pascoe (2012), a lack of good information about what youth are doing with new media stimulates fears and hopes about the relationship between young people and digital technologies. The way our youth receive media now is very different from the past as a result of technological developments and it’s important for the grading system to develop also. The youth often use their mobile devices, laptops, YouTube, tablets, etc. as newer forms to receive media, so the independent grading system would have to be implemented by having an app that could be used to display the grade of the content being viewed by the youth and sending
parents notifications of what grade of content their children are viewing if required. Elizabeth Soep, the author of the article “Youth Media Goes Mobile” suggests the importance of regulating youth media and developing helpful apps for the youth. Her guidelines for app development, which include identifying community needs and opportunities, market research to determine relevance, interviewing target audience members to assess what they want and need, and brainstorming (Soep, 2011) can be used to develop the independent grading system and incorporate it towards mobile devices by creating apps for the system.

Testing the Solution

Seeing as how 8 in 10 parents find media ratings systems useful (televisionwatch.org, 2010), support and approval for the Independent grading system will not be hard to find. Since this solution allows for limited parental involvement, where parents can also exert control, parents will find this updated “rating system” useful and convenient. Information on this new grading system will be provided in schools, through cable providers, online, and through local awareness organizations. Children will be able to associate the A-F ratings with their school grades- allowing them to strive for the best grade, an A rated media program. This will allow the system to be widely adopted by the individuals that spend the most time developing a child’s future- parents and teachers.

In order to implement the Independent grading system solution, several steps need to be taken to ensure proper and effective usage. First, research will be gathered on the current content rating systems, and notations will be made on their strengths and weaknesses. From those findings, the new A to F criteria will be developed, similar to what we see with the V-chip and current systems (Nathanson & Cantor, 1998). An oversight committee would be established to periodically review the grading system to ensure appropriate and accurate standards, just as
current organizations do for the current systems in place (tvguidelines.org, 2012). Once the
criteria have been established for the Independent grading system, the non-profit organization
responsible would create awareness-program information through PR and marketing channels,
which would be distributed across the nation, in schools, community centers, libraries, cable
networks, local networks, and many other locations.

Currently, “programs are voluntarily rated by broadcast and cable television networks, or
program producers” (tvguidelines.org, 2012), which may account for the lack of controls on
programs viewed by children. The Independent grading system would replace the current TV-Y
through TV-MA (tvguidelines.org, 2012), and because of the widespread support generated by
parents and teachers, this would lead to an increased need for networks to implement more
grades on more of their programming, thus reaching more families in the US. Once the major
networks were on board with this program, other regional and local networks will find no reason
to refrain from using the Independent grading system.
References


International Communication Association, 1.


*Conference Papers- National Communication Association, 1.*


