Mass media and children. Globality in everyday life

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Abstract

Mass media play an important role in everyday life. There is a growing use of media in early childhood, so it is not surprising that they greatly influence children and young people as well as become an essential element of education. At present, it is difficult to imagine the world without such global media as TV or the Internet that most of us use every day. Children do the same. Most of them make use of media every day, both at home and at school.

The aim of the article is to discuss theoretical analyses and empirical data which involve the use of mass media in everyday life.

Keywords: mass media, children, everyday life, globality

Introduction

Nowadays, mass media have become an integral part of our everyday life. Media are not only sources of information and entertainment; they are also means of communication, the way we get in touch with others, regardless of distance. The use of media takes up a great deal of our free time.

Mass media are “all the electric and electronic means of recording, playing as well as broadcasting pictures and sounds, that is designed to reach the mass of the people” (Dankowska-Kosman, 2004, 89). Thanks to the range, regularity and repeatability, mass media have become the essential information system in today’s society (Smid, 2010, 93). Mass media include television, radio, press, computers, the Internet, mobile phones, landline telephones as well as video cameras which are used to record pictures (Huk, 2011, 19-20). In everyday life media can be divided into traditional and alternative. Traditional media include books, press, radio, television and films, whereas...
alternative media comprise satellite and cable television, multimedia computers as well as computers. That is mass media through which globality enters human everyday life.

Children and mass media

Modern childhood appears to be so much influenced by media that it is often described as the media childhood (the TV childhood or the computer childhood). According to J. Izdebska (2006, 169), the media childhood comprises five aspects:

1. Daily and multi-hour presence of such media in a child’s life as TV, computer, the Internet and mobile phone.
2. The amount of time devoted to the use of media, a time of the day, how often children use media, interests and hobbies associated with media and types of programmes watched by children.
3. The way children use and receive media.
4. Specific relationship between the child and media.
5. The effects of child-media relationship including experience, behaviour, emotions which result from media.

With so frequent use of media it is impossible to avoid their influence on human life. If the receivers are mature, they choose media content consciously and assess information passed by media critically. In that case, media can have a positive impact on the receivers. On the other hand, there might be children who, unquestioningly believing everything in media, are completely unaware of the media-related threats.

A particular attention should be paid on individual and environmental factors which determine the influence of mass media on people. E. Ejsmont and B. Kosmalska (2008, 92) mention the following factors:

- the age of the receiver: the way media content is perceived depends on the age of receiver; the level of understanding information, memorizing, emotional reactions as well as the reasons for watching TV are different, depending on the age of viewers;
- sex: in case of adults it determines the choice of programmes; as far as children are concerned, it might be noticed that boys more frequently choose watching TV;
- the level of intelligence: it determines the level of understanding media content and criticism;
- being popular among friends: spending time in front of the TV screen is more frequently chosen by children who are less popular with their peer groups;
- the level of identification with television characters: the more common features are found between a viewer and a TV character, the more frequently a viewer will imitate TV character behaviours;
- the level of realism perception: people who perceive TV content more realistic, more often imitate behaviours presented on TV; the older people become, the less realistically they perceive TV programmes.

Television and the Internet, through which globality enters everyday life, have become dominant types of mass media in children’s lives. It results from the fact that these types of media cover a massive area. TV transmissions are extremely attractive and they affect several senses simultaneously, which means that they fully engage the viewer (Zieliński, 2006, 188). Nowadays, the Internet tends to compete with television offering us possibility of watching films, series or TV programmes. It is also widely used to listen to music, play computer games, communicate with others and meet new people. The use of media takes up a lot of time and pushes other, more valuable ways of spending free time into the background.

Many writers claim that mass media, particularly TV and the Internet may have two-way influence on people. They can affect us in a positive way by extending our knowledge and showing proper patterns of behaviour. Media and their content may also develop our interests and hobbies, knowledge, attitudes, values and lifestyles (Ejsmont, Kosmalska, 2008, 92). On the other hand, media can have a negative impact on people. First of all, people may become addicted to media. What is more, media may have a negative influence on behaviour patterns, including promoting aggressive behaviour. Among other media-related threats medical and social problems such as limiting social relationships should be mentioned.

One of the risks connected to the use of mass media is netoholism manifested by an addiction to the Internet or spending long hours in front of a TV or a computer screen. The effects of netoholism may include changes in child’s personality such as a sense of helplessness, anxiety, fear or headaches (Biała, 2006, 97). As far as the use of the Internet is concerned, addiction psychology distinguishes three zones:
1. Green – the use of the Internet is moderate without any signs of addictions.
2. Orange – a person who uses the Internet realises some symptoms of risk and then learns how to use the Internet moderately.
3. Red – addiction. In this case therapy is necessary. What is more, prevention should be applied so as not to return to the Internet addiction (Ibid., p. 106).

Excessive media use (TV, the Internet) affects children’s social life and leads to limiting social and family bonds. It also limits the time devoted to relax, housework, homework, meeting friends or playing. Media engage children in virtual reality and attach them to an electronic device e.g. a computer or a TV set rather than to a real person (Ejsmont, Kosmalska, 2008, 97).

The impact of media on children is determined by their attitude to the media content. It is therefore important to involve society, particularly parents and teachers in teaching children how to use media properly. The purpose of media education is to develop in children relevant, positive attitudes to media (Janicka-Panek, 2009, 25): criticism, ability to select media content properly, creativity, open-minded attitude, dialogue and tolerant attitude. On the contrary, negative attitudes must be eliminated. They include media consumerism, media addiction, Machiavellianism, the agreement to be controlled or manipulated and the attitude of acquiescence towards propaganda (Podolski, 2006, 143-144).

Mass media and family

Family is the environment where a child uses media for the first time. In most Polish homes a TV set occupies a central place and is the most popular means of transmitting culture and extending knowledge about the world (Izdebska, 1966, 45). Therefore, family is strongly influenced by media and their global impact. It depends on their members if the media influence is positive and negative. It is the family who decides how to use media and influences children by showing them appropriate patterns of spending free time. The family helps children develop their abilities to plan everyday activities, encourages them to physical activity, to develop hobbies and interests as well as to choose the best ways of spending free time.

Each family can benefit from appropriate use of mass media. It is commonly believed that media can:
- help educate children and develop their knowledge;
- extend parents’ educational and psychological knowledge;
- inspire and encourage parents to use this knowledge in their contacts with children; that way media support educational function of the family;
- integrate family (using media together helps tighten family bonds);
- compensate deficiencies in the family (Ibid., 213).

On the contrary, if improperly used, media potential can bring harmful effects to the family life. Media-related risks include: disorganisation of family life, family disintegration, damages to family bonds as well as rows and arguments between family members. Furthermore, television or other media cannot replace parents in bringing up children (Izdebska, 2000, 81).

Even if family members receive media content properly, they might be affected by atomisation, which means separating family members and isolating them from the world around.

To prevent media-related risks, family bonds and relationships should be developed. Instead of spending free time in front of the TV screen, parents ought to encourage their children to other ways of spending free time.

The idea of parents’ pedagogisation is getting more and more popular. It involves the necessity to prepare not only children but also parents for using media properly. If parents are conscious and competent media users, they have more possibilities to influence their children, transmit proper patterns of behaviour and control their children’s media consumption (Musiol, 2007, 149). Parents should be responsible for preparing children to use mass media properly. They ought to equip their children with skills and abilities to assess media content critically and use information provided by media selectively. These competencies are called media literacy. The other important aspect which determines media influence on children is the amount of parents’ attention they pay to the content of media which is transmitted to their children (Juszczyk, 2006, 31-32).
If parents are engaged in their children’s education, they show them different, interesting and valuable ways of spending free time, they help children develop a sense of responsibility for their lives, not only through extending their interests and hobbies, but also through imposing duties on them. If parents equip their children with the knowledge on how to use media appropriately, the family will not be threatened by side effects of media use. Nowadays, it is a significant issue which affects children’s education and development. That is why we cannot remain indifferent towards media and their presence in family life.

Thanks to their rich content, the Internet and television may become invaluable sources of information which children can benefit from. It will happen only if a child uses these media in a proper way. It is parents’ responsibility to prepare children for safety living in the world of media. Otherwise, media can have a negative influence on physical, emotional and social development of children. Therefore, it is a matter of great importance to engage parents in providing their children with safety and security when using media.

Review of research on mass media in children’s everyday life

EU Kids Online carried out one of the best known projects which examined children’s activity on the Internet, based on the research conducted in 25 European Union countries. In Poland the project, financed by the EU “Safer Internet” Programme, was carried out by Dr Lucyna Kirwil’s team. The research was conducted in 2010 and involved children aged 9 – 16 (535 boys and 499 girls) as well as their parents (one parent per each child). The other participating countries included Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, Great Britain, Italy, France, Norway and Greece, among others (Kirwil, 2011, 6).

The research reveals that, on average, a Polish child starts using the Internet at the age of 9. This is when globality enters children’s everyday life in its all aspects. As far as other countries participating in the project are concerned, it appears that children in Denmark and Sweden begin online activity the earliest, when they are 7 years old. In Europe 93% of children use the Internet at least once a week and 60% is online everyday or almost everyday. Taking age groups into consideration, 33% of 9 – 10-year-old children and 15 – 16-year old teenagers surf the Internet every day. In Poland as many as 52% of children use a PC without adults supervision (in Europe the rate is 35%). Majority of Polish children, 90.5% use a computer at home, whereas in Europe the rate is 85% (Ibid., p.9). It is clearly visible that in Poland parents’ supervision regarding children’s online activity is lower than in Europe. Therefore, we should try to reduce the difference and encourage parents to become more engaged in supervising their kids when they are online. It is alarming that young people developed a habit to surf the Internet everyday.

The EU Kids Online project also proves that a lot of children do not have skills which allow them to use the Internet safely (however, the skills are developed when children are getting older). Depending on the index, it is from 1/3 to 2/3 of the whole examined group, which along with the low level of parents’ control must be worrying in terms of children’s online security (Ibid.,p.14). Once again, the necessity for increasing parents control over their children online activity must be emphasized. It is also necessary to educate children how to be safe online.

The Internet addiction symptoms (including among others disturbances in sleep, eating disorders, spending more and more time online, neglecting family and friends, withdrawal from other activities e.g. doing housework or hobbies and interfering with school responsibilities) were proved by 18 – 38% of the research subjects, depending on the symptom. All the symptoms were noticed by only 9% of children in Poland (Ibid., p. 15-16). It is heartening that as many as 41% of Polish children did not notice any online addiction symptoms. Although, based on the above-mentioned research, it might be assumed that in case of children, the risk of becoming an Internet addict is relatively small, we should keep a watchful eye on young people and encourage them to spend free time in a safer and more educational way.

The most worrying conclusions drawn from the research involve children’s online contacts with strangers and developing these contacts in reality. Every fourth Polish child keeps in touch with strangers online and every twelfth has ever met an online stranger in reality (Ibid., p.19). The data mentioned above explicitly indicate that children should become aware of stranger danger online. Additionally, parents and teachers must help children use the Internet safely and contribute to decrease in their children’s online activity.

The report “Children active online” (Polish: „Dzieci aktywne online”) produced by Gemius, a Polish research agency, for the needs of the 1st International Conference “Keeping children and young people safe online” discusses research results regarding online activity of children and young people aged 7 – 14 (http://pliki.gemius...). The report
shows that in June 2007 every tenth Polish Internet user was 7 – 14 and spent on average 24 hours and 27 minutes online. In this age group girls spend more time online by 10 hours than boys. 45% of the young Internet users claim to be online everyday or almost everyday. Those living in large cities stay online the longest (33 hours and 42 minutes). Children most frequently visit culture and entertainment websites (on average 6 hours and 55 minutes). 70% of the respondents use social networking services. Also, 70% of children play online games and there is no significant difference in these groups between boys and girls (Ibid.). To conclude, children primarily seek entertainment on the Internet, which is proved by frequent playing online games. Contrary to stereotypes, girls as often as boys choose this kind of entertainment. The same proportion of children use social networking services, which proves that along with entertainment, staying in touch with friends seems to be equally important. As expected, children from large cities spend more time online than their peers from towns or rural areas. It can be surprising that girls spend on average 10 hours more online than boys.

Polish Internet Research is the project worked out by the Kidprotect Foundation. The research was conducted by Megapanel PBI / Gemius in May 2011. This is the second edition of eKid project regarding online activity of children aged 7 – 15 (http://www.telix...). The research shows that 7 – 12 years old children make up 9% of the Polish Internet users, young people aged 13 – 15 contribute to the next 3%, and the rest 88% are the Internet users over 16 years old. In the youngest age group 7 – 12 boys (65%) more frequently than girls (35%) use the Internet, whereas in the age group of 13 – 15-year-old teenagers 60% of boys and 40% of girls are regular Internet users. In case of older children these proportions are similar for girls and boys (Ibid.).

The research reveals that almost 50% of children aged 7 – 15 surf the Internet everyday. There is a significant difference between the youngest Internet users and their older friends who go online several times a week: 27% of children aged 7 – 12 and 46% of teenagers aged 13 – 15 (http://www.telix...).

Google.pl, onet.pl and youtube.com are most frequently visited websites among the youngest group of respondents. The other popular websites are google.com, wikipedia.org, wp.pl, allegro.pl, facebook.com and interia.pl. Older children visit similar websites, although their order in terms of popularity is slightly different. The top ten most frequently visited webpages by young people aged 13 – 15 include: google.pl, youtube.com, nk.pl, google.com, wikipedia.org, onet.pl, facebook.com, allegro.pl, mozilla.com and wp.pl (Ibid.).

Children spend most time online visiting radio websites and playing games. The most popular webpages are radiozet.pl (16:19:16), kurnik.pl (8:18:01) and pykam.pl (6:44:27). Older children spend less time visiting these websites: radiozet.pl 10:16:56, kurnik.pl 5:32:32 and gram.pl 5:09:19. It is clearly visible that children, depending on their age, spend different amount of time on particular websites. The youngest Internet users primarily seek entertainment, but they also use social networking services (http://www.telix...).

The research project “Parents towards online threats to children” involves parents’ attitudes towards children’s online activity. The research was conducted in 2008 by Public Opinion Research Centre (Polish: OBOP) for Nobody’s Children Foundation and involved 500 parents who were asked to answer the questions concerning online threats as well as children’s safety on the Internet. Their responses appear to be important since parents have significant influence on children and their possibilities of using the Internet. It is therefore advisable to become familiar with their opinions concerning online threats and safety as well as enhance parents’ sense of responsibility for this sphere of their children’s life (Wojtasik, 2009, 90-99).

The research shows that over 41% of children use the Internet independently before they are 9 years old and 14% go online before they turn 6. As far as positive aspects of using the Internet are concerned, parents most frequently mentioned educational value of the web (66%) and possibility to develop their children’s interests (53%). Among potential threats to children when they are online parents indicated pornography and violence (67%), disclosure of personal information (60%) and making friends online (51%). When it comes to digital literacy, over 50% of parents claim that their Internet skills are worse than their children’s, whereas only 30% believe that their online skills are better than children’s (Ibid., 90 – 99). Majority of parents assess their online skills as worse than their children’s, which might be perceived negatively because it is parents who are responsible for teaching children how to use the Internet safely. If parents fail to teach children online safety properly, they will not also use the Internet efficiently.

It is important to compare parents’ responses regarding online threats to their children’s answers concerning real online dangers. 19% of parents notice threats from pornographic content, whereas as many as 71% of children admit to have had access to pornography. As far as violence is concerned, only 22% of parents believe that their children
are threatened by online violence, whereas 51% of children admit that they have watched violent scenes. Parents are also unaware of online stranger danger. Only 2% of parents realise the risk, whereas 43% children surveyed admitted that they were invited to meet a stranger in reality and 20% of the young Internet users at least once had an actual meeting with a person whom they got to know online (Ibid., 90 – 99).

It is therefore clear that parents are to a great extent unaware of the potential dangers which their children are exposed to online. It is essential to educate parents so that they could protect their kids from online threats.

The research conducted by Hanna Tomaszewska (2012, 169) involved four aspects: “Free time and social life of young people versus new media”, “The use of new media to communicate with peers”, “Emotional attitude of young people towards new media and indirect ways of communication with peers”, “The role and function of new media in communication of high school students with their peers” (Ibid., 167 – 168).

The project covered first year students from 14, including 7 general and 7 vocational high schools in Warsaw. In total 350 high school students took part in the research, 50.6% of which attended general high school and 49.4% vocational school (Ibid., 177). The research was conducted in 2006.

The research findings reveal that students from general high schools are more socially active than their peers from vocational high schools. This tendency refers to both virtual and real world. Teenagers’ online activity is determined by sex. Girls are more active users of social networking websites and discussion forums. They value close relationships and want to have friends and boyfriends. Boys devote a lot of time to hobbies and peer groups. It is interesting that young people, although engaged in different media (which results from fashion, convenience or necessity), prefer spending free time with friends whenever possible. This is illustrated by the responses concerning favourite ways of spending free time, the top two of which include meeting friends (27.5%) and going out with a boyfriend / a girlfriend (14.4%), whereas playing computer games (7.7%) and watching TV (3.3%) turned out to be less popular (Ibid., p.205). However, when referred to spending free time at home, the responses are completely different: 21.5% of high school students choose watching TV and 19.6% – using a computer. This means that young people prefer media when they stay at home (Ibid., p.207).

Young people most commonly use the Internet to communicate with others (on average 3.22 for boys and 3.35 for girls; the answers were rated on a four-point scale: 1 – never, 2 – seldom, 3 – often, 4 – very often) and to search for information (3.18 for boys and 3.32 for girls on the same four-point scale). Teenagers frequently use media to communicate with their peers. Face to face contact often appears along with contact through media which have become inherent part of the youth’s lives. Those who often communicate directly with others, also communicate with them via media. Girls more frequently than boys feel the need for communication with other people, regardless of the means of communication (Ibid., 209).

Conclusions

Modern mass media have huge potential in the process of globalisation. Different types of media have beneficial applications to our everyday life. They create favourable conditions for children’s development. They also enable children to understand global issues such as wars, nuclear threats, illnesses, hunger, homelessness, poverty etc. What is more, media promote cultural diversity and teach tolerance. They create new possibilities for better education, develop child’s creativity and manual skills or improve physical coordination (e.g. quality computer games). Additionally, mass media / multimedia allow children to participate in cultural events, both national and international. It can be said that nowadays media have become, along with school and family, one of important educational environments.

Educators emphasise, however, negative impact of media on children who are unable to select appropriate content from different types of multimedia. The media content, often embellished or exaggerated, become something attractive or even competitive to real things, which may develop “specific media awareness leading to cognitive and moral relativism, and finally to the passive consumerism attitude of blind imitation” (Izdebska, 2003, 23)

Undoubtedly, there are many possibilities and chances, but also threats from electronic media applications. Therefore, it is important to benefit from mass media so as not to become addicted or threatened by them. Parents and teachers, two primary educational environments, should support children in the use of media.

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