

# THE IMPACT OF MEDIA ON CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

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## **Introduction**

Children in Australia are spending more time with the mass media than with any other single activity, sleeping excepted. The average child spends three hours a day sitting in front of television and another couple of hours with films, radio and the press.

The considerable influence of television has been well documented. A summary statement in **Children and Television**, Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, 1978, says:

"Clearly television has emerged as the dominant experience in the life of the average Australian child . . ." (4.33)

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No previous civilization has possessed a single force of such magnitude. Intrinsicly, the media are good. While they are a tribute to the creative talents of our generation, they challenge us to integrate them into our culture in ways that improve the life of man.

The identification and measurement of the impact of the mass media on people is a complex task and one is not able readily to isolate media influence from that of the family, school, church and peer



group. Further, the effects of media use vary among individuals. However, from the abundance of available research it is possible to present a general over-view of the function of the media in the culture.

Expenditure of time, a precious commodity, is one of the more obvious enduring consequences of present-day devotion or addiction to

the mass media. What, then, are we to think of those activities that are foregone — the games, the conversations, the family interaction? Turning on the television or radio can turn off communication among family members. It can also alter family living patterns. Certainly the extent of the influence on family life of these media depends very much on the family itself. In any case, the gravity of the problem is evident.

The mass media provide children and adults with a tremendous source of knowledge and with a wide range of stimulating experiences in culture, in fantasy and in sport. Indeed, as sources of entertainment they are unsurpassed in our era. Nevertheless, these experiences affect the language and symbols people use, and frequently contribute in various ways to their education and socialization.

In Australian people are able to enjoy the benefits of a steady flow of information from around the world. They have at their disposal media which will deliver to them a mass of information and entertainment. Never has man been able to be so well informed with so little effort on his own part.

No literary form has such an extensive audience as television or radio and these media surely affect the acquisition of concepts, attitudes, values and moral standards. And therein, of course lies food for serious thought.

The behaviour of young people is influenced by television as, hour after hour, they see older people who communicate, who relate socially, who handle tensions, who resolve conflicts, who are kind, who are consumers, who play, who laugh, who listen to music and who eat particular kinds of foods. This influence, of course, will vary from child to child, but there is no doubt that children imitate many of the types of behaviour they see portrayed on the screen.

The young are also exposed to much violence and witness a wide range of aggressive acts. Television frequently focuses on the less pleasant side of life and there is a real possibility that young viewers may suffer from a loss of sensitivity and creativity. Therefore, the emotional impact of our modern mass media can be significant in the growth and development of children and adolescents.

Advertisers use the media to create demands for products and thus to influence the buying habits of the young and not so young. Today, few people doubt the persuasive power of advertising.



Advertisers, of course, can encourage responses that are impulsive and irrational and children may well require some protection from advertisements with the potential to develop demands that are unnecessary, or even harmful.

In this context dental care is also interesting. In 1978-9 the combined Commonwealth and State Government expenditure on dental health services for children will amount to \$38 million. This does not include the amount spent on dental care through private practitioners. Yet a significant percentage of advertising on children develop distorted ideas about what foods are desirable to eat! Exploitation of children through advertising certainly merits the careful attention of parents and teachers.

As a whole culture is permeated by television and other media, all people are influenced, including those who do not normally watch television, listen to the radio or read the press.

The media, particularly television, are in positions to help to define or create behavioural norms, that is, to show what is acceptable for cultures at a particular point of time. Thus, the media are both a product and producer of culture. As producers of culture the media have some influence on what people do, say and think. They affect language and symbols, fashions and games, attitudes and values, beliefs and practices. Moreover, such effects often reveal themselves with surprising suddenness, which in itself is of no little significance. Indeed, modern-day cultures are being transformed by the media at an unprecedented rate and few facets of daily living remain untouched.

Directly and indirectly the media are significant in shaping our attitudes to God and people, to life and death, to things spiritual and material.

Likewise, our attitudes to authority, work, politics, sport and music tend to be moulded by the ideas that come to us from the media. Little wonder, then, that so many people, possibly a majority, hold and express opinions that they have accepted ready-made from one or other of the media.

This again underlines the seriousness of a modern phenomenon that cannot be taken lightly. In a particular way, commercial television and radio play significant roles in developing attitudes to our consumer-oriented society; e.g., the foods we eat, the clothes we wear, the cosmetics we use and the entertainments we enjoy.

Unreal values constantly attributed by the media to material things pressurize consumers into

buying what is advertised rather than what they need. In this, of course, there is the implication that happiness is ensured by the use of particular products.

Programmes and advertisements both tend to present a rather selfish and materialistic attitude to life. A recurring theme would have us believe that "the good life" consists primarily of having sufficient money to purchase a wide range of goods, many of which, one could argue, are quite unnecessary and some even undesirable. This influence, of course, is not uniform and whereas some individuals are influenced to a remarkable degree, others are only marginally affected. But, this presentation of values by the modern media is more significant at a time when the influence of some institutions, traditionally responsible for the process of value transmission to children, appears to be weakening or even breaking down. While value transmission is in this state of flux, people will tend to develop values as they draw on the widest possible range of experience in attempting to formulate answers to the basic questions about their lives and the future. In this situation the media cannot fail to play a significant role.

Today's presentation of culture and values by the media can readily become tomorrow's norm and, in the long run, the media support and help the forces for moral change in our society. This, of course, could be in a positive or a negative direction, but what is important is that we recognise the potential of the media in the transmission of culture and values. While the media are influencing us as individuals they are also influencing our communities, parents, families, church, schools and our social groups. Hence we have what we might call a "compounding effect" — the media influence the parents who in turn influence their children and the media influence teachers who in turn influence their students.

Our understanding of the impact of the mass media on children is still far from complete. More research remains to be done before we can establish precisely the ways in which children are affected by the various media. Given the fact that the massive exposure of impressionable people to a constant diet of mass media has some impact, then it might well be disastrous to procrastinate while waiting for the definitive research on exactly how the media affect the socialization and education of children and adolescents.



Educators and parents have a special responsibility to ensure that children are given sufficient opportunities to develop those skills which will enable them to live in our audio-visual civilization. This duty cannot be stressed too strongly.

The mass media are an essential part of the economic system in Australia. They form a powerful industry which is basically committed to making a profit. Frequently, the industry has a very concentrated ownership which places substantial power in the hands of relatively few people who are in a unique position to influence the nation. The industry as a whole is primarily responsive to the advertisers and the consumer is of secondary importance. As a consequence of the present economic structure of the media industry, the people have very little effective control over what is produced. In other countries government control has the same effect.

## Summary

The press, radio, film and television have emerged in most countries as powerful agents of education and have taken their place alongside the traditional agents — home, school, church and peer group. Our schools, families, parishes and other organizations need to recognize the role of these media in the growth and development of young people and to co-ordinate their efforts to help them handle the media intelligently.

Many of the current fears about the unwholesome effects of the mass media can be allayed. In a variety of ways the electronic media have been given a free rein in many cultures and not much effort has been expended on learning to use them so that they will not influence people unduly.

Although the modern communication media must certainly be accepted as influencing young children, they should never be deemed too powerful to be corrected, mitigated, or utilized.

The recent Senate report, **Children and Television**, recommended that steps be taken to train children to be appreciative, critical and discriminating viewers who are able to evaluate television programmes on the basis of enrichment and enjoyment and to be able to assess and judge what they see in terms of their own attitudes.

The Senate Committee made this recommendation in recognition of the powerful influence of media on children in Australia.

According to the Senate, the long term aim of media education for children "is to produce more critical and discerning audiences that will demand higher standards and tastes in broadcasting services."

Media education — as it provides children with the skills, attitudes and knowledge to use the media well — is the most effective form of protection against undue media influence and exploitation.