

Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue Conference

Raising the New Generation with a Foundation of Values and Tradition: Religious Perspective

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Topic 3. How do the media and modern technologies influence the new generation?

(c) Media placement in building personality of a child and raising him/her religiously, culturally, and socially.

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The twenty first century saw the rapid development of new technologies, particularly the computer chip, satellite and cable communications, digital television, computers, video games, virtual reality and the internet. These technologies are changing our patterns of behaviour, our modes of accessing knowledge, our entertainment, and our ways of seeing the world and interacting with one another (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2004)

It is also rapidly shrinking the globe, uniting us and bringing us closer together, creating a 'global virtual village.' In some instances, its presence is welcomed as a necessary communicative tool, fulfilling functional roles namely, disseminating the daily news, weather and financial indicators, classifieds etc. and in some instances it is lambasted for its role as society's watchdog. Some would argue

that the media and its technological tools are shaping the world into a homogenous race, destroying minority cultures and religious identities.

This paper is intended to provide a brief discussion on the impact the media and its technological tools have in raising a child in a knowledge-based society.

Historical and Traditional Role of the Media

Defining the media is not easy as it is constantly evolving with the new technologies. In a media studies resource book authors Shaughnessy and Stadler (2004) define media as a specialist information medium that transcends physical barriers,

‘The media are technologically developed and economically profitable forms of human communication, held either in public or private ownership, which can transmit information and entertainment across time and space to large groups of people’

Predating technology and the printed medium, mass media originated with the speeches of tribal leaders, kings and priests. From the 1800’s newspapers were the primary medium of mass communication and focused predominately on societal affairs namely, marriages, deaths and ‘upper class’ lifestyle concerns, as literacy was limited to the affluent, most newspapers were handwritten and had a retail value.

Initially, the printed media did not have that much ‘power’ in persuading public opinion, but with the development of the railway and the invention of the printing presses its popularity grew. Subsequently, the broadcast radio and television diversified the traditional media characterization and was controlled by the wealthy and powerful namely, governments and corporations.

According to the World Association of Newspapers:

‘Between 1890 to 1920, the period known as the “golden age” of print media, media barons such as William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer, and Lord Northcliffe built huge publishing empires. These men had enormous influence within the media industry, and gained notoriety for the ways in which they wielded their power. *Iskra* (The Spark), published by Lenin in 1900, is one notable example. On June 21, 1925, *Thanh Nien* made its debut in Vietnam, introducing Marxism to the country and providing information on the revolution’s strategic policies.’

These media developments had no direct impact on the child’s opinion as the child’s development was greatly influenced by the parents, caregivers, society and religious persuasion.

Definition and impacts of New Media

The rapid advancement of the media and its technological tools enables ‘intimate and individualized’ conversations with its audience. Traditionally, media conversation was one-to-many, leaving the recipient with no control or influence over the content namely, the ‘Editor’ would communicate his message to the public without any expectation of a reply.

Prof Vin Crosbie, Adjunct Professor teaching New Media Business at Syracuse University defines modern-day media or commonly termed ‘New Media’ as,

‘...the evolution of several ostensibly unrelated technologies converged during the past century to create a third and entirely new communications medium – New Media

Among those convergent technologies were:

- The invention of digital communications during the late 1940s;
- The invention of the Transport Control/Internet Protocol ((TCP/IP) in the late 1960s;

- ARPANET's creation of the Internet during the early 1970s;
- The invention of the personal computer in the late 1970s

And to lesser degrees of the importance:

- The invention of the HyperText Transport Protocol (HTTP) in the late 1980s;
- The opening of the Internet to the public in 1992;
- The invention of the Mosaic browser software in that same year.'

Today, children are equipped with the most advanced media tools, which allow instant accessibility to all sorts of information. They are now able to participate in discussions, share ideas, purchase products, influence public opinion via mobile and website polls and reality television shows. One such example of a young person influencing public opinion is the televised interactive programme, American Idols.

The American Idols interactive show grew phenomenally with its young audiences in America and globally. The concept of the programme was to search for 'undiscovered' talent, create a platform for aspiring singers and to economically improve their quality of life.

According to Cecile Frot-Coutaz, executive producer of American Idols:

'A lot of young, talented people are now seeking careers and representation before they turn 16. 'Lowering the age limit allows us to tap into this talent pool.'

The producers of the programme have recently lowered the age entry limit to fifteen years to capture a much younger audience punting entertainment and singing as life enriching careers. Their advertising slogan reads, 'One audition changed the rest of their lives.' To qualify this slogan the producers have listed the previous winners with their current (dull) employment status before becoming a celebrity namely,

‘Before AMERICAN IDOL, Lee DeWyze worked as a paint store clerk in Mt. Prospect, IL. Kris Allen was a college student from Conway, AR. David Cook tended bar in Blue Springs, MO. Chris Daughtry was a service advisor at a car dealership in Greensboro, NC. Carrie Underwood lived on a farm in Checotah, OK. Jennifer Hudson was a cruise ship performer from Chicago, IL. Kelly Clarkson was a waitress from Dallas, TX.’

The American Idols successfully converge traditional media (television) with new technologies and its products namely, mobile phones, computers, internet, blogs, emails, podcasts, online newsletter, alerts, voting, individualized ringtones, music games and electronic resource library. The phenomenal growth of ten seasons is directly attributed to the convergence of media and technology, without it, the show would of being confined to a community and the producers would have had to travel to various locations to find new talent and garner support.

Following the success of the American Idols, South Africa imported the concept and also experienced phenomenal growth. A success story from South Africa is the 2005 Idols winner, Karen Kortje, a single parent who was working as an apple picker on a farm in Grabouw.

Before the Idols competition, Karen from Grabouw a small apple growing town nestled between the Hottentots-Holland, Kogelberg and Groenland Mountains with a population of 15663 (Grabouw Tourism Bureau) and high illiteracy rates was unbeknown to South Africa. More importantly, her winning the title is attributed to the votes received from the viewers. Karen received over two-million votes. The convergence of the media and technology with its low costs enabled young persons to vote for their favourite singer, giving them the means to actively participate in the show and influence the judging process.

Interestingly, in South Africa, youth make up almost half the country’s population and especially in our new democracy, where their participation is most needed, most young persons are indifferent when it comes to electing a President to run the country. This apathy could be attributed to the following:

1. The voting process are confined to buildings
2. They subjected to standing in queues
3. They feel isolated, distant from candidates
4. Subjected to time
5. Need to travel

Perhaps, the South African government and the Independent Electoral Commission should re-look at their educational methodologies and voting criterion to interest and attract youth or perhaps the fourteen to sixteen year olds are much more technologically savvy than what we give them credit.

In the absence of the 'older' generation not fully aware of the new media and it's impact. Children are increasingly shaping their own and public opinion, creating 'new' norms by using the media namely, the changing of the English language from alpha to alpha-numeric, for example, the word *wait* is transformed to *w8*. Increasingly, they are creating their own language to ensure maximum and effective usage of technology, for example, words are reduced to sounds, for example, the words *see you* is transformed into two sounding letters, *c u*.

These new developments are initiated by the users of new media and not its producers, for example, a sms was initially limited to 245 characters per sms prompting the innovation of 'new technological language' as mobile phones usage cost were much cheaper than a landline and allowed the user his/her privacy, it increasingly plays a more functional role, demanding more individualized applications. The main reasons why mobile phones are more popular with young persons are:

1. It can be transformed into an individual and personalized form of communication
2. The user has full control over its content

3. It is convenient, lightweight, wireless and regarded as a fashion accessory
4. It has useful everyday applications like setting alarms, calendar planning, creating database of contacts and friends, calculator and navigator.
5. More socialable applications appealing to young persons are the camera, recording of songs, games, easy access to internet and social networks like mxit, forums, chat rooms, video recording and playbacks.

The disadvantages of new media and especially mobile phones are:

1. The invasion of privacy, many users, take unsolicited photographs or manipulate images. Saudi Arabia had banned camera phones through out the country while many countries are concern about this problem. They have also banned the usage of the Black Berry.
2. Psychiatrists believe that mobile phone addiction is becoming one of the biggest non-drug addictions in the 21st century.
3. An increase in Cyber bullying, which is a bullying act using offensive words and behavior via online chatting, emails or SMS text messages. Or more serious form is blackmail – users use unsolicited photographs and video to persuade or manipulate users.
4. Many scientists believe that the radiation from the mobile phones may cause the users to have different symptoms such as headache, earaches, blurring of vision and even causing cancer.

Mobile technology is the future and more popular with the younger generation, yet many of them don't understand the dangers of unlimited access to information and social networks. Most young users as young as seven receive their first mobile phone from their parents without any guide as to the advantages and disadvantages of using mobile phones. Many parents are not aware of the dangers and allow children to build and share their individual profile, which contains personal information, to faceless 'friends' of the cyberworld.

According to Jean Piaget, a Developmental Biologist, children under the age of 15 are not capable of reasoning as an adult. They don't have the capability to discern between 'good' and 'bad' information. Seven year olds are not yet responsible for their behavior as they don't understand the principles underlying best behavior, they only understand the do's and don't's as a command. And from the age of 12 upwards the child's thinking becomes more logical and the child is beginning to tell the difference between the tangible and abstract.

Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development

The Preoperational Period (2-7 years)	
Intuitive Phase (4-7 years)	<p>Speech becomes more social, less egocentric. The child has an intuitive grasp of logical concepts in some areas. However, there is still a tendency to focus attention on one aspect of an object while ignoring others. Concepts formed are crude and irreversible. Easy to believe in magical increase, decrease, disappearance. Reality not firm. Perceptions dominate judgment.</p> <p>In moral-ethical realm, the child is not able to show principles underlying best behavior. Rules of a game not develop, only uses simple do's and don'ts imposed by authority.</p>

Period of Concrete Operations
(7-12 years)

Characteristic Behavior:

Evidence for organized, logical thought. There is the ability to perform multiple classification tasks, order objects in a logical sequence, and comprehend the principle of conservation. thinking becomes less transductive and less egocentric. The child is capable of concrete problem-solving.

Period of Formal Operations
(12 years and onwards)

Characteristic Behavior:

Thought becomes more abstract, incorporating the principles of formal logic. The ability to generate abstract propositions, multiple hypotheses and their possible outcomes is evident. Thinking becomes less tied to concrete reality.

These are the ideal cognitive developmental stages of a child that is nurtured in a loving and stable home, yet with modern-day challenges, both parents need to work, the HIV/Aids virus has transformed many homes into child-headed households and the increasing child abuse rates has detrimental consequences on the development of a child.

And, whilst the home is not conducive to raising a child with a high self-esteem and equipping them with critical, logical and analytical thinking processes the child is developing their own perceptions of life and acceptable behavior. This behavior might not comply with the religious, social and cultural identity of the family or community as the child has created his/her own identity with their 'virtual community', constantly chatting on their mobile devices, living past the 'real' family. This double life breaks down the family or social unit and creates relations within relations. The child develops a 'sense of belonging' with his/her virtual community, a dependency on new media for its day-to-day living and regards the information posted on the internet or on their mobile phones as true without verifying the source or the content.

In the absence of monitoring the content of 'New Media' and quality educational programmes in schools the child's is increasingly becoming vulnerable to the dangers of 'New Media'.

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