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## **Contradictory Messages of the Media: A Compare and Contrast Study of the Child Identity Represented by Press and TV**

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Children are given special attention at all levels of society. They are always given priority when it comes to news and marketing issues. Throughout this paper, the mass media coverage of the children is analysed considering the news in the press, programmes and the commercials on television. On one hand, the written news, comments, facts and figures of the children were presented and criticised, yet on the other hand, the virtual childhood and idealised children were created and adored in the visual messages. The messages contradict in this sense. With these contradicting messages the roles and values of the parents and the society change as well. On one hand, the fathers and mothers care a lot for their children, on the other hand, they neglect, even leave their children.

With the power of setting the agenda and cultivating the seeds of the concepts, the media has a manipulative function not only in Turkey but also all over the world. This paper is an attempt to exemplify how these contradictory messages of the media could be organised, how the reality and virtual reality co-exist in the same society and how the expectations of the people could vary depending upon what they read or what they watch. The paper concentrates on the data collected through Jan-March 2006 and results of the analysis are discussed through the insight studies with sample groups. As a result the paper aims to match the child identity represented by the press and by the television commercials to see how much they fit into each other.

### **Introduction**

In this study, the 'image and identity of child' is considered in the changing dynamics and dimensions of modern family and society to lead to the concept of 'Children in Communication'. Questioning the child identity as a member of the 'audience', it is brought to light that children take place in communication starting from the very beginning of their lives. Yet, there are many contradictory representations of the children through the media.

Starting with an acquisition process, developing rapidly and continuously they tend to consume whatever they find in their communication environment (Ferguson and Slobin, 1980; Krashen, 1981). Their capacity, competence and performance are enormous. They get the messages produced by the adults and they somehow react to it in some part of their lives, but when and how are just unknown. The messages in their communication atmosphere recycle so frequently that they become a part of their identity. In a way the adults now are cultivating the attitudes, beliefs and strategies for future communication that might be socially, politically, psychologically and economically effective in future (Cohen and Weimann, 2000; Gerbner, 2002; Gilman, 2000). Realising this fact might affect the way we produce the messages, which could be harmful for the children.

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Children in developing countries have many problems. One of the main problems of the world today is the number of the suffering children. Most of them suffer from physical inequalities whereas most of the others suffer from psychological problems. Children in modern countries have some other problems. The more they get the technology the less human communication they have (Van Der, Zanden, 1988, Mussen, Conger and Kagan, 1979). Having less contact with their parents and nature changes their expectations and attitudes (Elkind, 1989, p. 217). Although technology has brought so many different aspects into the life of today's children the new generations are still dependent on the old stories and fairy tales told not in the form of books but virtual reality of all kinds (Watson, 1990). Today's children have more toys, more technical equipment, more cartoons and candies but the problem is whether they are happier or not.

This paper aims to concentrate on how children are reflected through different media and how these representations, different images of the children of the same society find their place in real life.

### **Purpose and Methodology**

Spoken or written, visual or audio texts surround people in modern society. These texts frequently encounter with each other as well as with people. The new images of people regarding their self-respect and self-positioning in society are mostly shaped through these texts. Some of them are chosen, because we believe that we need them; yet, others only interfere in our world sometimes without our permission. Being an open text, all the texts are influenced by the other texts. Thus either they are enriched or restructured through the interaction with the other texts. Public response and the reflections of the society shape the future texts as well. These texts mirror their viewers and readers in the media atmosphere. The media is the place where the texts are displayed and where the information is gathered.

Since most of these texts are cyclical ones rather than being linear ones, the new information gathered through the new encounters and new texts end up in the self or in the society. The upcoming texts are shaped regarding the previous ones and the future events are put into classes as in the past. Thus, the new texts are evaluated through the eyes of the new society shaped by the new texts. After this evaluation the new information is either accepted or rejected. What happens to the accepted information? It is added to the self to make it perfect, active and competent enough for the future encounters with the other texts.

What happens to the rejected information? It is added to the self again in order to be used later on for the future encounters. But this is a rather passive addition and a bit protective. This type of an addition to the self could rather be regarded as the 'knowledge' about the enemy to defeat him/her when it comes to that. This is a rather specified field where you know about the rules but never fight. All these evaluations require the self to be active all the time, testing, assessing and evaluating the self to be ready for all the others. Each new encounter has an impact on the self and on the society. Thus both the self and the society grow up bit by bit by the help of the other, with the new texts around.

To find out how crucial the distinction is between the different layers of the media could be analysed in different ways. The news is delivered in most different television channels almost in the same order. The different papers publish the same piece of news in similar ways. The slight differences do not cause much change when the cumulative effect of the media is considered.

Just to see the similarity, the same channel having a well-known newspaper and a well-known television channel could be observed simultaneously. Mainly the same news is delivered in the news bulletins, yet the time and space each bulletin is given might change according to the audience reactions. For this reason, it's been decided that news covering most of the media at the beginning of a new year could be analysed. For three months, between January and March of 2006, the newspapers and the television programmes involving children are considered as the most important. The collected data is classified considering the way it handles the children. The news is classified by whether it is minimising or maximising the child image in its positive or negative way or if it is just delivering the information in a natural neuter way. Only a few of the messages were seen as neutral and objective.

One other factor effecting the interpretation of the data was the coverage of the same news on the newspaper and on TV. Generally, this coverage might change from time to time and the primary news on the newspaper could become secondary news on the television channel or vice versa. The secondary or less important news on the newspaper was reflected in a more major way on the television channels when they have more visual parts in it. Thus, rather than the coverage quality and quantity, the major emphasis in the discourse were considered.

### **Findings and Interpretation**

The newspapers and the television channels were referring to the same child issue in different ways. This difference could be summarised in specific terms as the three distinct approaches to the same point. The findings and their interpretation could be summarised as follows:

- Minimising Effect,
- Maximising Effect,
- Neutral Approach.

The newspapers and the television channels have different ways of presenting child based issues. The newspapers are dealing more with the traumatic sides of the news. They do it on purpose to increase the attention of the readers and to be read more. This is the only way of increasing their circulation. Mostly the news delivered through the newspapers was pessimistic and rather sad. The news coverage is larger if they have an accompanying photo. The density of the emotional dose was a bit more emphasised just to make it more memorable and effective. These could be classified as the news regarding child abuse, children running away from home, street children, working children, handicapped, etc.

The television channels seem to be giving more importance to the optimistic side of the child image. The information could also be as sad or pessimistic; yet, there could be

some humour in it in the way it is delivered. Also through some repetitions of the visuals, some images were given in a more influential way.

It's been found that the secondary or less important news in the newspapers were reflected in a more major way on the television channels when they have more visual parts in it. Thus, rather than the coverage quality and quantity, the major emphasis was on the discourse. The way it's been reflected was much more important than the bare coverage of the news.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

There are many different topics when children and their media relationship is covered. The media has an impact on adults, but has a greater impact on children. Thus, the way the media reflects the children would have a double function both on the adults and on the children (Hall, 2000).

Considering the importance given to the news programmes on television channels, it might be interesting to know that most kids are watching news with their parents. The research shows that once television is mentioned, the children associate it with the 'news'. During the research done in 2001 by Istanbul University Faculty of Communication 502 children of 6-14 ages were questioned (Hürriyet, 2001). The data shows us that they remember the news line by line even weeks after. According to the meetings and questionnaires given they feel 'unhappy' when they watch television because usually the news is full of sorrow and pain. The collected data proves that 39.4 % of the children watch television news programmes between 18:00-22:00 at least three times on different channels. The 79% of them watch the main news broadcasts everyday. 13% of them associate the television with the word news.

News programmes watched alone or together with other family members reach up to the level of 14% in the whole watching time of the children. However, this percentage goes up with the growing ages. 53.8 % of the children could remember the news of the day before. It's interesting that the children could remember the visuals of the news even many days later. In the news order, 27.5% for sports news, 12.9% for education news, 11.6% of news including some documentaries were found interesting for the children. As could be guessed, news about the economy appealed to only 2% of the children. The children also reflect that they feel pain mostly for the news regarding traffic accidents (32%), murders (25%) and natural disasters (16%).

It is important to note that the children are more affected when they see the news on the television news broadcasts rather than reading it in a newspaper. According to the data collected by Prof. Servet Bayram of Marmara University, out of 504 adults 47.7% are reading a newspaper every 3 days. The rest read a newspaper every week or every 10 days. Most of the people (60.7%) admit that they do not have regular reading habits. Half of the participants read the newspaper in 1-2 hours, 28.3% read it in an hour, and 9.1% read it in less than half an hour. This shows us that the adults reading newspapers were less common than the ones watching television. In this case, it's inevitable that the newspapers and television channels apply different strategies to appeal their consumers.

The children of today are a kind of mixed type. Having been educated in the family and in the school in diverse ways, they have many problems as children. What's worse, it's believed that they'll have more problems in the future. Thus, even within the family, due to the different understandings of education, different generations handle the issue in many different ways. These mixed messages could also be seen through the media. On one hand the media is representing the child as weak, powerless, in need or miserable, but on the other hand, the same media gives messages of a very powerful, intelligent, governing child images. The uncontrolled love or sacrifices for children are also represented throughout the media.

In the past, it was believed that the families were creating the 'problem child'; yet, there is more proof that it is neither the families nor the education systems but the media that creates the problem child.

The media is seen as the only place where the children could find some peace and reflection. Due to the limited time between real life and education, the children have not much chance other than with the media to compensate the gap between their wishes and expectations and the realities.

The media reflects children in a distorted way, and using the space and time limitations it makes it real life rather than presenting it virtually only. It provides a virtual society in which the children were represented in a highly different way from real life itself.

### **The Place and Function of the Child in the Family**

Most of the families of today place their children in the family centre. This is due to the many messages surrounding them. Among them are many messages created by the media to serve its own needs. The media creates images of the family through serials, television films, soap operas and news bulletins. Media created images are not only for adults but also for children. The media also produces the child-centred family giving crucial importance to their children trying to be forgiven for the things they could not do for them.

The traditional roles of the family members were given mostly to the media in the present. For the child, media is becoming everything. The media handles the education, it also performs the observation, yet there is also some place for spare time activities. In a questionnaire the children stated that they would prefer television to their father 44%, and to their mother 20% (Güven, 1994). This proves that media has also been valued more than the family members. Media creates the child image for the child and for the family.

Whereas the television is seen as the world's dominant storyteller, the parents at home and the friends at school or at work function as a TV at home. They are the cultivators having all the information, characters and setting/plot for all kind of actions developing somewhere inside and outside. Most of them fed by the media help it to cycle the information.

The media images of the children show us two fringe points. One is that the children are neglected the other one is that they are over protected. The press usually gives the images of neglected children yet the television news and programmes yield many examples of how children are taken good care of and how much the families care for their children. This is not only done through the news bulletins but also with the television serials, advertisements and other type of programmes.

### **The Time Spent on the Children**

In real life, the children were not taken care of a lot. They are left to the television. They usually watch television alone in their bedroom if they are in big cities. In the smaller cities or villages, it is usually the agreed program by the whole family members they watch. In both cases, the level of neglect could be high. But in the programmes they watch, the child figures are mostly the protected, sometimes over protected children. It is the same in the media images. The news bulletins and on the newspapers are full of neglected children and how much they suffer, but on the other hand, the advertisements and the many programmes show cases of over protected children.

The media images of the children show us two ends again when it comes to the relationship of the mother and the child. Mostly the mother and child relationship is emphasised in the media. The contradictory messages appear in this relationship as well. The mother is shown as the inevitable, natural company to the child and sometimes the mothers are depicted as the most perfect mothers of the society, over protecting their children. But, the news is full of the details of abused children by their own mother or sometimes other family members. The number of the mothers represented as abusing their stepchildren, own children or even the neighbour's children are increasing with each piece of news. The press is full of photographs making use of such news especially on the third page sometimes carried up to the first page. However, the television news and programmes are full of rich examples of how children are cared for.

Regarding the father and child relationship, mainly the media is saying two different things. It is important to note that the press is responsible for many images of fathers leaving their children. On the other hand, the television is using the father position for the general economic conditions. Mainly he is the supplier of the family, that's why he provides most of the things for the family and specifically for children. In that case the same media created two different images: Neglected Children vs. Over protected Children. Television is mostly responsible for this, providing many news and other programmes showing the idealised over protected children. In a way, these images create a pseudo-world in which the parents and children are very happy, yet in fact there is no such a world.

Considering the other media such as radio none of them are as influential as television. Radio has many programmes involving children but they are not as effective. In most of the radio news it is really very difficult to find a bit related to children. Yet, apart from the news, the children programmes, the child targeted programmes radio programmes recognise the child audience and makes use of them providing them with whatever music they like, etc. Unfortunately there is only a small audience. Thus, the battle is between the television and the newspaper.

Television stands at the far end of the optimistic point of view. In television, the visual child image is shown as prominently as possible but the real child is shown very little. However, in the newspapers it is just the opposite. Newspapers have many full pages stating a very pessimistic point of view. The pages are examples of child abuse, gender discrimination, street children, etc. In that case, the newspapers news are giving the child image as little as possible but the real child is shown much more prominently.

### **The Child and Visual Communication**

All this data proves that the visual literacy is given more importance than the literacy itself. The newspapers handle similar news, so that, in certain periods, certain types of news appear. The reflection is almost similar to the previously published one. They are written almost in the same style, even using similar vocabulary, perhaps similar photographs from the archive. It is also possible to see the similar visual effects during the news programmes (the archive scenes are used more effectively) (Boulding, 1956). The impact of these visuals is more than that of the printed press. Neither in television nor on newspapers is the news delivered in the most appropriate way considering the child's physical, sensual, intellectual or imaginative qualities.

### **Targeting the Child Audience**

Television programmes and especially advertisements were underlined in the paper. The idealised child figures are mostly seen in the television serials and advertisements. They target mainly or peripherally (directly or indirectly) the child audience.

The messages are given in such a way that the children are idealised as the centre of the society and the family. Everything is organised for their specific good and benefit, the parents and all the older generation are so kind and understanding to them (Peters, 1977). Somehow most of their wishes come true in this virtual reality atmosphere. The rate of the advertisements in the child hours for children and for adults during the observed period could give us a clue on how they are led.

For Children	%	For Adults	%
Food	29.38	Banking	4.9
Gum	43.45	Furniture	0.43
Detergents	10.74	Food	15.71
Cosmetics	0.87	Cleaning	11.34
Toys	5.00	Communication	66.39
Books	10.53		

### **Child Based Communication**

Television programmes establish a model for the society. They represent not only what happened in the society but also what could have happened. Thus, the imaginary

scenarios, the planned encountering, the overdosed child based discourse creates a pseudo-world in which the children are maximised through their appearances, through their reflections and through their idealised, virtual identities. The realities of life were usually referred to rather cruelly in the newspapers through the pictures.

When the impact on the audience is considered, it could be said that news programmes and the other programmes on television are proved to have more impact than the newspaper news and articles.

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