THE FAMILY IN MEDIA CIPHERS

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Abstract

Undoubtedly media have a great power and impact on the lives of individuals, families and society. Family becomes a very attractive group for the media industry. The desire of man for current information forces the mass media to expend enormous effort to be always one imaginary step ahead. To be faster, better, most trusted, most watched. Not only children are lost in the family in this whirlwind of media efforts on the client, but very often also the parents who raise their children under normal circumstances. There is why it is necessary to give the systematic contours to the media education of the family, because just the systematic approach enables us to use the mass media effectively for the benefit of individuals and families. I wish to suggest that only 'mentally (media) healthy generation' can raise a healthy media generation that will not fall into narcissistic individualism forming the pseudo values. The fact is that the more is a man freer in the choice of media content, the greater responsibility for shaping his life lies on his shoulders but also the lives of ones entrusted to him.

1. Introduction

Mass media by their impact on individuals and masses significantly influence their thinking, feeling and acting. The media - or more precisely - media makers know the principles of the human mind, they know in what connections of pictures human mind associates the desired outputs. Basically, by the system of arranged pictures the desired output originates in the human mind. It is a very frequent phenomenon when manipulating in an advertisement.

In this case we can talk about some kind of media culture in the broader sense of the term. We do not mean cultural manifestations via the media, but influence of media on society. Development of new technologies influences Science and research and, naturally, the environment where a man lives. Revolutionary changes, which are not only of a technological nature, happened to be even in communication technologies. On the basis of these changes a man is always 'bombarded' by pictures from various parts of the world which have a positive as well as a negative character. To a great extent the media keep serving people various models of life (living, coexistence, partner relationships, etc.),

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furthermore entertainment and experience of various emotional characters along with the quality and cheesy outputs and also information of broad scale nature [1].

If we talk about the sense of media in the life of a man, we can talk about the function and role of the media in the contemporary society. Today, mass media present current news, documentary, educational and entertaining information from the world around us. They provide us with information about the world which is out of our reach – physical or intellectual. Media depiction of reality is often just a filtered reflection of reality, or one of many variants of its interpretation. Journalists and media owners have not insignificant influence on the public opinion and politics because to a great extent they regulate what people think by posing topics which are according to media necessary to be discussed and become aware of and which thus appear in newspapers, magazines or on TV.

Being aware of this, some critical theoreticians of the media and communication came up with the construction of the so-called social reproduction. According to this theory, media serve for maintaining power situation. They do not work for society, but only for dominant power groups, for the elites. Media filter undesirable information and inform only to such an extent and context which keeps the status quo, fixed social system. In fact, the media indicate what is and is not normal. The language of the media describes *deviation from the right direction,* if they become the subject of media content, as *controversial*. This term in the media language in advance disqualifies projects and authors of other than generally preferred ideas and attitudes [2].

Society attaches exceptional importance to the media [3, 4]. Society consists of individuals and today we can find only a minimum of households without the latest media conveniences. However, in direct proportion to the advanced technology of households, value of time, community, dialogue, feeling and emotion exhibited to a man within the family or work community is in decline. We talk little about ourselves, about what we feel and we talk more about what and how other people feel or how they solve their problems. Maybe because of suppression of our own feelings, fears, unimportance or weakness, we prefer to solve the same problems of other, popular people available for the objective of a camera or radio microphone [4]. Maybe the time will come when we stop giving these modern means of communication such a big space in our personal life, but obviously their expansion and feeling they are important is also the consequence of the globalisation process [4].

2. At the edge of the abyss

Drugs such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, crack or cannabis can turn a person into an addicted wreck, an artefact of a human being – personality falling apart from both physical and psychical side. It is different when talking about the irresistible attraction of modern technologies which have brought a new sort of addiction. At the first sight it could seem as a benign and relatively

'harmless addiction' still considered to be more or less a cute kind of specific entertainment, venting of intellectual energy. This tendency is beginning to turn into a frightening shape resembling the most pessimistic visions of sci-fi writers about the virtual world. It is growing into a problem unpleasant for both an addicted person and for his relatives, family, friends and co-workers [5].

For this purpose serve the statistics, numbers from abroad, because until now there are no such statistics available in Slovakia. However, we may consider the data that are available from the United States and carefully assume that the future survey in Slovakia will show similar results and trends. For instance, in an average American family the television is on for 7 hours and 40 minutes. Besides, 40% of Americans often or always watch TV during eating dinner, 50% of children at the age of 8 to 16 have a TV in their room. Americans spend 4 hours and 31 minutes watching TV. Another 5 hours and 16 minutes they spend in front of some other screens such as computers, smart phones and tablets. Facts about violence presented on TV are also interesting. American studies show that without TV presentation of violence it would be possible to prevent 10,000 murders, 70,000 rapes and 700,000 robberies every year in the USA. Many perpetrators of criminal acts confessed that they had imitated violent behaviour from the TV screen [*What are you missing?*, http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/Missing-poster01.pdf].

Information overload creates the so-called 'metapatology' characterised by tiredness, estrangement, boredom, apathy and loss of faith in higher values. Similarly, disruption of personal communication as a result of increasing use of the Internet creates anxiety which causes the following search of entertainment. Higher level of anxiety again leads to the necessity of getting new information. The result is that a man defines himself as a 'pilgrim in the masses'– outsider in the crowd.

The Internet and its services are considered to be the common working means, relax, source of information, entertainment, etc. The Internet is a common thing not only in the commercial world but also in education and nowadays even in households. The number of Internet cafes and Internet clubs has increased enormously and it causes the Internet to enthral the young as well as other age groups. The problem of addiction to the Internet technologies is not very serious in Slovakia at the moment, but the group of the ones at risk – addicted - is still growing. Therapists in the Special psychiatric medical institution in Predná Hora (Revuca region) have started to treat the first cases of these new nontoxic addictions related to the Internet. The senior doctor of the institution confirms this by saying: "It was only the matter of time when these new addictions get to us".

It is necessary to distinguish if it is a case of addiction to the computer or the Internet. Computer addiction is the adherence of a person and his perception to virtual (computer) reality. People become fixated on various games and applications. They fantasise about them, imitate them, etc. They even identify themselves with virtual characters in the games and experience with them the whole action. Computer addiction, however, is not the same as the Internet

addiction. People addicted to PC games create their own world and live in it. They lose the ability to communicate with their surroundings and grow way from society.

In general, researches confirm that 10% of the Internet users suffer from addiction to the Internet, pathologic state, which could lead to the states of anxiety and depressions. Internet addiction today is classified by specialists on mental health as *obsessive compulsive disorder, the disease characterised by obsessive, repeated and unwanted thoughts (obsessions) causing anxiety and/or irrational ritualistic repeated behaviour that the addicted person has to perform (compulsions).*

In the field of the Internet addiction, we can make use of some selected statistical information of American specialists. More and more Americans show signs of the Internet addiction that are similar to alcoholics or drug users. It was based on the research of the scientists from the University in Stanford, California. According to the results of their research based on the telephone conversations with more than 2,500 adults it shows that at least one in eight Americans show signs of 'problematic use of the Internet'. The study shows that although the reason for some addictions might be pornography or gambling, many Americans also visit various specialized websites, buy some consumer goods or just chat.

According to the survey of the Chinese National Children's centre, about 13% of Chinese up to 18 with access to the Internet is addicted. It is more than 2 million people. There are a few millions of young people suffering from the computer game addiction, Internet pornography, Internet chat or cybersex. After more young people have died spending long hours in front of the computer, the Chinese government decided to fight systematically modern addictions. The centre for treatment Internet addiction IATC near Beijing works as part of the local military hospital with adequate conditions of treatment. The patients are usually boys at the age of 14 to 19. The Internet is considered by Chinese officials to be the major culprit of criminality of the young, many suicides and dying of exhaustion from spending long hours in front of the computer screen [6].

3. Media education

Experts in the field of education warn that loads of information consuming the children causes the decline of general education. The reason is inability to incorporate thus gained information to one's own knowledge system; the interpretation framework to judge their importance is missing [7].

Reality and fiction often mingle as well as information and entertainment, commercials and reality [8]. It is still disputable how we are prepared for entrance of media into our lives, how we can deal with media offer, if we can choose what is the most suitable for our knowledge, entertainment and relaxation, if we can analyse ways of interpreting information, etc. Generally, perception of media as the source of information prevails which except for

positive functions (spreading of knowledge, education, etc.) also fulfil negative functions (we mean the contents that could threaten psychical and moral development of children and teenagers, mainly contents with violent charge supporting hatred, intolerance, etc.) [9].

That is why it is highly relevant and necessary to deal with media education on various degrees of education with use of adequate ways and methods. Media education can be defined as practical teaching aimed at building up media competence understood as critical and differentiating attitude towards media with one goal – to create balanced citizens who are able to give their own opinions on the basis of available information.

4. Critical fields of media education

Based on the research, studying of many materials and communication with players of media education (parents, priests, catechists, teachers, pupils, students) we have come to identification of critical fields which are in the way of more efficient use of potential which have single involved elements. We cannot deny the activity of the academic environment, non-profit sector, Church, family, individuals and even partly the state in partial efforts to fight the Golem [10].

Twenty years ago we were standing as one in the streets chanting: *United we stand!* We do not see any other way in the field of media education. Efforts of family, academic environment and the Church must be united by the political system which is clear from its elementary duties.

Critical field means:

- family, its general threats as well as a threat from the side of the media, break-up of relationships in the family, break-up in marriages, communication between parents and with their children;
- political system, competence matters of involved ministries (Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic), the National Institute for Education, universities, schools and non-profit sector;
- system of vocational training for the future teachers of media education, qualification, competences of teachers, environment of the preparation;
- insufficient activity of Church in the field of media education, agenda of communication is missing on the Church – bishops – priests - the believers (parent/child) axis in the field of media education, the system of media education is missing at the parish, family, school and after-school catechesis level;
- insufficient preparation of Church workers in the field of media education, insufficient implementation of fundamental regulations of the Magisterium.

Probably these are not all critical fields in the process of media education. Some hidden mistakes always emerge in the functioning system and these are not possible to predict in advance. In a well and effectively established system, it is much easier to deal with them and to eliminate them in the process.

5. Family media space

A European survey of values from the year 2000 showed that Slovakia, in comparison with other European countries, still gives much importance to the family. Generally, we can see how often practices and language of consumerism, individualism and egoism infiltrate into our lifestyle saturated with pop culture. Marital and family life is very fragile, easily attacked and difficult to maintain in the present society. Statistics confirm the fact that approximately one half of marriages break up within the first two years.

Children and teenagers are threatened by various media influences. That is why it is important to teach them how to use the media properly and to have a right attitude towards them. Media education should not only contribute to vocational training of teachers [11]. Parents as well play an important role in assessing their own media habits in order to be capable of guiding their own children.

Every education has its roots in the family and media education has its foundations right there, too. It is the most natural environment in the family for its implementation. Family culture is related to it and its foundations are created by parents [12]. The relationship of parents, their communication and mutual influence on their children determines the family, family culture and thus educational environment. In our present family background, we must understand media education as follow-up education built within a certain framework of values [13].

Family culture daily receives new impulses which try to adjust it to 'their own image' modelled on consumption, intrigues, sex and emotional instability. Slovak television programs are overflowing with American films and TV series and also Slovak series made according to tried foreign concepts.

Some of them, e.g. *Panelák* or *Ordinácia v ružovej záhrade* intend to introduce a certain image of family and relationships that penetrate into the viewer's consciousness. This image is based on the notion that the particular film family/relationship goes through so many changes, emotional stress and problems that their family happiness remains only a distant dream. Do you also experience something similar? Are you afraid of something similar happening to you, too? Does this stereotype resemble any family you might know? Or is it even a common occurrence in real life? [14]

Parents might not even realize that, but primarily they educate their children about media at home. School education takes second place. Media education is, for instance, when children are not allowed to watch certain programmes, television is not viewed while sitting together at the dining table, or when parents help children comprehend what they see on the television screen. All these actions are active steps that parents, as a third party, may use to facilitate a contact with the media for their children. In such case parents assume the role of mediators.

An action, by means of which a parent, as a third party (above mentioned mediator), enters into the relationship of children and the media is called a parental mediation. In such case a parent regulates a contact of children with the media [15]. Initially, parental mediation was mentioned only in connection with television viewing. Various researches proved parental mediation to be effective in reducing the impact of television, but with small alterations it could be also applied to any medium.

Professional literature identifies three main strategies that parents can use: active mediation (talking with children about television), restrictive mediation (establishing rules for restrictions pertaining to television viewing) [15] and *social co-viewing* (parents watch television together with their children). One Dutch study proves that active mediation successfully reduces the relations between exposure to news coverage with violent content, and subsequent emotional responses of fear, anxiety and anger in younger children [16].

Children imitate their father and mother's behavioural patterns and attitudes towards the media. Their educational and developmental process occurs through imitation of people relevant to them, as well as people from the world of the mass media.

Ability to motivate and engage a child in appropriate media contents and programmes is a key element in this process. Parents are important figures in the lives of their children, and as such they possess a great ability to form in their children the right attitude towards the media based on trust and a sense of security in their relationship towards their parents [17].

"One of the relevant factors of effective television functioning in the family is the atmosphere that dominates there. Character of relationships between the family members, a way of their co-existence, condition of childcare, effect of education that manifests itself in parents' interest in the development and education of their child help to create that family atmosphere." [18]

The Holy Pope John Paul II took a great interest in this area of the family life. He wrote: "Therefore, not only parents themselves must use television reasonably. It is also their duty to form such habits in their children in order to ensure their healthy personal, moral and religious development." [19]

6. The system of rules as a possible solution

The above mentioned words of the Holy Pope indicate that the easiest way of starting the media formation in the family through a fixed set of rules. These rules clearly determine authority of respective members of the family. On a pragmatic level, it means taking due responsibility for their actions.

A publication titled *A child in the focus of the media* refers to so called media space - where parents establish rules for the media usage and set an example for their children. When arranging domestic media space, it is necessary to take into consideration a variety of means of communication and also introduce balance and own fixed time schedule for their usage.

For younger children it is possible to establish rules for television viewing: you can watch television for two hours, and then you can play computer games for an hour, but then spend another hour of your leisure time reading.

It is not only about wording the rules. Much more important is to emphasize the meaning of such action. It is necessary to point out a variety of leisure time activities, call attention to less appealing activities, such as reading, too. Behind all of that, there is an objective of balanced development of our children [20].

Personal engagement of parents in the field of media education is obvious. A discussion about received communication (a film or an episode of the series), time spent together in front of a computer playing games or listening to music is often considered as a sufficient educational method.

In keeping with previously articulated thought, both children and adults learn to understand the media together, and at the same time. This is a collective program and a pedagogical task that needs to be executed. In addition to family members, new people, such as TV presenters, film and series characters or other people that we encounter through the media, become a part of an extended family circle and create the media space.

This extended 'board' requires us to maintain a leading role related to the education of our children. The media and people employed by them tend to form our opinions, as they become role models [21].

A publication titled *Television at our home* presents examples of rules that help regulate television viewing. The authors propose five principles that allow parents and their children view television programmes more reasonably than before. The appropriate solution for both parents and children is to learn how to become a selective and conscious viewer, who is able to make responsible decisions of what to watch, when to watch it and for how long.

In order to actually watch television in such way, a family must:
- responsibly assess its habits related to television;
- be aware of differences in the value system of the family and the one portrayed on television;
- be prepared to say 'no' to some of the programmes;
- be willing to discuss the programme content at any time;
- to understand that family also has other activities, not only television viewing [14, p. 32].

Such 'regulatory' system also needs its planning that ensures that television is used for its intended purpose, which is to offer information, education and entertainment at times previously agreed upon.

We have developed a habit of automatically reaching for a remote control as soon as we come home from work. And so, we let ourselves get recklessly carried away by all 'that comes our way'. The media creep into the privacy of our lives without us even realizing it, and slowly force out that little time period, we have for a mutual conversation at the dining table. This quality time of dining

together is replaced by television, computers, Internet, newspapers and magazines, not to mention etiquette of such dining.

And therefore, when we are preparing a weekly plan of what to watch on television we first ought to ask ourselves:

- What programmes would we like to watch?
- What series do we watch regularly?
- What programmes are in tune with the value system of our family?
- Is there anything especially interesting for us to watch on television?
- What is the particular programme about?
- After reading the summary in a weekly magazine, do we have any notion about what to expect from the particular programme?
- Are we used to marking programmes that the members of the family want to watch in the following week in the TV listings?
- If we watch extra programmes, how much additional time are we going to spend watching television?
- What is the proportion of time spent in front of the television to time required for other family matters?
- Which programmes will be watched by the whole family and which by the children only?

From the list of programmes select those you will discuss in your family circle. You might also create a table which enables you to have your television viewing habits under control [14, p. 34].

This system cannot be implemented fundamentally. It needs to be preceded by adequate pre-understanding (catechesis) when the family members become accustomed to the rules. The easiest would be to start at the beginning of the family life, or from the early age of a child, when establishment of such rules is not so 'drastic'.

What about parents who are unfamiliar with this field? There is a room for 'alternative', remedial solutions, such as appropriate usage of media education within the parish or family catechesis [22]. The system of parish and family catechesis pertaining to media education is, however, required to be institutionalized in the parish agenda.

There is a possibility to use media products about the impact of the media (series of cartoons about the impact of television on children and youth OVCE.SK and Mediálni špióni). In Slovakia, Studio LUX have been in operation for more than 10 years and their objective has been to prepare, dub and produce Christian-oriented audio and video titles and distribute them to other television companies or on DVDs. TV LUX with its programme offer presents yet another option. It is here that we see a real scope for presentation of media positive impact on both the individual and the masses.

It can be seen that the family communication reflects primarily the relationships between the family members. Communication in this environment is different from communication between people who are not that close to each other. In such close and intimate circle, represented by a family, communication

should be more intense, direct, clear and emphatic. All these features should be also attributed to communication with an education subtext.

Home and family are regarded as places where communication could run more freely. Yet we should follow the main principles of effective communication. It is our duty to let the family and its members know that we care about and love them, and we do not force our own opinion upon them.

It means, not to force our own opinion upon them even if we, as parents, know what is right. Communication stands for exchange of information. Therefore, other people we encounter in our family environment are entitled to their own opinions, too. Family is a place where communication must not be left to chance. In contrary, we should use communication to positively influence all who constitute a family.

One cannot develop without air and breathing. Similarly, one cannot develop without a contact with their surroundings. And it is this contact that presents itself in communication. As a matter of fact, communication enriches us, educates us; we express our feelings through communication. Therefore, it is possible to define communication not only as a social process, but also as a natural human need and activity [23].

Communication plays a crucial role in today's society. Level of communication determines relationships in society. Thanks to this level, we may or may not have high quality relationships; we may or may not 'sell' our abilities, skills and knowledge. Based on the quality of communication, our relationships are assessed as either good or bad, and thanks to the quality of our communication we also form them as such.

Communication is very difficult between people whose level of communication is low or not open enough. Problems in families, workplaces, schools and institutions arise. Social communication plays a very important role in all areas of our life. It is mainly in the public life that we come into contact with other people and society. In this case, communication can be perceived as an ability or a skill, and in the more specific case as a competence [24].

7. Conclusions

We have come to the conclusion that focused and systematic effort of those involved, that is the state, the Church and most importantly, the primary educators – parents, is necessary. They all need to become media literate themselves [25]. The role of the mass media is to bring people together and enrich their lives, not divide and take advantage of them.

Such formation should take into consideration technical skills, but it should be mainly ethical and moral formation, formation pertaining to our inner life. Only people formed in such way are capable of creating a new culture, a culture that respects human being and his dignity, a culture that respects life, a culture of solidarity, love and peace.

Such effort requires time. In today's busy and consumer world, when time is a number one commodity, it is very important to find that time. In families, it

is required to designate time for individual media usage for both parents and the children. We should do so by setting daily limits, and by designating time for joint family consumption of media contents. Let me emphasize that 'joint' here means creating a community where no one should be left alone to the impact of the media. It is beneficial to select and view the programmes together and talk about the programmes we have viewed.

It is up to us, the Church and families to determine what offer we prepare for those entrusted to us (ourselves, the believers, and family members). If we do our best and offer quality, we have nothing to worry about. There will be no room for an erosion of our value system and stupefaction of own conscience. It is much needed to instruct today's families on how to search for media contents of high quality and value [26]. These contents will then encourage a culture of life, the true culture based on Christian values.

In this respect, more eager involvement of priests, with few exceptions, is still lacking. From pulpits they often criticize believers for watching media trash, but they fail to conclude their liturgies with an offer of programmes, magazines, books, articles or websites of a good quality [27].

Today, the offer of television channels, films, magazines, books and websites is very broad and it is very difficult to keep up with the variety. And here is a room for the right direction or selection [28].

Involvement of believers in media activities in the parishes is very limited, too. Also lacking, in my own opinion, is some kind of introduction to media literacy as part of the preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage. If a married couple is not familiar with the field of media, how will they manage it as parents? What will their family media education be?

If a family is left alone in their efforts, they will struggle to maintain the right values. The solution is, however, in the community. The role of the community is to share, encourage, guide and communicate these problems. Simply, not to be left alone in the efforts. Families not only need to live in the community within, but also outwards, in the community of other families. There is room for discussion and solution to the problems in this area of life – the life with the media. The Holy Scripture reads: "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not" (1 Corinthians 10.23).

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