

Nordicom and the Establishment of an UNESCO Clearinghouse on Children and Violence

A number of international documents concerning children and mass media stress the need to broaden and deepen our understanding of how children relate to and are affected by media violence. We need knowledge, generated through research and education in a broad range of disciplines, if we are to meet the problems and challenges posed by ever more international media flows. Hopes are expressed that greater knowledge of the impact of media violence will lead us beyond stereotyped arguments and simplistic models. Greater knowledge is also required if we are to take effective action against violence. Here it is a matter of keeping the *users* of research – in this case political decision-makers, media practitioners and executives, teachers, and interested voluntary and service organizations – well-informed.

At an international conference UNESCO held in Lund, Sweden, in Autumn 1995, the feasibility of starting an information clearinghouse on the subject of children and televised violence was a topic near the top of the agenda.

Fruitful research and constructive public discussion would be greatly facilitated by the existence of an organization for documentation and information about research findings and research in progress. There is an acknowledged need for *information brokers*, who can interpret and satisfy the needs and desires of different groups of users, i.e., who can refine and adapt the information accordingly. These are the functions the term 'clearinghouse' signifies. Knowledge is gathered from various quarters, it is examined, collated and processed/refined, rendered intelligible and useful to various user-groups via multiple channels: books and newsletters, bibliographies, surveys of current research, statistical compendia, etc., in printed and electronic editions.

These discussions continued within UNESCO, and work began to find an existing institution which already maintained a research documentation organization and had the capacity to take on these tasks. In early 1996 Nordicom was contacted and asked to participate in the establishment of a Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen. UNESCO and the Swedish government have provided funding which to start operations in January 1997.

A fundamental starting point for the Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen should be the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. The Convention provides the perspective in which violence should be considered, and it would appear to be an excellent tool for establishing conceptual clarity in this area of study.

The scope of the Clearinghouse shall include studies of violence in televised fiction and non-fictional violence in television news and current events programming, violence in feature films, in video and computer games, as well as in images and texts available via Internet, etc., and other telematic media.

The prime focus will rest on what might be called 'problematic violence', i.e., violence that serves as a model for solving conflicts or establishing the perpetrator's power, control of status, for giving vent to frustrations and anger, and violence as 'cult'. One of our principal tasks must be to clarify and make known the findings of research regarding the effects of media violence.

Crucial to the success of the kind of Clearinghouse outlined here is the establishment of fruitful partnerships with various sources of material, i.e., with the relevant researchers and research institutions, and the identification of instrumental user-groups. Thus, among the first tasks in building up the Clearinghouse will be the establishment of an international network, with 'hubs' in Europe, North America, Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Arab world. The Clearinghouse should have the character of a 'network central'.

Nordicom will systematically document research and research findings in the area as well as initiatives on the part of members of the research community, or in which members participate. This work will draw upon our demonstrated competence in collating and publishing research with a few to making it intelligible and, to the extent possible, internally compatible. The information brokerage functions are paramount.

The sum total of Clearinghouse documentation activities will form the basis for the publication of a *yearbook*. The yearbook may, for example, consist of a thematic section with scholarly and survey articles on a given subject, and a section of standard format featuring registers of current research, current literature, comparative statistics, media education programmes, affirmative action, legislation and regulations, etc.

A simple *newsletter* may also be published. The contents of such a publication might include news briefs, specialized bibliographies, registers of researchers, regional surveys, presentations of media companies, statistics and conference information. In short, the newsletter will provide information of a topical nature.

The Clearinghouse will be user-oriented, which is to say that the services it offers will meet existing demand and be adapted to the needs of its users. Users' interests and needs are the focal point, the *primus motor*.

Nordicom's ambitions in this work may be summarized as follows:

To generate and effectivize knowledge on the influence of screen violence on children and adolescents, taking our starting point in the principles set out in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. The primary objective will be to disseminate information on new research findings in this area to users of such knowledge around the world. To be truly effective, international information efforts require the use of multiple channels: newsletters, books, databases, Internet, and so forth. Cumulative knowledge is a prerequisite for fruitful research and effective policy in an age when the economic and cultural influence of mass media is steadily increasing.

It is our hope that the *Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen* will become the hub of a global network dealing with the question of young people and media violence, with many branches in all parts of the world.

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