

Introduction

Media Governance

Harm and Offence in Media Content

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During the past decades, the media landscape and media culture have undergone major changes. Modern information technology has given rise to a constantly increasing supply of media products through many new channels, and our perceptions of time and space, of the bounds between private and public, central and peripheral, have changed. A good share of the people in this world – albeit far from all – have access to an abundance of information, entertainment and games via television, films, radio, books, periodicals, the Internet and mobile telephones. Convergence, fragmentation, diversification and individualization are characteristics that are frequently in the focus of debate on our contemporary media culture.

Without media and modern information technologies the globalization we speak of would not be possible. Access to a variety of media, telephony and online services are increasingly recognized as vital factors for political, economic and cultural development. Properly designed, a Knowledge Society – with its starting point in the Declaration of the Human Rights and the principle on Freedom of Expression – has a great potential to support more democratic, just and developed societies.

Communications satellites, digitalization and advances in online services – especially the Internet – have meant an enormous expansion of the global market for media products such as television programs, films, news, computer games and advertising. The categories information, entertainment and advertising are no longer clear-cut; neither are the bounds between hardware and software, and between product and distribution. In the midst of the global development of communication and media are children and youth.

An interactive media society has grown up alongside the traditional mass media society. Young people around the world have already opted into it. These technological changes have made truly global flows of information possible, while they have also opened up transnational markets for global media companies.

The production and distribution of media products is heavily concentrated, with respect to both ownership and content.

How to bridge the digital – or more correctly – the knowledge divide has been the topic of considerable attention and effort. It is not only a question of gaps between north and south; the divide is reproduced within virtually every country and often reflects other gaps – those between income groups, ethnic groups and the sexes. A significant generational gap is also involved. The younger generation today have a command of new media technologies that far surpasses the knowledge and skills the rest of us have managed to develop. Much of the content that is accessible via, for example, the web and mobile telephones remains *terra incognita* to many adults.

Many parents, teachers and policy-makers are concerned about the negative influence they believe media exert on children and adolescents. Such concerns have been voiced as long as mass media have existed, but the concern has grown in pace with developments in media technology. There is particular concern about depictions of violence in the media and in computer games. Concern is also expressed about pornographic films and images, and other potentially harmful content that is being distributed more widely via satellite/cable television, the Internet, computer games and mobile telephones. The content takes the form of violent and pornographic fiction and non-fiction, offensive advertisements, stereotypical and disrespectful depictions of young people, women and minorities, hate-mongering messages, and so forth. Interactive media like the Internet also imply invitations to risky behaviour in real life in connection with media use. 'Safety risks' are much the same wherever we are: at school, at home, or at the café – or on the Internet. But with the Internet and other online technology we cannot see or be seen by the person at the other end of the communication. Thus, the word "violence" is no longer an adequate heading for the cluster of problems in question. Instead, we speak of 'harmful media content' or 'harm and offence in media content'.

Ways to limit and prohibit the spread of harmful media content in relation to young people has been debated for many years. Protection of minors is generally held to be a matter of the public interest. Underlying this concept is the presumption that children are more impressionable, less critical and therefore more vulnerable than adults inasmuch as they have little experience and thus poorly developed frames of reference to guide their judgment. Therefore, it lies in the public interest to protect children from things like harmful media content until they have become more experienced and more mature. Definitions of content that may be 'harmful' to children and youth vary, however, between countries, which means that many proposed measures arouse strong feeling. In short, the policy area is controversial.

If we are to be able to protect young people from offensive and harmful media content, the level of public understanding and awareness of the media must be raised – among children and youth, among parents and other adults in the children's environment, and among political decision-makers and media professionals.

Protect or promote?

Regulation, self-regulation, co-regulation

Some decades ago, the protection of minors was often discussed in terms of government regulation and prohibitions. In today's complex society in an era of successive deregulation and globalisation, the role and powers of government have changed. The dispersion of authority both vertically to supranational and subnational institutions and horizontally to non-state actors has challenged the structure and capacity of national governments (Ian Bache and Matthew Flinders 2005). We live in an era of multilevel governance; there are many actors in this field, within public as well as in private sectors including the civil society, and on all levels: local, national, regional and international. Multi-level governance relies on networks, mutual trust and confidence, i.e., on collaboration and partnership. In recent decades, this overall trend in political steering, together with the rapid pace of development in the communications sector have, regarding the protection of young people from harmful media content, shifted the focus from legislation toward a focus on the responsibilities of the parents and other adults. But these adults need help in the form of both political decisions and initiatives on the part of the media industry, e.g., codes of ethics and rules that require the industry to assume its share of responsibility vis-à-vis young people.

Discussions of media governance, particularly on supranational levels, take their starting point in how government relates to the media industry. Kaarle Nordenstreng's typology of media governance is based on two dimensions of these relationships: formal/informal and external/internal. Formal factors include law and regulation (external) and self-regulation (internal); in the informal dimension factors include influences among the various market actors and the general public (external) and professionalisation and branch norms and codes of conduct (internal). (See *Presentation of Preliminary Results of the Study on Co-regulation Measures in the Media Sector*, Hans Bredow Institut, 2005)

Types of media governance

	FORMAL	INFORMAL
EXTERNAL	Law Regulation	Market forces and relations Pressures and lobbies Public opinion and criticism
INTERNAL	Management Financial control Self-regulation	Professionalism Organizational culture Norms and ethics

Source: Kaarle Nordenstreng, Hans Bredow Institut/EMR, Seminar 2005

Self-regulation grew during the 1990's to be the remedy of choice; both national, regional and international documents stress that media should take greater responsibility for protecting children and young people. The idea was that self-regulation would make it possible to reduce reliance on laws and public regulation, which quickly become outdated due to the rapid pace of innovation in media technology and are not easily amended. 'Self-regulation' can mean different things, but is generally taken to mean protective measures relating to content that is legal, but can possibly be harmful to children and young people. For obvious reasons, the degree of self-regulation varies between media.

There is a direct correlation between the extent of legislation in a given area and the presence of self-regulatory initiatives, as a comparison of television and the interactive entertainment industry reveals. Media that have existed a long time are also better organized when it comes to policy issues and internal codes of ethics, etc. Consumer pressure can bring about change. It is a well-established fact that, left to their own devices, media companies themselves will not change their ways, unless it returns a profit. New research has pointed out that "multi-level governance appears incapable of providing clear predictions or even explanations of outcomes in the governance process". Peters and Pierre, for example, go on to suggest that "multi-level governance embedded in a regulatory setting that enables weaker actors to define a legal basis for their action might be the best strategy to ... cheat darker powers." (Guy Peters and Jon Pierre 2005, p.89)

It is in this context that we should understand the growing interest in co-regulation expressed in different quarters, and especially on the supranational level. It is a recipe put forward particularly often with respect to protection of young people from harmful media content. If we consider law/regulation and self-regulation as traditional forms of regulation, then co-regulation "consists of more than just a combination of state regulation and self-regulation" (Schulz and Held 2006b, p.50). In this connection, Wolfgang Schultz and Thorsten Held, having surveyed and analyzed recent trends in co-regulation, found: "... in the field of protection of minors models where a regulator – on its own (contracting out) or on request (certification of non-state regulators) – based on a legal act initiates non-state regulation perform high. Generally speaking this seems to be a feasible way to put up co-regulation in this policy field. Theoretical findings back this assumption: A strong regulator as a relevant actor within the market is regarded as a benefit to stimulate industry commitment" (Schultz and Held, 2006a, p.124). Simplifying somewhat, one might on the basis of these findings conclude that co-regulation fills an express need for steering of governance and, secondly, that the success of co-regulation in protecting minors from harmful media content depends on how the total regulatory system is organized.

Thus, the approaches to protecting minors from harm and offence in media content largely boil down to three kinds: law and regulation, self-regulation and co-regulation of the media. No one instrument of regulation is sufficient; today and in the future some form of effective interaction between all three kinds of media regulation – that is, between government, the media and civil society –

will be required to reach satisfactory results. All the relevant stakeholders – within government, the media sector and civil society – need to develop effective means by which to collaborate.

To approach young people and harmful media content exclusively from the media industry's perspective, as in Kaarle Nordenstreng's typology above, is limiting. Viewers' and users' perspectives must also be included. Only then will an essential piece of the puzzle fall into place, namely, the necessity of more widespread media and information literacy and awareness in society at large. Children and youth, parents, teachers, media professionals and other adults – all are equally important in this regard.

Empowerment and awareness

– the need for media and information literacy

While the media and new information technologies are believed to cause some problems, they are also valued as social and cultural resources. An often raised question is whether children are helpless victims or are actually capable of meeting the challenges contemporary media present. In this context, the importance of media and information (or digital/Internet) literacy, is often mentioned. Consequently, "protection" is no longer viewed exclusively in terms of keeping young people away from certain content, or vice versa. The importance of strengthening young people in their role as media consumers is recognized.

Media literacy means understanding how mass media work, how they construct reality and produce meaning, how the media are organized, and knowing how to use them wisely. In short, it is seen to empower people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of an increasingly wide range of messages using images, sound and language. The medialized symbolic environment we live in today largely shapes the choices, values and knowledge that determine our everyday lives. Media literacy helps, therefore, to strengthen the critical abilities and communicative skills that give the individual's existence meaning and enable the individual to use communication for change, while promoting a well-oriented, democratic knowledge society.

In the span of a single decade new media like the Internet and mobile telephones have revolutionized media cultures around the world. With the growing convergence of radio, TV and computer solutions, including the emergence of various hybrids and specializations, we see how a variety of electronic media, information and communication is gradually becoming common goods. But with interactivity follows what have come to be known as 'safety risks', which have to do with the fact that we cannot see the person at the other end of the communication. As Insafe puts it: "The problem is further complicated because many people act irresponsibly and feel less accountable when they believe they are acting anonymously – little do they realise that all actions on Internet are traceable." (Insafe, EU 2006). Another new feature of the media culture is computer games.

Traditional media literacy is no longer sufficient. There is a need to develop new skills and competencies that render users and consumers ‘information literate’. The terminology shifts between digital literacy, cyber-literacy, Internet literacy and web-literacy, but a more gathering term is *information literacy*.

The young need these skills, but so do parents and other adults around them. It is essentially a question of awareness. Research has found that many parents have no idea how their children use the media, or of what the new media make available to their children. Furthermore, young people interpret the content of the media in frames of reference that differ more from adults’ experience than ever before (SAFT 2003, 2005).

Information literacy can include: teaching about the Internet and equipping people to assess the value of the sources they encounter, teaching children responsible behaviour when they are online, collaboration between key actors in order to enhance awareness of web-related safety issues, information about filtering software, security services and hotlines. Once again, interaction between different actors and groups is the key to success – cooperation among parents, teachers, the Internet branch, media and responsible authorities.

Promote *and* protect

The answer to the question, “Promote or protect?” is that it is hardly a question of either-or, but a combination of both – different kinds of regulations and a higher degree of media and information literacy among both youth and adults are necessary ingredients in the work to reduce harm and offence in media content. Evaluations of various regulatory measures and literacy-promoting activities on the basis of research findings and public opinion are another necessary ingredient.

When issues like these are discussed, all too often the frame of reference is the media landscape of the western world, even though we know there are major differences among cultures, political systems and faiths, and that all these factors influence media culture. Several countries of the South and Eastern Europe still lack adequate infrastructure for modern mass media and ICT – the differences between town and country are huge – whereas the flow of media content is infinite for those who have access to it. And it remains a fact in many countries that those who can change the situation are not always motivated to do so; those who want to change the situation are not always in a position to.

In the mean time, we are all living in the age of globalisation with its transnational flows of information, and we are all agreed on the value of multi-cultural societies, of diversity and pluralism in media culture. We need to learn from one another, to share our knowledge and insights. The work of supranational organisations like UNESCO and regional organisations like the EU are therefore of crucial importance today. In the era of globalization, national solutions alone

cannot solve the problems we face. This is particularly true of the issues relating to young people and offensive and harmful media content. It is in this context that this book should be seen.

The publication

In the present volume the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media brings together a number of scholars who, all with the future in mind, point out the main conclusions that can be drawn from the research to date on offensive and harmful media content and the protection of minors. Sonia Livingstone and Andrea Millwood Hargrave's article, "Harmful to children? Drawing conclusions from empirical research on media effects" covers both 'old' media and new media technologies. They conclude that the time for simple media effects approaches has passed. Instead, they argue, the issues of media content and media use need to be contextualised in a multifactor, risk-based framework.

Earlier we noted that new information technologies and globalization have led to fundamental changes in the preconditions for regulation in the media sector, and not least with regard to fundamental objectives like protection of minors. In this connection, Wolfgang Schultz and Thorsten Held survey and analyze recent trends in co-regulation, giving some examples of existing co-regulation in the field of the protection of minors in the media in their article, "Together They Are Strong? – Co-Regulatory Approaches for the Protection of Minors within the European Union".

In a different political and cultural context Bu Wei discusses child protection issues in Chinese Media with a focus on vulnerable children.

More thought-provoking perspectives and reflections are most important on this very complex area; two such articles are "Media Regulation, Self-Regulation and Education. Debunking Some Myths and Retooling Some Working Paradigms" by Divina Frau Meigs and "When Childhood Gets Commercialized, Can Children be Protected?" by Juliet B. Schor.

A discussion from a more philosophical aspect is presented in Vitor Reia-Baptista's article "New Environments of Media Exposure. Internet and Narrative Structures: From Media Education to Media Pedagogy and Media Literacy".

Another article presents results from a Swedish study of public views regarding various measures – both legislation/regulation and media literacy – that have been proposed to protect children and young people from becoming exposed to harmful content on television, the Internet, in films and computer games.

Finally, the Clearinghouse surveys different kinds of efforts at raising media and information literacy, each of which is accompanied by a catalogue of best practices, activities and innovative approaches. The book also offers examples of activities and projects with a focus on children's and young people's own media production as one of the more effective means to raise their level of knowledge

and awareness. Cecilia von Feilitzen, Scientific Co-ordinator at the Clearinghouse, is responsible for the selection of examples and the elaboration of comments in the section *Raising Media and Internet Literacy*.

Work on the project reported here has progressed parallel with work on the Clearinghouse' yearbook, entitled *In the Service of Young People? Studies and Reflections on Media in the Digital Age*. The two projects are tangential in several respects, and cross-pollination between them was both inevitable and welcome. The fruits of the interaction will be apparent in both publications that are being released in 2006.

In sum, this volume from the International Clearinghouse for Children, Media and Youth presents a comprehensive review of the field, current knowledge and recent trends on the subject of offensive and harmful media content and the protection of minors, evaluative research on different measures, examples of resources and projects from many parts of the world and, not least important, reflections on protective measures and media and information literacy – all forward-looking, with a view to create a better future for our young.

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