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Children and Television: A Comparison Between Classical and Contemporary Research

Introduction

Eversince the inception of mass media, various questions are raised by the general public pertaining to the probability of the impact of mass media on the viewers. Television, because of its nature; convenient and very lively, which was introduced more than 40 years ago, has become the focal attention of social scientists and educators due to many critics and perceptions, that it plays a major role in shaping people social mores. The advancement of telecommunication technology has further intensified the issues of mass communication impact on viewers especially children. It was accused of causing, exacerbating and contributing to a wide range of social disturbances such as violence, crime, sexual deviance, diminishing literacy and lowering attention spans of schoolchildren, therefore affecting their results.

These critics have triggered researchers to conduct various experiments and studies to find out how reliable these notions are. Officially, research on this subject started from the congressional hearings during the early 1950s (US. Congress, House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, 1953; US Congress, Senate Committee of Judiciary, Subcommittee to investigate Juvenile Delinquency, 1955). This inaugural congressional committees were formed specifically to investigate the impact of television violence on children and youth (Brown, 1976)

Since then considerable studies on the impact of children and television were launched to find evidence to quantify the

so-called *unfavourable image* of television but little evidence sought to prove the effects of television on children until now. This is the emphasis of classical researchers. Contemporary researchers however, argue that it is insufficient to study the correlation of children and television without having to understand the viewers or children -their level of knowledge, culture and so on. These elements, according to the contemporary thinkers have bearing on the level of influence by the television on children. Therefore, failure to take this into account in studying the relationships between children and television will produce imbalance judgement and bias research outcome.

Classical Studies

The most interesting classical studies on this subject were carried out by Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince,(1958) and Schramm, Lyle and Parker,(1961). The contribution of their studies towards the later development of children and television research approach was indeed significant.

Even though these two studies are quite different in term of raw material, concept, plan and perspective, their terms of reference were similar that was to study the impact of television on children and young people. Their prime concern was that television, in one way or another, has variety of impact on children, may it be favourable or vice versa. Basically, Himmelweit's study was particularly concerned about the reorganisation of activities that take place with the introduction of television (Displacement effects) and the influence of particular types of broadcast material usually on attitudes, values, thinking, knowledge and behaviour of children (Content effects).

That study was primarily concerned to the negative impact of television. But how far does television produce an undesirable effect on them is still the major question to some researchers on this subject. The Modelling Hypothesis, for example, offers a slightly different approach of looking at the relationship between children and television.

Numerous studies on this approach indicate that children under certain circumstances, watching another person (model) will subsequently act in the same or a similar manner. The term model is referring to a character in a film or television programme or a child's parents or indeed anyone whose

behaviour a child has an opportunity of watching. In other words, these studies were drawn to watch how someone copies or imitates other people's behaviour.

Possibly, one of the most important experiments of imitation process was drawn by Bandura (1961) by using Bobodoll toy and his follow-up experiment that was conducted two years after the first experiment. The findings indicated that children were in fact copying or imitating aggressive behaviour as acted by models. General interpretation was that children behave aggressively not because of the television content *per se* but it was in fact an act of imitating the characteristics favoured by them. While several other earlier studies agreed that this type of Observational Learning was a primary determinant of how much and what types of television programmes children viewed. This is more on parental modelling. The Modelling Hypothesis holds that much of young person's viewing behaviour - in regard to both quantity and preference - derives from their attempt to behave in an adult manner by following (or "modelling") the example set by parents (Comstock, 1978).

Parental modelling was seen by some researchers as an imitation act of children on types of programmes their parents like to watch and when to watch. But this idea was challenged by certain researchers such as McLeod, Atkin and Chaffee, (1972a and 1972b). They argue that children are in fact not imitating their parents but simply do so because of coincidence and economic status. They add that in some cases, *reverse modelling* may occur whereby the modelling influence runs from child to parents.

The reasons presented by Chaffee and his colleagues are actually very much related to the control of television at home. The first two reasons implied that parents have the great control over television probably due to their concern about the role of television in socialisation. However, the third argument is really interesting and few studies have been done to look at this aspect. E.E. Jones and Gerard (1967) and Roberts (1973) agree that the evidence on parental control of children's television viewing indicates that even the pre-schooler often operates as a free agent in selecting when and what to watch. The information monopoly once enjoyed by parents has been breached, if not shattered.

In relation to the information control by parents, quite a number of studies have been conducted to view the role of

family - parents for that matter - as a mediator of effect of television on children. Brown and Linne (1976) indicate that the family acts as a filter to child's experience of television...members of the nuclear family are able to monitor the child's progress, using both positive and negative reinforcements to ensure that he or she keeps on the 'right lines'.

The question nowadays is how far can family or parents as an agent of socialisation function as the sole 'regulators' of their children's viewing. Past research on parental mediation of children's television viewing has focused primarily on home that receive only one broadcast television and normally takes place in a 'living room'. The recent development of technology such as video technologies (VCR) and cable televisions have prompted few studies on this aspect. Atkin, Greenberg and Baldwin (1991) carried out a study on this subject and they found out that the easy accessibility of television set and program played an important role in predicting television viewing and parental mediation.

Schramm, Lyle and Parker (1961), however, approach the subject quite differently. To them, the term 'effects' is misleading and they rejected the favourite image of children as helpless victims to be attacked by television, believing a more adequate picture to be that of television as '*great and shiny cafeteria from which children select what they want at the moment..... A child comes to television seeking to satisfy some needs. He finds something there, and uses it'*.

This is where the concept of Uses and Gratification first introduced. Instead of looking the television as the actor, some researchers started to look at this subject from a different angle and perspective. Several studies along this line suggest that in order to understand the relationship between children and television, one must first of all understand the children's knowledge of reality (Feilitzen, 1976 and Piaget, 1952). What it means here is that children's interpretation on any recent information depends on how child has organised information received at an earlier time. In other words, a child will only expose himself or herself to information that he or she considers worthwhile. The studies of Edelstein, (1966); Von Feilitzen and Linne, (1972); Klapper, (1963); and Maletzke, (1963) stressed that mass media does not occur unless the individual himself chooses to use the mass media in a certain way. Thus, the role of individual is seen to be very important in this type of approach.

Recently, the debate about appropriate approaches to the impact and social functions of media has been intensifying. There is renewed discussion among *critical* and *empirical* researchers concerning the aim and methods of research (Rogers and Balle, 1985). Much of this debate involves an attempt to arrive at a new definition of impact and to devise methodologies for its study.

Contemporary Perspectives

The concept of Uses and gratification as I mentioned earlier is a new perspective of looking at the relationships between children and television whereby, according to this concept, audience (including children) are active and they in fact, use the media in certain ways. Rightly, it stressed the role of audience in the construction of meaning. This idea was put forward by the culturalists' thinkers. This approach came into being due to some fundamental defects in the Uses and Gratification approach (Morley, 1992). As Elliot (1972) wrote; *that Uses and Gratification approach fails to take into account the fact that television consumption is more a matter of availability than of selection.....[In this sense] availability depends on familiarity.....The audience has easier access to familiar genres partly because they understand the language and connotations and also because they already know the social meaning of this type of output with some certainty. (quoted from Morley, 1992:52).*

The other limitation of Uses and Gratification lies in its insufficiently sociological nature (Morley, 1992). The earlier studies dealt with specific types of content and specific audiences, whereas later approaches tend to look for underlying structures of need and gratification of psychological origin.

Morley's arguments were basically, to look at how audience interprets a given message differently, not just at the personal, idiosyncratic level, but in a way systematically related to their socio-economic position. In short, he needs to know how the different sub-cultural structures and formation within the audience, and sharing of different cultural codes, determine the decoding of message for different sections of the audience. This is a new approach in studying children and television which is considered as cultural approach. Halloran has argued that ; *"the task for the mass communication researchers is ...to identify and map out the different sub-cultures and ascer-*

tain the significance of the various sub-codes in selected areas governed by specific broadcasting or cultural policies'....This is necessary, because we must see that television message.....Is not so much a message.....[but] more like a message vehicle containing several messages which take on meaning in terms of available codes or sub-codes. We need to know the potential of each vehicle with regard to all the relevant sub-cultures." (quoted from Morley, 1992:54).

An important strength of the Culturalist approach is its insistence on culture as a material (including language), productive element of social change and thus, as a source of resistance and change. This is another significant approach that is, in fact, a new departure of studying in depth, the actual processes through which media discourses are assimilated to the discourses and cultural practices of audience.

Semiotic model, as one of the important concept in Cultural approach, put greater emphasis on interpretation (how audiences interpret media texts) in its analysis (Morley,1990 and 1991; Hall,1980) was considered insufficient by Donald Fry and Virginia Fry, (1983); Woodall, Davis and Sahin (1983). To them, in order to really understand how audience members make sense of media texts they receive, one must equally consider the contribution of the texts itself. Fry (1983)[1] pointed out that there has long been a tendency to treat media texts as unambiguous stimuli that audience members apprehend *correctly* or *incorrectly* based on levels of attention, literacy, or communication competency (the knowledge gap literature is an appropriate example of this). While other variables such as attention and communication competency are in fact useful in understanding the interaction between text and audience, it is difficult to assess the overall importance of such variables until we can account for the joint contribution made by the text and audience signification. Thus the content of a media text cannot be assessed in isolation from the process of interpretation.

Second aspect of the recent debate on audience research is the type of methodology applied or used in its study. The tradition of audience studies has long been predominantly one of quantitative empirical investigation. Some years ago, Wober (1981) rightly noted that; *"most audience research is, in fact, measurement - i.e. the quantitative registration of various types of viewing-related behaviour.....The problem is that 'the data produced by "**audimetry**" [techniques of audience measurement] provides much raw material for research, but in itself it does not constitute*

research or even half of research"(quoted from Morley, 1992: 174). It is because quantitative research as such is merely concerned with the establishment of a relationship among variables without taking into account other elements impinging the issue being studied.

In other words, the limitations of statistically based quantitative survey techniques are by very nature desegregating - isolating units of action from the contexts that make them meaningful. Silverstone (1990) has argued, that television watching is, in fact, a very complex activity, which is inevitably enmeshed with a range of other domestic practices. This suggests that the prime requirement is to provide an adequate description of the complexities of this activity. Morley (1992) suggested that an anthropological and broadly ethnographic perspective will be of some assistance in achieving this objective.

Jensen has argued along similar vein - stressing the need for the contextualization of research findings. As he puts it; *"what goes on in the reception situation should be understood with constant reference to the social and cultural networks that situate the individual viewer ..... [the ratings] offer few clues for understanding the significance of television as an integrated element in the viewer's everyday life ..... The audience experience of a particular medium and its content cannot be separated from how it is used ....If we are to understand the lined reality behind the ratings we need to turn to the context of use, the psychical setting where reception takes place, and ask what is the meaning of television viewing to the audience." (Jensen, 1987: 25).*

Similarly, Lull argued that if interpersonal and mass communication is to be read as texts, the surrounding context is the necessary foundation of meaning. According to him; *to invoke the importance of the 'fabric of everyday life' places a responsibility on the researcher to (1) observe and note routine behaviour of all types characteristic of these who are being studied, (2) do so in the natural settings where the behaviour occurs and (3) draw inferences carefully after considering the details of communication behaviour, with special attention paid to the often subtle, yet revealing, ways that different aspects of the context inform each other (Lull, 1987:320)*

If we take this argument seriously, then it follows that the kind of research we need to do involves identifying and investigating all the differences hidden behind the catch-all category

of watching television. We all watch television at different times, but with how much attention and with what degree of commitment, in relation to which types of programmes and occasion? This is where the *ethnographic approach*[2] comes about whereby researchers should personally involve themselves directly with the respondents during the period of studies.

The direct participation of researcher is actually referring to the Participation Observation method whereby according to Becker and Geer (1957) is a method in which the observer participates in the daily life of the people under study, either openly in the role of researcher or covertly in some dismissed role, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time.

This type of methodology is basically the core of a qualitative approach that was recently put forward by certain thinkers in the social sciences and humanities' school of thought. It was then applied to the study of television and children due to the complexity of the subject.

Conclusion

The approach of earlier studies was generally centred to the effect and influence of television on children. Even though there were some changes in perspective towards 1960s and 1970s, the arguments were still confined to the idea of the impact of television. As the field of communication research develops, many new thinkers in this field started to argue the perspective and subsequently draw some recent and newer perspectives looking at the relationships between children and television. They rightly question the 'bad image' of television as portrayed by earlier studies. Now, children are seen to be incredibly playing an active role in the relationships and try to approach it quite differently. Cultural approach argues that children's cognitive development and their language ability has played an important factors for any effects to take place. Semiotic approach does play a significant role in determining how far the audience, particularly children, are affected by television.

The application of qualitative approach in the study of communication research is actually a contribution from the contemporary studies. This is where the ethnographic and participation observation are introduced. The strength of these

approaches lie in the possibilities generated for contextual understanding of the connections between different aspects of the phenomena being studied. However, this does not mean that quantitative approach should be disregarded completely. Both the roles of quantitative and qualitative approaches can be integrated to produce reliable results of communication research. Bower (1973) and Jensen (1987) noted that qualitative analysis may sometimes serve to modify and explain results that have been produced by qualitative analysis. For instance, in order to evaluate the negative impact of television and the pattern of consumption, it is necessary to probe further into forms of experience and fascination that are at work in the reception of television.

This so called integrated approach is pertinent in any efforts to conduct social sciences research activities. In other words, both quantitative and qualitative and anthropological ethnographic approaches should be recognised as equally valid approaches. And where we can and where possible, we try to link them together and put the qualitative flesh on the quantitative skeleton - making the full flesh body.

On the whole, the tremendous change in research approaches particularly on the subject of children and television was basically generated from the idea of many earlier studies. Henc e in order to fully understand the latest and contemporary approaches, one must have a better understanding of the essence and approaches of an earlier study.

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Note

1 The approach of Fry (clearly associated to Pierce's Semiotic approach) may be quite different compared to the approach of many European semioticans (Sausurean approach). For the purpose of this essay, I include the other approach of semiotic simply to widen the perspective of discussion.

2 *Ethnography can be understood as ..... Simply one social research, albeit an unusual one, drawing on a wide range of sources of information. The ethnographer participates in*

people's live for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking question - collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issue with which he or she is concerned (quoted from Jensen, 1987:153)

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