

Background material for teachers

Unit 9 – Teachers' handout 1: media in democracies

In a democracy, the media are on the side of the people and the truth. Facts are presented objectively and comprehensively. Opinions and judgments are explicitly marked (through a clear distinction between message and comment, for example), as is information about which one has no known facts or about which one can only make assumptions.

Moreover, there is a diversity of media, and this leads to the provision of complementary information, as well as to the possible correction of one media source by another. Thus, the media user should be able to get balanced information on which to base his or her own opinions.

In a dictatorship, however, media are on the side of the ruler(s). The media support the power base and politics of the ruler(s) by using propaganda techniques (such as omitting information, forging information, or by emotionalising information, etc.).

However, the opposite can also be true. An analysis of the media in a country can also indicate whether one lives in a democracy or not. Freedom of opinion and the freedom of the press are of primary importance in a democracy: without these there is no democracy or full enjoyment of human rights. Moreover, in the past, the media has led to a number of “success stories” in the area of human rights. More than once media releases, television interviews or other visual messages have led to the freeing of people imprisoned for political reasons; and more than once people have sent SMS messages using their mobile phones in order to warn others about an imminent catastrophe.

Everybody is alarmed, therefore, when a consolidation of the mass media takes place in a democracy. This generally means that all media report an event in the same way, even though there may well be different opinions and judgments about this event.

Thanks to the protests and publications of a few critical individuals, one is sometimes still able to obtain balanced information and there is a chance that such consolidation of the media can occasionally be unmasked. The majority of citizens can only use the consolidated mass media, however, and the effect of this should not be underestimated.

Media also bears responsibility for the information it disseminates: can a journalist be sure that what he or she is reporting is true? Is their critical attitude justified or do they just want to be the first to report a “scandal”?

Using media also means exercising power. Whoever records pictures or sounds and publishes them should do so with a great sense of responsibility, and needs to be aware of his or her significance in a democracy.

Background material for teachers

Unit 9: Teachers' handout 2: working with television

1. Why are children so fascinated by TV?

Television offers constant change, relaxation and adventure. With the push of a button, one has the world – be it real or imaginary – at one's fingertips, without having to make any effort whatsoever, either physically or emotionally. Because there is a remote control and a myriad of programmes, one is able to zap between one thrilling event and the next. Children frequently identify with characters and personalities from various television programmes; they use television for information, and they use it when they have nothing better to do.

2. How much time do children spend in front of the TV every day?

In western Europe, the average daily television consumption by children aged between 3 and 13 is 90 minutes. Indeed, only 60% of children will even turn the television off. Furthermore, the television is often on while children are doing other things. Parents should try to set some rules for watching television and should also try to get their children to be a bit more focused in what they watch. It is generally recommended that the TV shouldn't be on all the time and that children should only watch programmes that are age-appropriate and also interesting and important.

3. Are there many children who watch overly large amounts of TV?

The so-called "TV addicts" spend more time in front of the TV than they do participating in other activities (school, games, meeting friends, etc.). However, there are very few children who fall into this category. It is not necessarily a problem if a child watches more TV one day than the next. The problem arises, though, when viewing is haphazard or when something isn't going right in the family or with the child. In such cases, TV consumption can be used to escape reality.

4. What do children of different ages like to watch?

Little children generally like to watch programmes from which they can learn something, as well as cartoons about fairy tales and adventure worlds. From about the age of 6, children start to become interested in gender roles. Boys then watch action films where they can identify with male heroes; girls develop a love of variety and music programmes, as well as series in which families and animals play an important role. At around age 12, music videos with the latest hits and series about youth and love start to become important. Almost all children watch these, but they also start watching more adult programmes at this point. Here, parents should take care to find out about the content of programmes in advance so they can avoid those that are not suitable for children.

5. What are the effects of television?

Television can be relaxing but it can also make children agitated and can "wind them up". This is due to the fact that images change quickly and there are often loud noises, especially in cartoons and action series. Some programme content conveys ideas of what the real world looks like and how it functions. Moreover, TV affects children's emotions and children react to seeing joy, fear or aggression in the same way as adults do. A lack of balanced comparisons can become a problem and it is therefore advisable to avoid only watching programmes of one specific genre.

6. Which informational programmes are especially good for children?

Most channels offer special programmes for children that provide information and convey knowledge about the world. Some channels even have children's news, which is presented in a way that children can easily understand. Moreover, news for adults that is shown at lunchtime or in the evening mostly avoids pictures that are not appropriate for children. However, adults should still be ready to explain to children what they don't understand.

7. How important is TV compared to other media?

For younger children, television is the most frequently used form of media. Over time, various other forms of media (CDs, MP3s, music videos, Internet TV) also become important, although the TV screen remains the main source of information and discussion.

Parents of young children should still take care that their children get to experience a variety of media: TV for current affairs and relaxation; the radio for listening to music throughout the day and for hearing some bits of news; books for fostering imagination and language skills; and computers and the Internet so that children can become independent learners and can communicate with others.

8. What is TV good for and when is it not so ideal?

Children who watch a variety of programmes (the news, talk shows, series, etc.) know a lot about current affairs and know many facts about life today. Television, however, is not so good for helping to solve problems. When one is having a fight with someone, or looking for the best course of action or trying to solve a brain-teaser, facts alone don't help. For this reason, television can never replace education at school or by parents.

9. Are adults role models?

Even young children imitate adults in terms of media use. If adults read the newspaper, then their children will be more prone to reading the newspaper. If adults spend a lot of time in front of the TV, then children will do this too. Parents should therefore never complain about their children's TV habits, but rather be a good example in this regard. They shouldn't just aimlessly watch TV but should be critical watchers.

10. What can parents do to encourage their children to be reasonable TV watchers?

Parents shouldn't ban TV but should watch it together with their children and explain why some programmes are good and others are not so good. Television should also not be used as a reward or as a punishment. It is important to find the correct balance. Children should have enough time for "real" experiences – spending time with friends, playing, and experiencing nature, cities and meeting other people.