The role of television in cultivating the values of pluralism and cultural diversity in children

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This article examines the influence of the mass media and in particular television on the development of the values of pluralism and cultural diversity in children. The role of television is quite important in forming positive attitudes toward cultural, ethnic, and other groups and in inculcating an adequate perception of social reality and tolerant, multicultural awareness. The article also analyzes the functions and principles of public broadcasting, among which diversity of programming is one of the most significant.

Keywords: pluralism, tolerance, multicultural awareness, diversity, public television, set of values

Today pluralism and cultural diversity are becoming basic values of public communication. People living in the globalized world learn that freedom of speech, freedom of expression, pluralism, cultural and linguistic diversity, and tolerance toward other views and value systems have turned into the new norms of society (Jandt, 2010). One should not underestimate the role of these values both in a general sense—in the political and cultural life of the country—and in a more precise one—in cultivating individual characteristics in a person who is being brought up in this environment. To be able to perform successfully in globalized space and to communicate effectively with people belonging to diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic groups, one should develop multicultural awareness, tolerance, and appropriate behavior; eliminate cultural bias; and create positive multicultural attitudes (Sadokhin, 2010). In this respect the role of the mass media in the modern world is becoming increasingly important. Because we are nowadays surrounded by ubiquitous media, both traditional and new ones, and because we can take an active part in creating the media landscape ourselves simply by capturing an image and uploading it onto social networks or sites like YouTube, it seems essential to realize the effects the media have on us and, in particular, to understand the role of the media in constructing our set of values. Can media help individuals get rid of their prejudices and negative attitudes toward cultural minorities? Can they enable people to develop tolerance and prevent them from participating in the ethnic and cultural tensions in society? These questions definitely need to be considered.

To begin, the process of a person's development and the formation of individual character traits have been analyzed in a wide range of psychological and sociological studies. Among the researchers particularly interested in exploring the influence the mass media have on the cultivation of the values and preferences of the audience, George Gerbner and his colleagues from the Annenberg School of Communication should definitely be mentioned. They introduced the well-known cultivation theory, which describes the long-term effects of television programming on viewers' attitudes, beliefs, value systems, and perceptions of reality. Studies conducted by Gerbner and his colleagues showed that television programs tend to misrepresent real life, particularly in their portrayal of the level of violence and of occupation and sex roles, race, and ethnicity (Carlson, 1993). The research demonstrated that the attitudes and behavior of heavy television viewers—those whose cultural life is monopolized by television and who absorb the television image of life and society from infancy on—undergo significant changes: such viewers more often than those who view television less frequently appear to have the wrong perception of social reality, are more supportive of mainstream opinions, and demonstrate intolerance toward other points of view (Media Education Foundation, 2005).

Although cultivation theory was criticized for a number of reasons, including the importance of a specific type of program in the cultivation process, the strength of the relationships between television viewing and perceptions of social reality and opinions, and the impact of television programming on a diverse audience, one should not underrate the role of television and other media in modern life. The globalization of information space, the rapid development of information and communication technologies employed by the mass media, and other factors have turned television and the Internet into the most powerful factors that have an impact on the views and standpoints of individuals as well as on collective subjects.

Although in many cases children and teenagers can indeed be classified as heavy viewers (those who watch television 4+ hours a day), one should take into account that television and other mass media are just one factor that can, for instance, lead to an increase in the level of violence of viewers or make them react in a certain way. Psychologist Albert Bandura, who suggested the term *modeling* in his social cognitive theory, underlines that children learn many social behaviors by observing others. So heavy exposure to television characters who succeed by behaving in aggressive, violent, or stereotypical ways, according to this theory, may encourage children to use similar strategies in their own lives. The same conclusion may apply to the modeling of specific judgments, morality, and sets of values (Bandura, 1989).

Similar ideas are expressed in script theories, which explain television's influence on the development of children's knowledge and beliefs about the world. Based on their experiences of real and media events, children build representations of what to expect in certain situations or of certain people. In turn, these expectations may guide their behaviors.

Still, numerous researchers have proved that heavy viewing of violent television is only one contributor to the development of aggressive behavior and is most likely to affect children who are prone to aggressive behavior for other reasons (for example, children from families or cultures in which aggression is an acceptable

response to conflict). I propose a different idea: while watching television programs or surfing Internet pages that contain acts of violence, gender and ethnic stereotypes, or different kinds of discrimination, individuals require the setting of reality, and the images viewed on television or on the Internet gradually construct a complicated picture of the world in their minds. The images of victims, aggressors, women used as sexual objects, or ethnic minorities treated as outsiders contribute to the construction of a specific system of values and beliefs. This system may later on be realized in a set of actions in real life, or it may not if other factors, such as family, education, and social environment, have a more significant influence on a person's development.

Still, the role of the media in forming the perceptions and attitudes of the audience remains strong. By filtering information for further dissemination through media channels, journalists perform the function of "gatekeepers" and set the daily agenda for media users (Shoemaker, 1991; Vartanova, 2012). Thus, they also can be considered moderators of our everyday media reality: by choosing particular events for coverage in the news, journalists contribute to the setting of reality and to the values and viewpoints that are being constructed in the public's mind. Obviously, the responsibility of media professionals in this sense is exceedingly high. For this reason journalists, when covering events involving different cultural, religious, or ethnic groups, should refer to the theme of universal values and present all the materials in an adequate context (Zinchenko, 2009). Otherwise individuals may lack developed tolerance, ideas about democracy, and standards for conducting productive negotiations with people from other social or cultural groups. These deficiencies, in turn, may result in ethnic and cultural conflicts in society and in aggressive behavior in individuals.

In regard to aggression being affected by certain influences, research conducted by Glebov and Arakelov (2010) was aimed at studying the impact of a number of factors on the dynamics of children's aggression and teenage criminality. The researchers found that the control group of teenagers, who had harmonious relations in their families and a developed set of moral values, including tolerance of others and preference for nonviolent ways of solving problems, demonstrated a normal level of aggression. The study thus proved that a set of cultural and moral values to a large extent contributes to the dynamics of aggression and affects the weight of the consequences of teenage offences. Thus, developing moral values in children, including multicultural awareness and the understanding that there is not only one valid way to live, is obviously of much importance today.

Another aspect that needs to be considered is teaching children the well-known concept that "all men are created equal" and that all people should be respected regardless of their ethnicity, cultural background, or social status. It is evident, however, that broadcasting nowadays does not always follow the famous principle suggested by Thomas Jefferson. Interesting research carried out in the United States compared the number of times black and white characters appear on U.S. television and the related contexts. The study showed that African Americans represent 11% of the characters on television, which is close to their real numbers in the United States, and that they are usually portrayed as healthy, wealthy, and successful persons (Media Education Foundation, 2005). This result probably makes viewers believe that the problem of racial inequality is successfully solved and that the values

of pluralism and tolerance are fully supported in American society. However, when African Americans appear in the news on U.S. television, they have twice the chance of any other person to appear in connection with crime, violence, and drugs, and they are portrayed as having negative characteristics and being in vulnerable positions (Media Education Foundation, 2005). Moreover, black and white people on television are usually shown separately, which perhaps makes heavy viewers support segregation because it makes them believe that people of different skin colors should live separately from each other. Thus, the perception of African Americans on television is quite contradictory. The idea of conducting similar research in Russia is interesting. The way cultural or ethnic minorities are portrayed in television programs—either as successful persons or as outsiders—most likely contributes to the construction of the values and attitudes of Russian children.

Obviously, one of key tasks today is making sure media policy is oriented toward promoting values of pluralism and cultural diversity in both media outlets and media content. Programming in this case is expected to be diverse in its source and in its intended audience. In the United States and in the United Kingdom, enthusiasts point to the role of public broadcasting in providing children's programming, cultural programming, and programs for specific groups that the market fails to provide (Goodman & Price, 2008). The Public Broadcasting Act, signed into law in the United States in 1967, emphasizes the need to "encourage the development of programming that … addresses the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities" (Goodman & Price, 2008). One possible way to achieve this goal is through diversity of media ownership and diversity of financing, which involves private donations. Diverse funding sources and diverse ownership of media outlets secure a "diversity of voice" (Napoli, 1999, 2001)—for example, variety in program genres, standpoints, views, and orientations. For an individual, having access to a wide range of programs containing information about different cultural, ethnic, and linguistic groups and their activities is essential because such programming contributes to the formation of a multisided perspective on reality.

In Europe, the key idea expressed by the Council of Europe in its recommendations on media concentration and pluralism is that in a democratic and open society an individual is entitled to opportunities for both accessing and imparting information; these opportunities are in accordance with the rights afforded through the Convention on Human Rights and, more specifically, by Article 10 of the Convention (Ward, 2005). Therefore, a number of policy objectives arise as prerequisites for democratic communication; these objectives include the right to a plurality of information from a number of sources and the right to have access to a range of diverse and high-quality information. Taking these objectives into account, one can reasonably say that in European countries public television plays a crucial role in the audiovisual market.

In this respect, the UK public broadcaster, the BBC, clearly demonstrates in its programming diversified content and respect for the values of tolerance and individual freedom. This content is clearly reflected in the BBC's *Everyone Has a Story: Diversity Strategy 2011–2015* (BBC, 2011a) and its annual report, *Telling Our Story: Equality Information Report 2011* (BBC, 2011b), along with other initiatives of the broadcaster and various other media companies, including those from the independent sector. Among the objectives and priorities stated in the BBC's official

documents are to deliver high-quality programming that reflects modern Britain accurately and authentically, to achieve systematic and consistent consideration of equality and diversity, and to advance equal opportunities to diversify and develop the workforce at all levels to reflect the audiences (BBC, 2011b).

Besides, as is underlined in the BBC's annual reports, one of fundamental duties of the company is to remain impartial: to take no position on any issue and instead to reflect reality, to provide multifaceted approaches to life, and to create multisided images of people. Among the programs that follow these obligations are *Life of Muhammad* (BBC Two), *Love Me, Love My Face* (BBC Three), *So What If My Baby Is Born Like Me?* (BBC Three), *Small Teen, Bigger World* (BBC Three), *New Tricks* (BBC One), *Torchwood* (BBC One), and Stonewall's Broadcast of the Year, *World's Worst Place to Be Gay* (BBC Three).

On April 17, 2012, a decree creating public television in Russia was signed. A few months later, on September 13, 2012, a charter for public television was adopted, and on September 17, 2012, this charter was officially registered at the Russian Ministry of Justice. Then, on October 4, 2012, a public council headed by Oleg Tabakov was created, and a supervisory council was appointed. The new channel is set to go on air in May 2013. One of the fundamental principles of public television is its complete independence from political parties, and one of its key tasks is securing independence in production and pluralism in content.

The future of public television in Russia looks challenging. Because it will be expected to follow the principles of universality of service, cultural and intellectual enrichment, provision for minority audiences, editorial independence, and so forth, it will certainly play an important role in the development of civic society in Russia. Other essential functions of public television are mobilizing society and contributing to the creation of national identity. In this regard diversity of programming addressed to various cultural, ethnic, and linguistic minorities is indisputably important: if public television secures those interests and if the opinions of these groups are relevantly represented in the public sphere, citizens will acquire adequate perceptions of such minorities, their values and attitudes. As a consequence, tensions in society may be gradually lowered, and a tolerant attitude toward other members of society may be developed. At the present moment it is difficult to say what the future of public television in Russia will be because it will certainly face a lot of problems in its relationships with the state, audience, broadcasting services, and other entities. But the principle of diversity it will follow is going to make public television an important factor in promoting the values of pluralism and tolerance in Russian society.

As we have seen, the mass media and in particular television may influence children's development in a variety of ways. Two broad areas for consideration are the effects on children's cognitive development and the effects on children's social development and relationships with others. Among the social effects the construction of positive attitudes toward other cultural and ethnic groups is important. Because, at this time, pluralism and tolerance are gaining the status of new norms, and effective communication in the globalized society is becoming impossible without tolerance and multicultural awareness, children should be raised in an environment that tells them that there is not just one valid way to live and that there is no absolute right and absolute wrong.

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