MEDIA MESSAGES

How Do They Affect Our Youth?

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How do media affect society, and particularly young people? Over the past few decades, parents, teachers, media researchers, theologians, and presidential candidates, along with health researchers, have pondered this question. Christian teachers face an even more daunting question: How can we help our students navigate the turbulent waters of media exposure and emerge as healthy young Christians?

Media influences include exposure (hours per day spent with the media), objectionable content (violence, drug and other substance use, pornography, etc.), advertising, and subtle reinforcement of cultural values, so that the sum of media exposure is surely greater than its parts.

The typical American home has the television turned on (but not necessarily viewed) for an average of 7 hours and 13 minutes per day. As more people gain access to satellite and cable stations, these numbers will probably increase.[1] By age 70, most people will have watched television for between 7 and 10 years of their lives.[2]

The average 18-year-old has already watched 22,000 hours of television (21 to 23 hours per week)—more time than he or she has spent in school (12,000 hours by the end of high school)![3] Young people have been exposed to 350,000 commercials by the time they turn 21.[4]

It is easy to conclude that, for most children, TV viewing has replaced play and other types of exercise, study, and reading—not to mention human interaction. As they are growing up, children will hear more spoken words from the television than from parents and teachers.[5] Because of this, television has a vast and powerful influence on young people's basic worldview, as well as their attitudes toward sex, food choices, alcohol, and methods of conflict resolution.

In a typical American home, children will view 200,000 acts of violence before they are 18; this calculates out to 12,000 acts per year, or 1,000 per month![6] Violence thus comes to be seen as a reasonable and effective solution to problems. Research has shown an association between increased viewing of violent acts on TV and maladaptive and aggressive behaviors. These effects appear to be strongest in single-parent homes.[7]

The Kaiser Family Foundation has just funded an extensive review of the research literature on young people's exposure to media, along with many other media-related issues.[8] The results are alarming. The typical American child 2 to 18 years of age spends 5.5 hours per day

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cohol. In fact, *alcoholic beverages appear more frequently than non-alcoholic beverages.*[10] Only one of 119 instances of alcohol use on TV portrayed a refusal to drink. Furthermore, 45 percent of the verbal and visual references occurred in a humorous context, a potent strategy used to enhance viewer recall and acceptance.

Aside from alcohol portrayals, one in five shows included tobacco use, usually by a successful and attractive white male; male smokers outnumbered female smokers. Refusals to smoke were very rare.

Movies

Just under 80 percent of movies depict alcohol use by major characters. Positive references to alcohol use outnumber negative ones by a ratio of 10 to one. Furthermore, movie scripts rarely portray any negative consequences of alcohol use. In a 2000 study, 93 percent of the 200 most popular rental videos included depictions of alcohol.[11]

Tobacco use is also common in movies. Forty-five percent of the actors depicted as smoking are young. Tobacco use is almost always portrayed positively, with pro-tobacco references outnumbering negative ones by a ratio of 10 to one. Illicit drug use also appears regularly in movies, with 52 percent of the references failing to mention

with various types of electronic media. This number increases to 7.25 hours for children ages 8 to 18. It doesn't require advanced mathematics to figure out that television, movies, radio, CDs, tapes, computers, and print media consume well over a third of the waking hours of young people today.

Media Content

Not only should we be concerned about the time young people spend with the media, but also what they are hearing and seeing.

Some investigations have suggested that children know the difference between "media reality" and actual reality. However, media in-

tentionally blur this distinction. With prolonged exposure, people come to see the media as reality, accepting uncritically what they see and hear on television, radio, movies, and the Internet. Real-world values, which are shaped by family, church, and school, are thus replaced with the values promoted by the media.[9]

Television

Research gathered in the Kaiser report reveals that 75 percent of television programs mention alcohol use, while 50 percent show actual alcohol use. Of the top 20 shows in America, 77 percent include references to al-

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or depict the consequences. Ten percent of drug use in movies occurs in connection with luxury and wealth.

Media presentations do not mimic real life. They represent only a snippet of reality, and not a very realistic one at that. They do not show the demands of daily life and responsible living, nor do they accurately portray the laws of cause and effect. The media focus on action and outcomes, on the novel and unusual, rather than the consistency, hard work, and motivation that real life demands. Consumers of media, and particularly children, thereby gain a superficial and inaccurate view of reality.[12]

Popular Music

Alcohol use is often a central theme in popular music, especially rap and country music. Alcohol consumption is mentioned in 27 percent of rap music, 19 percent of contemporary adult music, 25 percent of country music, and 25 percent of rock videos.[13] However, few of the songs (9 percent) mention any consequences of alcohol use. Of 1,000 popular songs examined in 1999, 18 percent referred to drug use. Certain types of music mentioned drug use much more frequently: Rap music lyrics included references to drug use in nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of the songs, while country music mentioned it in only one percent.

Sex

Media portrayals of sex appear everywhere and are often inappropriate. Sex is used to sell everything from auto insurance to

toothpaste. Soap operas depict frequent affairs and infrequent use of contraceptives but rarely mention the consequences of sexual activity, such as pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. On soaps, viewers are more likely to hear about abortions than contraceptives, and eight times more likely to view extramarital affairs than sex within marriage.[14] Two-parent, married heterosexual families are no longer the norm in prime-time shows,[15] which more and more frequently depict single parenting, gay relationships, and casual sex. Typical television viewers are exposed to 14,000 sexual situations and innuendoes per year.

The Internet

The Internet is the newest of the media. It combines both wonderful resources and horrible risks. "The Internet is as persistent as it is potent, an indelible and uncontainable presence in the culture. In fact, the Internet isn't separate from the culture at all; it is the culture. All the trash, flotsam and spillage of our society gets its moment there, and the tiniest obsession has its spot on the shelf, right next to Bach and charity and sunsets. The Internet lets a million flowers bloom, and a million weeds."[16]

Cyberspace is not a place for young people to roam without supervision. The U.S. Congress recently heard testimony about a survey of 5,000 regular Web users aged 10 to 17. Nearly one in five said that they had experienced sexual advances online, and a quarter said they had been sent obscene pictures.[17]

Violence

Ever since the advent of television, concern has been expressed about its potential for negative socialization, particularly in encouraging aggressive behavior. Though some researchers suggest that human behaviors are too complex to be attributed to a single event such as a particular show on television, behavioral researchers agree that viewing TV violence does cause aggressive behavior.[18] This is of particular concern, as one-third of all referrals to behavioral clinicians are for behavioral problems, which often include aggression.[19]

It is difficult to prove a direct cause-and-effect relationship between viewing TV violence and aggressive behavior. Although media violence can negatively influence behavior, its impact can be understood only when one considers multiple dimensions and factors[20] such as the viewer's personality traits, time spent viewing violent acts, and the number and extent of the violent depictions.

Children exposed to violent and misogynist depictions in advertising, reading matter, and music are more likely to act aggressively. This should come as no surprise, since children learn through imitation of what they see and hear. If they are constantly exposed to the values of the media, they will tend to model people and events portrayed by television, film, music, and print. The influence is especially strong when media make antisocial and

immoral behavior seem humorous, effective, and socially desirable.[21]

Childhood behavioral patterns develop early and remain fairly stable throughout life, so parents and teachers need to recognize the importance of protecting youngsters from excessive exposure to media violence.

Advertising

To understand media's influence on youth, we must examine more than the amount of time they devote to its various forms. How does what they see and hear affect them?

Let's start with advertising. Does it have an influence on youth? One example should help answer this question.

Since tobacco ads were banned from television, the industry has financed $3 billion worth of advertisements, becoming very creative and successful in various non-TV media campaigns. Many athletic events are sponsored by tobacco or alcohol companies, and logos of cigarette brands appear everywhere.

For example, Virginia Slims, a popular cigarette marketed exclusively to women, portrays thin and beautiful "liberated" women in its magazine ads and often sponsors athletic events such as women's professional tennis meets.

In the United States, it is against the law for persons under 18 years of age to purchase cigarettes. In 1988, the RJ Reynolds Company, which produces Camel cigarettes, made only $6 million from Camel sales to youth under 18 years of age, or 0.5 percent of the illegal underage market. Their market share increased dramatically once the company's ads began to feature Joe Camel, a "cool" cigarette-puffing cartoon character. Joe Camel became so popular that in just three years, the sale of Camels to minors increased to $476 million, or 32.8 percent of such sales.[22]

To see how many people recognized this advertising symbol, researchers showed two pictures, Joe Camel and Mickey Mouse, to groups of children in several locations across America. Neither picture contained any names, only the characters. Six-year-olds were as likely to recognize Joe Camel as

Mickey Mouse. In fact, far more children than adults recognized Joe Camel (97 versus 67 percent).[23]

The tobacco industry claims to advertise only to adults. It denies attempting to persuade people to start smoking, claiming that it only seeks to ensure brand loyalty. Clearly, its advertising strategies disprove this assertion.

Other Media-Related Issues

In a number of countries, eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa pose a serious public-health concern.[24] Young

girls in particular become obsessed with their body image (weight and shape), a discontent that is strongly related to how frequently they read magazines.[25] Media images often depict trim, tanned, attractive models, which may lead young people to adopt attitudes and habits that are unreasonable and unhealthy.

Obesity is the most common nutritional problem among adolescents. The amount of time spent watching TV is directly proportional to obesity in children.[26] The prevalence of obesity increases two percent with each additional hour spent watching TV. Young people who watch television four hours per day weigh more than those who watch it for only two hours.

Video Games

Young people may spend many hours per week playing video games. Public concern

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has escalated since reports that a number of the students charged with school shootings had immersed themselves in violent video games and Internet sites. Some studies suggest a connection between exposure to all video games (not necessarily only violent ones) and aggressive behavior.[27]

Researchers have examined children's activities after playing aggressive and non-aggressive video games. Several report that girls became more involved in aggressive, confrontational play after aggressive game use and increased their quiet play after non-aggressive video game playing. Boys did not alter their playing activities because of either type of game.[28]

Research regarding the influence of video games on youth is only beginning. Many studies are underway, and results should be available within the next two years.

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Media and Moral Development

Those who study the moral development of children have long debated which individuals and institutions have the greatest influence on their development overall and at various stages. Research has shown that parents play a major role in moral development, particularly at early stages. Youth who have a strong bond with their parents and/or other caring adults such as teachers tend to have stronger personal morals and values than those who lack these bonds.

Research also indicates that peers play a major role in moral development. There is consistent evidence that youth are strongly influenced by the values and behavior of their friends.[29]

Religious values and institutions have also been found to play a major role in the moral development of youth. Religious values provide an underlying definition of what is right and wrong, a supernatural endorsement of moral values, and a sense of accountability for living within those values. Research strongly supports the role of religion in moral development and behavior. Youth who have a strong religious identity and are involved in their religion (attend services frequently) are significantly less likely to commit violent acts and become dependent on drugs or alcohol.[30]

Throughout history, media have always played a part in the moral development of youth. Most cultures have used visual arts, drama, and stories to communicate myths, ideas, and values to the new generation. Some of those visual arts and stories might be considered immoral. However, children's exposure was generally limited because their time was largely consumed by the struggle for daily existence. Furthermore, the exposure generally occurred in a setting controlled by parents.

However, during the past century, a number of cultural changes have occurred in social institutions and families that have increased the power of media to socialize youth, making them an independent force in

child development. Throughout most of the past century, Western societies have undergone a secularization that has, to a significant extent, disengaged religion from significant public discourse and influence.[31] Most children live in homes where both parents work or where only one parent is present. This means less adult connection with and supervision of children and youth.

Perhaps as a result of these changes, the media in all forms have become a primary influence on the moral development of youth in our society. Research indicates that the visual media—television and movies—play a major role in young people's attitudes toward parents, gender roles, violence, sexual ethics, ethnic relationships, and ethics of all types. Unfortunately, this role is often destructive.[32] The media's portrayal of violence—particularly sexual violence—has been identified as a likely cause of male violence toward females.[33] In addition, the general absence of religion and religious values in the media (except at holiday times and a very few programs) has likely played a significant role in disengaging morality and values from public discussion and behavior.

To a significant extent, parents and society have come to accept the media as a babysitter and occupier of children's time. This deprives parents and other adults of the opportunity to play a primary role in young people's moral development.

Children will learn about violence, sexual behavior, ethics, and substance use. We cannot put a wall around our families, schools, neighborhoods, or society that will prevent this from happening. However, we do have some choices about *how* they will obtain this information and *who* will provide it—the media in its drive for cultural dominance and profit, or loving and committed parents, teachers, and the community. Parents, educators, and other adults can provide a moral foundation and interpretation of the complexities and problems of society, thereby giving youth significant protection against and resiliency in dealing with the impact of those problems. In addition, parents and communities can join in social movements designed to examine and impact the role of media in moral development.[34]

Discussion

The media play a major role in the lives

of young people, and consequently, influence them in many ways. If, as the Bible says, "by beholding we become changed," Christians should be alarmed at media's potential effects on human behavior and values. Media replace human interaction and other real-life activities, offering a materialistic, naturalistic, thrills-oriented worldview. They have great power to shape attitudes about what is good, right, and just. Media both arouse and desensitize people by their constant depictions of violence and immorality.[35]

What can be done? Keeping youth otherwise occupied during the periods when they would be likely to engage in media activities is a useful strategy. Some might suggest taking the TV, computer, and video games out of the home. Is this a reasonable goal? These are all an integral part of modern culture. It is doubtful that such a strategy can be achieved.

In order for our youth to be resilient in spite of these exposures (not to downplay the validity of decreasing exposure), they need a solid network of caring adults. The ones who do well in spite of the odds are those with adults to befriend them and become confidants. The problem isn't just the media; it is also a lack of a caring adult network, beyond teachers and parents.

The Kaiser review indirectly highlighted this point when it suggested that the ultimate effects of media exposure depend on how kids interpret messages, the dynamics of parent-child interaction, and the extent to which messages are contradicted or supported by others. Since our youth are going to be exposed to various forms of media, we need to combat these influences with a supportive network of adults who help them interpret these messages. Left in a vacuum to interpret the messages for themselves, children will be adversely influenced.

Because of their emphasis on values and their religious worldview, Christian teachers and parents may not be fully aware of the pervasiveness and influence of media. Two recent examples may help to illustrate how seriously they need to view this threat to young people's values and moral development. In New Zealand about two years ago, the television news showed a toddler, still in diapers, in front of a TV screen. The child spoke little, but his favorite word was "kill." He spent most of every day playing violent video games. His parents thought it was funny.

One of the authors of this article recently learned about "gothic" music, literature,

games, and videos. Feeling somewhat startled about what she had heard, she asked several graduate students at an Adventist university about this. They were well acquainted with this genre, which focuses on satanic, violent, and seductive content.

Obviously, parents and teachers need to be alert to the seduction of even our youngest and "best" young people by the media because we are too busy with other "important" activities to interact and dialogue with them.

Teaching Critical Viewing Skills

As educators, we need to teach our young people how to examine and understand the effects of media. With some guidance, even elementary-level students can develop critical viewing skills.[36]

In addition to including this topic in the formal curricula, teachers can spend a few minutes each day, perhaps following morning worship, talking about what students have seen or heard in the media and commenting on how such messages may be interpreted. However uncomfortable we may feel about what they say, we must face this head-on, helping students understand and critique what they see and hear. By listening and offering guidance, we can make a difference.

Teachers and parents have a solemn responsibility to protect young people from online sexual advances and all sorts of degrading and ugly content. They need to be aware of chat rooms used by kids, use Internet blocker programs, discuss with young people what they have seen on the Internet, and check the histories of sites visited on school and home computers.

Rather than concentrating only on the negative, however, we can reinforce the positive possibilities of the media and use it in creative ways. The electronic media offer dazzling potential as tools for learning, especially through interactive educational programming.

Conclusion

By dialoging with parents, monitoring school media use, and using Internet blocker programs, schools can limit students' access to undesirable forms of media. But even more important is our responsibility to help young people learn how to use Christian principles to make responsible and informed choices throughout their lives. ✎

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