

Children, the UN Convention and the Media

lish a link between political intention and actual programme policy. The YLE Broadcasting Company in Finland is one example; it has a deliberate policy of avoiding certain violent programmes, gives clear warnings in advance of broadcasting some material and also conducts research studies about their impact.

Several reports refer to the system of age classification for the cinema. One example is Denmark:

All films to be shown in public are — under the Act of Censorship of Films — to be reviewed and evaluated in relation to an audience of children and young persons. At the moment there are two age limits as to prohibition, i.e. 12 years and 16 years, and in addition to this an age limit of 7 years is intended as a guide.

In some countries these limits also depend on whether the child goes with an adult or is unaccompanied. A particular problem has been how to cope with the expanding film market. This is illustrated through another quote from the Danish report:

A revision of the censorship of films is being considered, one of the reasons being the ever-increasing supply of films on TV and the video market which are not covered by the Act on Censorship in force.

In Finland commercial videos are subject to the same censorship procedures as cinema films. In France the approach is similar:

... video cassettes offered for rental or sale must indicate on their packaging any prohibitions linked to the issue of the certificate of release for the work.

Voluntary guidelines for the press do exist in several countries; in several cases their implementation is monitored by a Press Council which is set up, wholly or partly, by the press institutions themselves. These, however, tend to focus more on the protection of children being reported upon, than on problems related to the publishing of material harmful to young readers.

The most comprehensive overall approach seems to have been taken by Norway — after the submission of their report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. In March 1995 the government issued a national plan of action against violence in the visual media.⁸ This was a joint initiative by the

ministries of culture and justice — with the co-operation of two other ministries: the Ministry for Child and Family Affairs and the Ministry for Church Affairs, Education and Research. The plan says that even if only a small minority of young people are influenced by violent media consumption the consequences could still be serious. It also concludes that social and cultural poverty increases the risks and it emphasizes the preventive efforts, not least within the school.

The Norwegian plan proposes some legal precisions to include also, for instance, video games. Its emphasis though is on assisting children and parents to make informed choices. The plan seeks to mobilize viewers and consumers to use their power and express opinions about the supply. Another ambition with the plan is that those who transmit extreme violence on the screen be held responsible. Another major aspect, again, is that networks and alliances be built to develop knowledge and reactions against media violence.

A special secretariat has been established to monitor the implementation of the Norwegian plan; a co-ordinating committee between the ministries has also been set up as well as an advisory council of experts. There will be annual reports to the parliament.

The Norwegian approach seems to be unusually thorough and conscientious. However, the impression of the country reports from the industrialized countries, in general, is one of awareness and deep concern. The guidelines for television, including on broadcasting hours, which exist in a number of countries, may not always be respected and, moreover, seem not to stem the high volume of violence hour after hour. A particular problem is the news reporting which sometimes is illustrated with violent images, the impact of which may be even stronger than abusive fictions.

The exploding market of videos for sale or rental have created new problems in making a distinction between child and adult consumption. Classified descriptions of the content on the package, which offer a kind of violence rating, can be of some help to parents but probably do not protect all children in real life. Computer games of a violent nature raise similar problems.

Conclusions

1. The media could choose to play an important role in monitoring the status of children and the efforts by the authorities to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. An effective reporting of

8. "Regjeringens Handlingsplan mot Vold i Bildemediene" can be ordered from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Media Department, PO Box 8030, 0030 Oslo. There is also an English version: "The Norwegian Government's Campaign to Combat Violence in the Visual Media."