

**ANALYSIS OF TV PROGRAMMES FOR CHILDREN
IN SERBIA**

- SUMMARY -

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I SIGNIFICANCE OF IMPACT OF TELEVISION AS A MEDIUM

“Of the numerous stimuli that influence how people will behave at any given moment, none is more ubiquitous or effective than the actions of others.”

Albert Bandura

Television is an audio-visual medium so widespread that there is hardly a single household without a TV set almost anywhere in the world. There are numerous studies examining the impact of this medium and all of them have shown that even in the cultures where computers take a prominent place, the popularity of television does not diminish (Lemish 2008). Watching television is predominantly the activity indulged at home, something that parents accept and approve of regardless of the children’s age. According to the research, children usually watch television with their brothers and sisters, as well as with their friends and children of the same age. In such situations, the interaction related to the contents being watched is richer and serves as a source of information and knowledge about numerous phenomena that children normally watch on the TV (Alexander, Sallayane Rayan & Munoz 1984, according to Lemish, 2008).

The media is one of the most important agents of socialization of children and youth. None of the media, not even the television is inherently a good or bad agent of socialization. The research has shown that the quality of this effect depends on the facilities offered (Lemish, 2008). It is important to note that television is very present and powerful medium and that it vastly influences the perception of reality among the children including the children's understanding of the phenomena they are exposed to. But children, especially at their early age, gladly watch programmes designed for them, their attention is very easily occupied by easily memorable actions, colourful characters and cheerful melodies.

At their early age children do not distinguish reality from fantasy shown on television. Hence, the degree of their identification and engagement in the content is greater in that period. This level of identification with the content is even higher if it is in harmony with the culture, environment, or some belief already experienced by the child. Identifying with television characters may take different forms, sometimes the identification is based on the actual position of the child, or on the position or status sought by the child, while sometimes, there are para-social interactions when the child behaves as if it knows and experiences friendship towards the fictional television character. Almost all studies unswervingly report their identification by gender at earlier age, i.e. the boys identify with the male and girls with female characters (Hoffner, 1996, Lemish, 2008). Many researchers in this field claim that all television genres can provide models for prosocial behaviour. A study conducted in the United States analysed the concurrence between watching certain series and demonstrated helpfulness, cooperativeness, empathy and participation in creative play, and showed significant correlation. The series is called "Neighbourhood of Mr. Roger" and it is dominated by affirmative values, presented to the children through everyday situations in which the main character shares his emotional experiences (Fish, 2004, according to Lemish, 2008). The researchers then questioned whether the emulation of negative behaviour still prevails among the children. The analyses of the performed studies have not confirmed this assumption, but it confirmed that children are rather, but equally, prone to imitating both the positive and negative models.

Some findings suggest that watching television is negatively correlated with children's achievement on creativity tests (MacBeth 1996, Singer 1993, according Lemish, 2008), but this should be taken with reservations because of the context of the research.

1. Impact mechanism of television: model-based learning

There are several different terms used for the model-based learning, as one of the learning methods (A. Bandura, 1961): imitating, watching, observational learning, model-based learning (modelling) and identification. These different terms describe a unique method of learning: learning by observing something new (a pattern of behaviour) displayed by others that may, under

appropriate conditions, be repeated and adopted, thus leading to new learning. Research shows that the probability of adopting the model behaviour is higher if the following conditions have been met:

- a) *High frequency models*: it is more likely to adopt the dominant model of behaviour, the one that children often come across with, rather than the patterns encountered rarely and sporadically. Thus, the behaviour models more likely to be adopted are those shown in programmes that are repeated often, or programmes having a large number of episodes and seasons;
- b) *Culturally embedded model*: models that are consistent with models characteristic in a culture where they are performed, will be adopted faster;
- c) *Existence of social support and rewarding certain behaviour patterns*: if a character in the series suffers no consequences because of some bad act, even benefits from such behaviour, it is more likely that children will imitate the similar behaviour;
- d) *Estimate of a person learning by a model to gain some benefit* (reward, social acceptance) if he/she adopts a particular model of behaviour;
- e) *Motivation* of the learner to adopt a given model: children want to look like, or be like some of the characters from the TV programme;
- f) *Social reputation (power, prestige)* of a person who displaying a certain pattern of behaviour: it is more likely to adopt the behaviour of a person who is powerful, respectful and prominent in a particular environment, than of a person of lower social status (which is why it is important that the characters belonging to marginalized groups have the status of leading, main characters, as well as that all the main characters exhibit a positive attitude toward the characters that belong to the marginalized groups);
- g) *Comprehensibility of the models of behaviour*: if one does not understand the sense of a particular form of behaviour, it may be difficult to accept such person as their own and imitate him/her;
- h) *Closeness of the model behaviour to the one who adopts it* by gender, age, social status: the probability of modelling will particularly be increased by

intergenerational closeness, which is why it is important that the characters in children's programmes are as versatile as possible.

The major contribution in defining the model learning as a form of social learning has been given by Albert Bandura. He recognizes various types of modelling behaviour. *Direct modelling* is actually reflecting the model that is alive and present in the life of a child. *Symbolic modelling* is the one actually contemplated by our research, and it has been defined by Bandura as a reflection of role models from symbolic media such as the books, movies, games and television. The Symbolic model is actually an illustrative presentation of a behaviour. There are actually four mechanisms that enable all the above types of modelling that comprise: paying attention, which is very important when it comes to television, because it is capable of capturing the attention quickly and keeping it focused on the content. Once a content has been noticed, it must be retained, and therefore, the second mechanism is memorizing through a verbal or pictorial model. Now the presentation must be transformed into behaviour, so that it is as similar to the model as possible and the last mechanism is based on the motivation and requires that a person is sufficiently motivated to imitate a specific model.

In a characteristic experiment with the Bobo doll, Bandura demonstrated to be modelled aggressive behaviour. Children in the first, experimental group (i.e. the aggressive group) observed an adult model who demonstrated aggression towards the doll. When eventually found near the dolls the children demonstrated the same behaviour, as opposed to the control and other experimental (the non-aggressive) groups. In particular, the findings of the Bandura and his associates (Bandura, Ross, Ross, 1963) were:

- Children who were watching aggressive models demonstrated much more aggressive actions towards the doll than the children in the control and non-aggressive groups;
- Aggression that was not imitated and which appeared sporadically was more present among the group of children who imitated aggressive models;
- Girls from aggressive group demonstrated more signs of physical violence when the model was a male, and more verbal when the model was female;

- Boys are more likely to imitate same-sex models than girls;
- Boys imitate physical aggression more than girls, with some minor differences identified in relation to verbal aggression in favour of girls;
- Rewarding models for aggressive behaviour also strongly underpins the aggressive behaviour of the children in the experiment.

These findings have stirred the public and are still rather appreciated and often quoted when attempting to criticize television and television contents. Some findings indicate that the correlation between watching television and aggression is high and positive, but the research on the effects of aggressive content on television to children are not unambiguous. Some authors believe that it is important to examine other types of modelling behaviour and that proactive solutions may be found in positive models instead of deepening the problems with aggression. They state that particular songs and videos that can easily capture the attention of viewers have the power to influence behaviour.

There are numerous studies conducted worldwide, examining the interaction of TV models and children as the audience. Today we can say that children choose contents that fit into upgrading their understanding of the world, due to which watching television is now more often referred to as a social construction. Accordingly, it has been found that television significantly affects the child's construction of gender and gender roles, gender identity, sexuality, understanding the body, eating habits, political realities and conflicts (Lemish, 2008).

II ABOUT ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S TELEVISION PROGRAMMES AND LEGISLATION

In this Analysis and in accordance with the categorization provided in the Guide “Communicating with children”¹ the children will be considered to represent the persons from birth to the age of 14,

¹ Kolucki, B, Lemish, D. (2011) *Communicating with Children*, Belgrade, UNICEF, available at http://www.unicef.org/serbia/Komunikacija_sa_decom_web.pdf

divided into three development phases. From birth to the age of six, children are in their early development age. From seven to ten, in their middle age, and from eleven to fourteen in their early adolescent age.

The methods used were: content analysis, interviews, questionnaire and quantitative statistical method.

The analysis included the involvement of children's programmes in the total programme of television channels with national frequency. Special attention was paid to the content of the programme in relation to the following principles: participation of children, inclusiveness of vulnerable and marginalized groups, appropriateness to age, interaction, and educational nature.

The analysis included two public services – Radio and Television Serbia (RTS) and Radio and Television of Vojvodina (RTV) with two channels each, having legal obligation to broadcast programmes for children, as well as the commercial broadcasters: **Prva, B92, Pink, Happy and Happy Kids.** Happy and Happy Kids channels have been treated as one in most of the reports as they share the same frequency: Happy Kids is broadcast from 10.00 to 14.00, while the children's media content on these channels is the same and transmitted without interruption at the hours when Happy Kids programme, the only dedicated children's channel with national coverage, coincides with the hours of the Happy channel.

Three cable channels specialized in children's programme were analysed: **Minimax, Ultra and Ultra Mini.** The population exposed to the programme of these channels is comparable to the channels with national coverage in their number, and their TV rating has a significant share in the total TV rating related to the children's contents. This especially applies to the programme for the youngest children (0-6 years) that is very rarely broadcast on the channels with national coverage.

The analysed period was from **1 January 2014 to 30 April 2014, with a particular focus on the first week of February**². The database of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media in Serbia (REM) was used and the programmes were monitored within the regular programme schedule. This particular week was chosen in order to have the representation of children's programmes that are less burdened by extraordinary circumstances due to which most of the channels changed their programming schedules, that could jeopardize the validity and stability of the outcome of the survey – the pre-election period, winter holidays, transition to summer scheme, state of emergency caused by the May floods.

The analysis unit was the children's programme that include children's TV dramas and movies, children's fiction series and serials, animated series, short cartoons for children, children's feature film, children's quizzes, music and other entertainment shows for kids, mixed children's programmes.

The sample comprised 12 children's programmes.

Based on the monitoring programme in the selected week and the total period analysed, **the questions to editors** of children's programmes on channels with national coverage have been formed in order to reach the criteria applied by broadcasters when selecting and producing the children's programmes.

The subject of the analysis included the opinion of children and parents about television programmes for children. The data collected in 10 schools (4 rural / suburban schools and 6 urban) in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, during September and October 2014, that included answers of 458 children and 412 parents (870 subjects) provided a more accurate picture of the favourite contents and needs of children, the influence of the television programmes on them, and of the opinion and attitude of the parents towards the children's TV programme.

² The control, last week of February showed negligible deviance.

The additional objective of the analysis was to place the children's programmes in the legal and subordinate legislation framework of obligations imposed to the broadcasters. Thus, the analysis provides an **overview of the regulations and practices of broadcasters and regulators in the countries of the region and the European Union.**

The outcome of the children's programme and legislation analysis, along with the interviews with editors of television stations, parents and children, have been used to formulate recommendations for improving the quality of television programme dedicated to and involving the children.

III CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the analysed period, the broadcasters dedicated one third of their overall programme to the contents designated for children. However, **the largest percentage, 65%, of the overall children's programmes broadcast was the cartoons.** It was observed that the public service, RTS and RTV had the smallest share of cartoons in their programme schedule.

Cartoons are often prevailed by violence, so the logical question that may be raised is what exactly are the motives of broadcasters to promote such content.

It has been noticed that **children's programmes are broadcast in weekend blocks of several hours**, which in the end gives a satisfactory share of children's programmes in the overall programme.

There is a higher proportion of foreign content to domestic one, with the foreign production almost exclusively being the part of the children's programmes of commercial and cable broadcasters, while the local production is broadcast by local public services. A more balanced picture is

obtained when taking into consideration the broadcast of the children's programme of both the foreign and domestic production.

Since the **foreign production prevails** by the statistics of the content across all channels, except for public services, this fact raises the question of the promotion of indigenous culture and values.

The analysis showed that two public services offer the most diverse genres, but that the programme is not equally versatile when it comes to appropriateness for different age groups.

The public services and commercial broadcasters with national coverage offer the least of content for children aged 0-6. The largest number of programmes have been designed for the age of 7-10, and 11-14 years of age, noting that commercial televisions have a very scarce programme tailored to the children of that particular age. The majority of the cable channels is adapted to the age of 0-6 and 7-10.

The largest number of programmes with the participation of children has been broadcast by the public services. The programme activities in which children participate have not been broadcast on Happy Kids, B92 and Minimax cable channel.

In the overall reporting programme, two shows have been identified, one of which is adapted for children with intellectual impairment or disabilities, and the other talking about these children, being the participants in the show. Both are broadcast on public service channel RTS 2. The participation of children with intellectual impairment or disabilities that would be suitable for ages younger than early adolescence, does not exist. The children from marginalized groups are not visible in the children's programme.

Most of the broadcast children's programmes have no interactive elements, nor encourage any thinking or participation of viewers on the given topics.

Life in the village is represented in only two reruns of the series: Stories from Nepričava and Neven (both being broadcast on RTS).

The most common themes in children's programmes include: the magic, transformation, monsters, followed by violence and fight against evil, and it was observed that **the least number of the children's programmes are dealing with hygiene, health or nutrition.**

It is important to mention that the channels with national coverage, other than the public services of RTS and RTV, have no editors of children's programmes, in spite of having them broadcast. The television persons in charge do not recognize their responsibilities for this segment of the programme, and consequentially, it is almost impossible to get the answers about the children's programme that has been broadcast.

The major shortcoming of the children's programme provided by the public services may be considered their numerous reruns of old shows. Also, the majority of the cable and commercial channels have the most of their shows rerun. Even when a premiere is broadcast at the beginning of the week, the shows have been rerun during the reporting period. **In both public services, the editors fail to perceive such reruns as their shortcoming**, but rather the need for the new generation to be able to see the shows providing the timeless value, local tradition and culture. One of the decisive reasons for having the reruns, as they claim, is the popularity at the time of their initial release, and their estimate that the new audience should be familiarized with them in order to be saved from oblivion.

The results show that **the majority of children in Serbia often watches television** without exclusively watching the children's programmes. A part of them assert that the children's programmes are of poorer content which is the reason why they watch the "Animal Planet", "The History Channel", "Discovery" and sports channels.

The finding that **girls spend significantly more time watching television** is in line with the results of other studies showing that boys spend more time using computers and they are more addicted to computers (Cao & Su, 2006; Bulgarian, 2004).

It was found that a significant proportion of children watch programmes that are not suitable for their age, but are watched by other family members. This is primarily related to entertainment shows, music competitions, quizzes and fiction series, both the domestic and foreign ones. It is probable that parents are more prone to giving the socially desirable answers, or they do not sufficiently take care of what their children watch in terms of the appropriateness of programs that children follow. Specifically, parents state that their children often watch children's programme, and less of the other programme watched at home or any other shows in contrast to the claims of the children.

Children from rural and suburban areas are more likely to state that they watch everything watched by their family at home, than the children living in an urban area. The reason for this remains an open question, whether this is a result of lower availability of cultural, entertainment, sporting and other activities in these areas, or of a lesser level of awareness about the effects of television on children and their understanding of the world, or the truth lies somewhere in between. This may remain a topic for a future research, for now.

Parents do not sufficiently control what their children watch on television, nor agree or plan with them what to watch: almost 80% of the children stated that they choose what to watch on television by themselves, and about 70% of parents stated that the child did not choose what to watch, but that it was something they control, while one third claimed not to be aware of what their child watched on the television. Keeping in mind the finding that one third of parents are aware of how powerful agent of socialization the television can be and as such, influence the attitude and identity of their children, along with the fact that the parents assess the impact of children's TV content as mediocre, it is obvious that the awareness should be raised among the parents when it comes to the influence of television on children. The finding that **children having the parents with higher education degree spend less time watching television than children of parents**

with lower education levels is consistent with the finding that more educated parents show less satisfaction with TV content for children and apparently attempt to influence the children's watching of television by organizing their leisure time in other ways, more often than parents with lower level of education.

Out of all parents who responded to the questionnaire, only ¼ are fathers and ¾ are mothers.

It is interesting to consider this information and what it indicates. It is very likely that this is the result of fathers spending less time with children, i.e. the usual attitude (and practice) that children are the mother's care, i.e. that mothers are chiefly the ones dealing with children, their education and other activities, that they observe and know them better. Looking at the analysis of primary school textbooks, one may see that even the new generation of textbooks where women are much more commonly presented in professional roles than in the old textbooks (where they were predominantly portrayed as mothers and housewives), still contain the stereotypical image of a mother dealing with children and taking care of them (Pešikan and Marinković, 1999). Of course, the problem is not in the mother taking care of the children, this is quite natural, but it would equally be good to have fathers involved as well, considering that women face the problem of balancing their professional and private roles, especially when the systemic social support is missing.

The favourite TV contents for children remain cartoons (the most popular are those that shown on the B92: "SpongeBob SquarePants," "The Smurfs," "The Penguins of Madagascar," "Kung Fu Panda"). In spite of naming them as their favourite programmes, the children stressed that many cartoons were often repeated and that a number of them are not fit for their age ("they are baby cartoons"), and therefore they turn to the series dedicated to teenagers, predominantly those of a foreign production ("Big time rush ", "iCarly", "Victorius " etc.).

Some children mentioned the advantages of watching the programmes in English language, as helpful in their learning the language, while others stated that it would be necessary for the children's programmes to reflect the life style that would reflect the local context and claim that there is **a lack of TV content for children in Serbian language**. Children also noted the poor

quality of synchronization in some cartoons, which is yet another argument that they need more shows in Serbian language.

It is important to note that children and parents highly rank the old shows, most often the old children's programs shown on RTS ("Muzički tobogan", "Fazoni i fore", "Metla bez drške," "Čarobni autobus", etc.). The parents believe that there is a need for more programmes of a content and form similar to those old shows, but with more contemporary production. **Many parents noted that children's programmes in domestic production are out-dated and therefore less interesting to children.** We point out that one of the indications of obsolescence of the programmes may be their potential for interactivity, namely the communication of the television content with children. This is something the parents recognize as a problem when it comes to the commercial aspect of the television programme ("they successfully communicate when they need to sell toys"). A vast numbers of children focused on the aspect of interactivity and mentioned that there should be **more quizzes with the participation of children**, when asked about how to improve children's TV programmes. The interactivity in TV contents can also be achieved through questions put by the characters / actors / programme showmen to the children watching from their homes, or by inviting children to some sort of action ("let's sing this together" and "now stand up all of you, let's exercise together", or "what can you do in your street to provide shelters for more animals during the winter", etc.).

The satisfaction with TV programmes is higher among the children than among their parents, which is an expected result. However, there is still a big gap between the indicated parental dissatisfaction with the TV programmes and their reporting on the amount of time their children spend in front of TVs. There are several possible explanations for this result, one possible explanation being that parents do not have a choice and view television as an aid in child care.

The weakest point of children's TV programmes is certainly the educational potential and this is recognized both by the children and the parents. Amusement and abundance of TV content has been valued most highly, while the recognized areas for improvement include: variety, adequacy of children's age, quality, importance of education, the appropriateness of the socio-

cultural context, the educational messages they display. Another aspect of the TV children's program which is very poorly developed, both in the opinion of the parents and the children, is the inclusiveness of TV content. The diversity of the main characters is ranked very low, namely, **both the children and the parents recognize that children's TV programmes are rather poorly filled with the other and the different**, i.e. the members of various socially marginalized groups (people having intellectual impairments or disabilities, the ethnic, racial and national minorities, persons coming from poor families, people living in rural areas). This is a serious finding, especially when one considers the necessity of creating an inclusive environment both in schools and in the media and in the children's environment, to ensure that the members of socially marginalized groups are not discriminated. Discrimination is present if there is a "white balance", i.e. none of the characters in the TV programme is different in any way. Without the presence of others and the different in a child's environment, it is impossible to develop tolerance to diversity, understanding and appreciation of diversity.

The analysis has therefore shown the necessity of significantly improving the children's TV programmes in Serbia, primarily to make them more contemporary, interactive, participative and inclusive with a greater share of domestic production and production in the national socio-cultural context, that would involve the children growing up in Serbia.

The content of children's programmes has shown that broadcasters have to be more accountable for their programmes, while the regulatory body needs to pay more attention to the quality of the programme. Even more so knowing that there is no supervision of the specialized cable programmes for children, other than in response to the rare complaints made by the parents.

Laws and subordinate legislation of regulators in Serbia regulatory allow REM to act in this regard.

REM monitors broadcasting of programmes and has the capacity of maintaining the continuous access to their content while further regulating this area with subordinate legislation and deciding about the allocation of national frequencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS based on the findings:

- ***Increase the production and broadcasting their own children's programme*** that fits the socio-cultural context and the children growing up in Serbia. Own production offers a variety of content and genre options that individual programmes could make different, allows an integrative approach and diversity of contents. The high rating of local programmes is another argument supporting this.
- ***Strengthen the educational role of the children's TV programmes.*** Both children and parents mentioned the requirement of having more quizzes and travelogue programmes and programmes about science, nature, animals, content to help them in learning and education
- ***Increase inclusiveness in children's TV programmes.*** Programmes for children must encompass the "other and different", i.e. they should include different characters, and representatives of socially marginalized groups, both in supporting and main roles. The children should participate in the programmes as actors, researchers and guests.
- ***Increase the interactivity of children's TV programmes.*** Contents produced and broadcast for the children should be sensitive to the problems and issues of children, and relevant to children's development in terms of their educational potential. It is important that the children themselves perceive them as relevant. This can be achieved by creating programmes that will tackle the current problems of children, discuss current topics concerning children in Serbia and the region and the local sociological and cultural context, in which the children will have the opportunity to participate from their homes as well.
- ***Broadcast diverse and rich children's programmes.*** All the TV stations should have a programme for children of at least partly their own production and offer more versatile and higher quality shows on different channels

- ***Improve the responsibility of broadcasters*** for the quality of children's programmes they broadcast
- ***Educate parents*** about how they should monitor and mediate the contents that children watch on TV. In many households TV is switched on throughout the whole day, which indicates that there is no reflection on scheduling the child's time or any conscious selection of programmes to be viewed.
- ***Strengthen the control of violence in TV programmes.*** Particular attention should be paid to violence in TV programmes complained about by the parents and the children. This underlines the importance of the aforementioned recommendation on the necessity of an increased parental care when it comes to the content their children watch on television, and the requirement that they act as a "filter" for the threatening and inappropriate content. More importantly, a systematic effort should be made to visibly mark the contents that are not appropriate for children and to broadcast them in hours that will make them not easily accessible to children, at least the younger ages.
- ***Strengthen the monitoring role of the regulator.*** The regulatory body should require stricter compliance with the subordinate legislation and greater accountability of broadcasters for the content of the programme. Stressing the importance of this topic when announcing the contests and in the decision making process on the allocation of national broadcasting frequencies, is not sufficiently used as the mechanism of influence on the quality of children's programmes.
- ***Conducting research*** to examine different aspects of the phenomenon of television and children, especially the parental role in children's watching of television; media literacy among children and youngsters and the ways to encourage its development; role of television in rural and urban areas; analysis of messages conveyed by individual shows to children and the value system promoted by them; analysis of the main characters - models presented to children through popular TV programmes, and the like.