

# **Children and Mass Media in the Arab World: A Need for More Media Education**

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## **Introduction**

In the old days, childhood was not well taken care of. Children were seen as savage creatures that must be avoided. No one cared for children and the childhood lied down in the family and human interests. That was the case in the old and even during the Middle Ages. The child was savage with respect to its behaviour, and education was crucial to change the child's savage behaviour.

Jean Jack Rousseau was a pioneer who brought some changes to this view. He introduced some kind of romance on the relationship between poems and their childhood and then poems and other children. The interest and care for the child moved to different sectors. The child who was nothing became everything.

This new view to children prevailed all over the world. Attention and care given to children accompanied the introduction of cinema on the turn of the nineteenth century. It was natural that the new medium (the cinema) pays a lot of attention to children. That was a kind of a fashion during that era. This interest in children and the production of children's movies continued through World War I. This was followed by the introduction of children's programmes on television during the 1950s.

Care for the children became very obvious in all countries with the turn of the twentieth century. In 1989 a world summit for childhood was held. Starting from that date most countries in the world began to give special care for children. This care for children was also obvious in the universities and academies where a lot of studies and research were directed towards children, their general and cultural needs and their education.

In the Arab World, there was also a pan Arab interest in the child that was reflected in establishing Arab Institute for Childhood Studies in Cairo under the supervision of the Arab League.

In Egypt, for example, there was a presidential decree to consider the decade 1989-1999 as the childhood decade. During that decade a lot has been done at official and private levels to improve quality of the services provided for the Egyptian child. This may also explain the great attention paid to study of children during this decade.

### **Arab Children and Mass Media**

If the rise of mass media goes back to the beginning of the 20th century, the study of children and media is more recent. Works in the field of children and mass media rely on the contribution of scholars from different approaches, i.e. mass communication, psychology, social psychology and sociology. Due to the importance of mass media and its strong relations with the human beings, scholars in the fields of education and mass media were more interested than others in studying the influence of mass media on the child.

The child has very limited experience in life that leads to his quick response to stimulus without deep thinking. Scholars were divided among themselves with respect to the influence of mass media on the child. While some scholars see mass media as having positive effects on the child, others see the mass media as having negative effects.

### **This paper contains two parts:**

**Part one** presents the main findings of research on children and mass media in the Arab World. This covers most studies carried out during the last 20 years, in all Arab countries except North Africa.

**Part two** deals with the situation of media education in the Arab World with special reference to recent initiatives carried out by Mentor Association for Media Education.

Before discussing findings of previous studies, I would like to shed some light to the situation of mass media in the Arab World.

All Arab countries have their own satellite TV channels in addition to their national channels. The number of Arab satellite channels exceeds 200 channels. They are governmental as well as private. Satellite television channels are watched in nearly 90% of homes in the Arab

world. Arab viewers are also exposed to other European and American satellite channels.

Number of national TV channels varies from one country to another. For instance Egypt has the largest number (9 TV channels, 2 national and 7 regional), Saudi Arabia has 2 channels, one in Arabic and one in English directed for expatriates, and most Gulf countries have 2 to 3 national TV channels.

Radio is also common medium especially, the new FM stations which introduce mainly light and musical programs. Egypt has 7 radio networks. In other Arab countries there are at least 2 national radio stations per country.

Print media are also numerous. In Egypt there are more than 400 newspapers and magazines, mainly privately owned. The number of newspapers and magazines vary from one country to another. While Kuwait has over 20 newspapers and magazines, Saudi Arabia has more than 50. There are special magazines for children in nearly all Arab countries.

More than 75% of young people in the Arab World have access to the internet. The majority have the access at home.

When we talk about children and media, the most common media are the cinema and television. In fact, they have more effects on children than other media such as print media or theatre. The two media complete each other although they actually compete as television was accused of stealing audiences from the cinema, especially in the Arab world.

From review of literature, it was clear that the number of studies carried out during the 1990s, especially the mid-1990s were very big compared to the number of studies carried out during the 1980s or the 1970s. Even this number increased, to a great extent, during the last five years. This may be due to the great attention that governments in the Arab countries started to pay for children. A great deal of children's associations was established under the supervision of governmental and non-governmental organizations. Academic and scientific centers for the study of child were also established all over the Arab World.

Most studies were related to children and television, i.e. types of children's programmes on television and

children's exposure to these programmes. Many of these studies mainly analyzed the television programmes. Some studies interviewed children to examine their exposure to their programmes as well as their preferences and the influence of these programmes on them. Some studies were also related to communicators (programme planners, producers and directors). Finally, a few studies also examined parents, and to what extent they influence their children's use of television.

Studies on children and other media i.e. print media; radio and video were less frequent.

It was found that the social status and the geographic area factors have a great influence on children's use of mass media. Those from upper and middle classes have access to most media. Television was the most used medium for children from working-class background. The difference was also clarified in preferences. Middle class children prefer varieties and musical programmes whereas those from working class prefer traditional and religious programmes and materials. Middle class children also used magazines and other print media more than those of working class. It was also found that children from urban areas have access to more media than those from rural areas who stick mainly to television as their main medium.

No real attention has been paid for the problem of mal educated and homeless children. Official organizations keep on caring for children's problems, but nothing has ever mentioned about the role that media may play in this issue. This problem is very common in all Arab countries but unfortunately very little is done about it.

Arab children are very special in their dealing with mass media especially television. In most families from different social milieus, children are left to watch television without any control or interference from the family. The danger of this situation increases with the introduction and the spread of satellite television and channels of the new communication technology such as the internet. In most Arab countries children know more about satellite channels programmes than other members of the family. They are also exposed to these channels more than any other member in the family. Children are also more familiar with modern communication technology than their parents.

Findings of studies have also shown that television was the most dominant medium on all other medium. Most

children watch television for different gratifications, the most frequent was entertainment and fun. Cinema is also one of the most important media for children. The importance of films is special in the Arab World because of the spread of illiteracy. Therefore, children are more prepared to respond to films and motion pictures.

Newspapers' use was affected by the age factor. Older children (10 years and above) were using newspapers more than the younger. The same judgment applies to magazines. Children's use of print media was also affected by the socioeconomic status of the family. Children in middle-class families were more likely to use print media more than those of working-class families.

Timing of children's magazines and prices are also crucial issues. The time should be towards the weekend. Most children see magazines as entertaining rather than educating. Therefore, children prefer to read magazines during their days off from school. This point should be reflected in the contents as well. It should be a light content and reflect children's needs and expectations.

It was also obvious from the literature that there is a problem with respect to specialized writers for children in the print media, i.e. newspaper and magazines. The specialized writers were very few, and most of them were not to the standard. This applies even to those who cover with their materials the very limited space devoted for children in newspapers. This may also apply to the situation in magazines and even children's magazines.

The situation was different in radio and television where people who present children's programmes were relatively more experienced. This matter could be seen clearly in Egyptian radio and television. Egyptian television screens a wide variety of programmes for children in different age groups. They actually have special TV channels for the family and children. The rate of viewing by the target young audiences is high. Egyptian radio also broadcast some programmes for children in different age groups. The rate of listening to these programmes is very high. Even mothers, may join their children in listening to these programmes especially those directed for pre-school children.

Another problem related to the lack of specialized people was related to levels of payment. Those who work in the field of children's programmes were less paid than others. This leads to the situation where people who work in the field of the production of children's materials

and programmes are viewed as less qualified than those who work in the field of other programmes. This case was common in most Arab countries.

Lack of financial resources in general was a major problem for children's media in most Arab countries with the exception of the rich Gulf countries. The budgets allocated for children programmes in radio or television were far less than those allocated for other kinds of programmes. The same judgment applies to the situation of children's films, which suffer from the lack of financial and other resources. This leads to some difficulties in most cases to produce children's films where the children play the principal roles.

Although a great deal of research on children and media was carried out, we still have problems in dealing with children from the media's viewpoint.

The very same problems that were shown in findings of most of the reviewed studies are still there. Two important issues are worthy tackling in future research:

- Do parents have the right to select radio and television programmes and print materials for children?
- Do children expose themselves to their programmes and materials or are these programmes and materials wasted?

The above issues are the kinds of questions that need to be addressed by future research. It is very common in many Arab televisions to screen programmes for children while they are at school. One may wonder to whom are these programmes directed.

To conclude the first part of this paper, the review of literature has shown that:

- Researchers in the Arab World gave more attention to television than all other media. That may be due to the fact that television was more influential on children than most of the other media.
- Studies on children and radio were very limited with respect to frequencies.
- Studies on children's use of other media such as cassette recorder were not in evidence either. Although the use of portable cassette recorder and the IPOD has become very popular all over the world,

especially among young people and older children, studies on these media were not in evidence.

- Studies on children's use of video and video games were also unavailable.
- There is a need to carry out studies on children's use of modern media such as the IPOD, mobile phones and on-line chatting rooms.

## **Situation of Media Education in the Arab World**

From the above review of findings it was clarified that there is a real need for media education. Most studies have shown that mass media have lots of negative influences on children. These children need to be educated on how to deal with mass media. Families also, especially mothers, need to be advised on how to help their children in dealing with mass media.

It is also obvious that there is a need for some kind of coordination between different organizations such as educational and mass media organizations to conduct joint-research projects. This will help, to a great extent, to improve the conditions of children's use of media and consequently the media effects on this young audience.

During the 1980s some departments were opened in some Arab universities to qualify teachers for "the educational media" and not "media education". In other words, these departments were mainly concerned with the media used at schools generally or in the educational process.

At the same time, as from the early 1990s, in most Arab countries, schools were requested, by law, to have the so called "Multi-Media Laboratories". They are mainly computer laboratories, and most has access to the internet. They are supposed to be used by children at schools for the sake of educational process. These laboratories are fully used in private schools but not in governmental schools though they exist. Children mainly use them to go on line and do some of the project required.

The media education at schools was narrowed to the level of media use in the educational process.

Before 2002, there were no real workshops or conferences on media education. The first workshop was organized by

UNESCO in Cairo in Dec. 2002. That was preceded by another workshop in Tunisia.

As of today, the situation of media education has witnessed some slight progress that may be seen in the number of studies, especially PhD studies, which are being carried out on media education. This trend has started very recently.

However, there is still a lot of confusion about the concept and objectives of media education. The concept is mainly seen as the use of media in the education process and digital literacy which varies from media education.

### **Role of Mentor Association in the Arab World**

The Mentor International Media Education Association is a federation which was formed in May 2004 to offer media education services to all members; both associations and individuals. Its headquarters is in Barcelona, Spain. The Mentor Association reinforces media education strategies promoted by the UNESCO, and strives to strengthen an agenda which upholds media education initiatives, first and foremost, in Latin America, Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East and throughout the rest of the world.

The Mentor Association aims to promote and lead international developments in Media Education and effective educational and cultural training.

### **The primary objectives of the Mentor Association are:**

- o To be the central point for idea and project exchanges to promote an education culture through the media.
- o To organize events and activities for the wide range of representatives who work in the field of Media Education.



- o To establish joint collaborative agreements with entities who have similar or complementary goals to Mentor and / or the commitment to fulfill the objectives of the Mentor Association.
- o To develop media education initiatives.
- o To research and create media education projects, and act as the principal platform for associations which aim to reach these outcomes.
- o To contribute to, and share, media education experiences

Among the recent initiatives of Mentor association was the organization of a big conference that was held in Riyadh, the capital city of Saud Arabia in March 2007. That was the first ever international conference, in the Middle East on media education.

The conference was organized in cooperation with the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia. It was sponsored by the Saudi King who delegated the Minster of Education to formally open it on his behalf.

The conference was attended by more than 1500 participants from all over the world, Europe, the USA, Asia, Africa, the Arab world and lasted for 3 days. It was also attended by some Ministers of education from the Arab World as well as members of the Saudi Royal family. Participants were teachers, scholars, university professors and media people.

The conference was a great success. It was also a practical and initial step towards establishing a good cultural dialogue based on interaction on the ground.

It was recommended to encourage initiatives for joint research projects among scholars of different countries.

It was also recommended to sustain this kind of interactions and to organize this kind of meetings every year, though it was initially thought to be every 2 years. Requests were made from some countries to host the next conferences. The United Arab Emirates was selected to host next year's conference in March 2008.

Following the success of the conference, we submitted a very ambitious program for training of Saudi secondary school teachers on media education. There is a preliminary approval on the training program which aims at training 3000 Saudi teachers during a period of 5 years. The proposed training will last for 6 months. Part of it will take place in Saudi Arabia and the other part in Europe. This will be a pioneer program in this part of the world.

As soon as we initiate this training programme, other programmes in other geographical areas will follow suit.

The above was an example of initiatives that, we as Mentor Association, try to carry out to promote and spread the concept of media education in different parts of the world.