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Editorial

It was in 1948, with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that the United Nations proclaimed the family as “the natural and fundamental unit of society entitled to protection by society and the State.” In the following decades, as the concept of the family became the subject of intense sociological scrutiny, the UN sought to draw attention to the debate by making 1994 the International Year of the Family (IYF).

2014 marks the twentieth anniversary of the IYF, providing an opportunity to focus on the role of families in society today, to review current challenges, and to recommend new directions. And in today’s information and knowledge societies, the impact of new technologies, social media, and interactive digital platforms needs to be taken into account.

In many affluent countries and in communities in many urban centres of countries in transition, communication technologies have become an essential part of everyday lives. Research into the impact of this relatively new media landscape suggests that:

- * More family members, beginning at ever younger ages, are using interactive technologies, including the Internet and mobile phones.
- * People within families are using these technologies in increasingly individualised contexts. Family television viewing, sharing a family computer and vying for time on a family phone are less common as TVs, mobile phones and laptops become individual devices. And busy families seem to be interacting in more fragmented ways, with fewer communal activities.
- * For many young people, multi-tasking has become the norm, as they juggle different communication devices and experiences: downloading music while talking on the phone, engaging in IMS chat, searching the Internet for school-related information and keeping one eye on the television screen.

There is also an ongoing controversial debate about cognitive effects. Some believe that the creative aspects of engagement with interactive technologies helps young people to develop the skills needed for contemporary society. Others are concerned that this comes at the expense of focused concentration and critical thinking.

In the context of the International Year of the Family it might also be important to recall those families affected by disappearance and loss. Each year, hundreds of

thousands of people are separated from their loved ones as a result of repression, conflict, migration, and natural disasters.

The International Day of the Disappeared (August 30) draws attention to the fate of individuals imprisoned at places and in conditions unknown to their relatives through secret imprisonment and forced disappearance, as well as those detained or stranded in foreign countries.

The role of media in helping human rights groups to bring such cases to public attention is crucial – as was demonstrated in Argentina, for example, during the decades-long search for those “disappeared” under the military dictatorship.

Even so, media practitioners often find themselves treading a fine line. In Syria the recent widespread seizure of journalists has gone largely unreported by news organisations in the hope that keeping the kidnappings out of public view may help to negotiate the release of those held captive. There is also confusion over what constitutes a journalist, since much reporting coming out of the country is not from traditional professional journalists but from “citizen journalists” affiliated with so-called local “media offices”.

The family bears the brunt of such political and social disturbances and it is children who suffer most. During International Year of the Family it is to the child that communicators and media practitioners may need to pay particular attention. Children’s rights include their communication rights – a theme often ignored by policy-makers. In this respect, communication rights advocate Cees J. Hamelink notes:

“The mass media should disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child. This implies that the mass media should have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous; that the mass media should develop respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations; and that the mass media should prepare the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous groups.”¹

Celebrating the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family is an opportunity to consider how new information and communication technologies are impacting the life of the family and its most vulnerable members: children.

It is also an opportunity to remind ourselves that while communication is what makes us human, it also offers us a means of preventing ourselves from being inhuman.

Note

1. “Media Globalisation: Consequences for the Rights of Children”, in *Children, Young People and Media Globalisation* edited by Cecilia von Feilitzen and Ulla Carlsson. UNESCO International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media (2002).