GHANA YOUTH MEDIA LITERACY INITIATIVE

EXTRACTS FROM THE HANDBOOK ON

**'THE IMPACT OF THE POPULAR MEDIA
ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH'**

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WHAT IS MEDIA LITERACY?

Definition I: Firstly, through media literacy education, students (children, young people, adults) can be equipped to (i) develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of the media, (ii) the techniques they use in the production and distribution of their media content, text or products.

Secondly, media education aims at increasing students' <u>understanding</u> and <u>enjoyment</u> of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how hey are organized, and how they construct reality. Lastly, media education's other main objective is equipping students to be able to produce media content or product themselves; for example, news broadcast, newspaper stories and video productions.

Definition II: Media literacy enables us to (i) _access_, _analyse, evaluate_ and _create_, (ii) _messages_ in a variety of media forms. Again it helps us to (iii) build an understanding of the _role of the media_ in the society, and also provides us with the (iv) essential skills of enquiry (questioning) and self-expression that can make us (citizens) participate meaningfully in the development and growth of our democratic process.

Media literacy education is necessary in the 21st Century. In this era when we are inundated with all kinds and modes of communications media technologies and messages, the wisest response is to be literate in media use and consumption.

Definition III: To understand the definition by _Wikipedia_ better let us analyse the literary meaning in the context of the key operative words.
- _Access:_ It means 'the ability to reach and use the media.'
- _Analyse:_ 'The ability to examine the nature and structure of the media (and its content or products), especially by separating these into parts, components or units, in order to fully understand or examine them.'
- _Evaluate:_ This means 'the ability to form a reasonable opinion of the value or quality of the media and their content, after carefully thinking or reflecting on their nature, structure and/or output.'
- _Use:_ It is 'the ability to effectively and profitably make good use of the media for the desired purpose or enjoyment.'
- _Critical Thinking and Appreciation:_ This implies 'the ability to make fair but careful judgements about the strengths and weaknesses, benefits and risks, as well as the good and bad qualities of the media and their content or products.' Lack of critical thinking may lead to naive and ineffective use of the media's full potential. In the end, one becomes vulnerable to media exploitation and 'misuse', and thus gullibly accepting – hook, line and sinker – the nature, structure and content of the media.
- _Discourse and Discovery:_ Critical thinking and appreciation are applicable to 'discourse and discovery.' Just like the media creators and producers, the

consumer or user has an equal obligation to ensure that quality standards, in terms of the professionalism and media content, are attained. This calls for discourse; an informed discussion and input necessary for realizing quality standards. The mass media ideally offers the citizenry the platform to contribute to discussions on issues affecting their personal well being and the general good of society. On the other hand, where there are biases, misrepresentations and the violation or abuse of human and communication rights, it takes discourse – in speech or in writing – to seek redress; put the records straight to help entrench the values of responsible journalism and communication rights.

Discovery here refers to the practical knowledge and experience related to media production and distribution processes. Media education offers students the hands on opportunity to create and/or produce their own media content and distribute these to their target audiences. This learning process helps students to understand and appreciate how the media constructs reality and to distinguish between content reality and fantasy, and separate fact from fiction, as they are expressed in the various media forms – newspaper, magazine, radio, TV, film, Internet, video games/music, etc.

IMPACT OF THE POP MEDIA ON CHILDREN

Media literacy education has been in existence over the past 30 years or more, in the advanced countries. In Africa this is virtually non-existent, hence the uncontrolled and gullible consumption of media by children. We cannot agree more with the saying that, *'today's children are brought up on a diet of television cartoons and soap operas.'*

1. TELEVISION
The following presentation on the impact of television on Canadian children is applicable to Ghanaian children as well.[1]

I. Excessive TV Viewing: Children and youth watch excessive amounts of television, and the effects of too much contact and time with television include the following:

1. Watching violent television programmes can lead to an increase in violent behaviour by children.
2. Excessive television watching contributes to childhood obesity.
3. Excessive television viewing may have a harmful effect on a child's learning and academic performance.
4. Watching certain programmes may encourage irresponsible sexual behaviour.
5. Television is an effective channel for advertising products to children.

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[1] The Canadian Paediatrics Society's website www.cps.ca/Englixh has a lot of material on how the various media affect our health and social well-being,

6. The average child (Canadian) watches nearly 14 hours of television every week, and by the time he or she completes high (senior secondary) school, he/she would have spent more time watching television than in the classroom.
7. Television viewing frequently limits children's time for vital activities such as *playing, reading, learning to talk, spending time with peers and family, storytelling, participating in a regular exercise and developing other critical physical, mental and social skills.*

II. Learning through the TV Medium: While television offers children variety of educational and entertainment programmes, its excessive viewing can affect the academic performance of the children.

8. Television is and can be a powerful teacher. Children and youth can learn a lot from TV programmes. Well-designed educational programmes are considered as "powerful pro-social teaching devices." Some of the television stations in Ghana do broadcast special 'TV classroom' educational programmes for the benefit of students (children and youth).
9. Aside their educational and entertainment values that may help improve the reading and learning skills of viewers, watching television takes away the precious time that children should spend on say, reading and school work.
10. One hour or at most two hours of daily unsupervised television viewing by school children may have a negative effect on their academic performance, particularly, their course-related reading.

III. Violence Through Television: One of the alarming consequences of TV watching is *violence*, as the following evidence illustrate.

11. Studies have shown that the amount of violence on television is on the increase. Thus, the average child watches about 12,000 violent actions on television every year. This includes the portrayal of murder and rape scenes.
12. More studies do concur that exposure to heavy doses of television violence increases aggressive behaviour, especially in boys.
13. Among the category of children who may be vulnerable to television violence are the following:
    - Children from minority and immigrant groups
    - Emotionally disturbed children
    - Children who are abused by their parents, and
    - Children in families in distress.
14. Parents, teachers, physicians and other child workers who may come across children with a history of aggressive behaviours should not hesitate to inquire about their exposure to media violence, particularly via television.

IV. Food and Nutrition Through Television: Studies prove that advertising and marketing agencies have found the television medium an effective source for promoting their products and services, but often at the expense of the health of the media consumers, particularly children and youth.

15. Most children who watch a lot of television programmes are physically unfit. The programmes take their time away from play, physical exercises and such activities. These children are more likely to eat high fatty foods.
16. Television viewing contributes greatly to obesity (fatness). There is the suggestion that the fat content of most of the advertised products exceeds the recommended dietary and nutritional requirements, and that several of the foods have high calorie value.
17. The number of hours spent on television viewing corresponds with an increased relative-risk of higher cholesterol levels in children.
18. Eating meals while watching television should be discouraged since this may lead to less meaningful communication and poor eating habits.

V. Sexuality Through Television: Television viewing influences the perception and attitude of children and youth towards sex and sexual behaviour. Studies have shown that:

19. Television has become the leading sex educator today.
20. The medium exposes children to adult sexual behaviours in ways that portray the actions as normal and risk-free. Again, it sends the message that because these behaviours are frequently shown in the media mean, "everybody does it".
21. Television portrays sex between unmarried partners 24 times more often than sex between spouses. Meanwhile, the risks of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy are not given much publicity in the media.

VI. Alcohol and Smoking Through Television:

22. Breweries in Ghana and abroad spend millions of cash on advertising each year. Television is a viable medium for alcoholic beverage advertisements – whether in Europe, the Americas or in Africa.
23. In Ghana, the four television stations, Ghana Television (GTV), TV3, Metro TV, and TV Africa, all make money from alcohol commercials. All day-long, commercials on various kinds of beer, local schnapps and gin, including alcoholic beverages said to contain herbal medicinal properties are shown. These commercials often abruptly interrupt prime-time programmes such as soccer, boxing, soap operas and news broadcast. Why because more people watch these programmes?
24. Each year teenagers, for example, see between 1000 and 2000 beer commercials that carry the message that *'real men drink beer'.*
25. Advertising increases beer (and other hyped up alcoholic products) consumption. However, in a country like Sweden, the ban on alcohol advertising has led to a decline in alcohol consumption.
26. Even though tobacco products are not advertised directly on television in Canada and many other countries, including Ghana, however, passive promotion takes place when for example, movie or soap opera stars portray cigarette use.
27. Television may not be the only means where children learn about tobacco and alcohol use. Many of the G-rated animated feature films available on video cassette, DVD, and CD, as well as many music videos, depict alcohol and tobacco

use as normative behaviour. Most of these media products do not convey messages on the long-term effects of alcohol and tobacco use.

VII.   Advertising via Television: Advertising *per se* may contribute to behavioural changes and product choices, yet the negative effects of unwholesome, below standard and unacceptable products seem to outweigh these advantages. The following points illustrate this further:

28. Advertising can have positive effects on children's behaviour. For example, some alcohol manufacturers spend about 10% of their budget on advertisements that warn about the dangers of drinking and driving.
29. Studies have shown that the developmental stage of a child plays a role in the effect of TV commercials. For instance, young children tend to believe what they are told, and even assume that they are being deprived, if parents fail to procure them the advertised products.
30. Most pre-school children do not understand the difference between a programme designed to entertain and a commercial meant to sell. According to a study, children under the age of 8 years are mentally unable to understand the difference between advertising and regular programming.
31. Every year, the average child watches more than 20,000 commercials and more than 60% of these commercials promote sugared cereals, candy, fatty foods and toys.

2. VIDEO GAMES

Video Game ranks next to television and films as the media that attract children and teenagers most. Without parental control or supervision, children may play video games for hours at the peril of their academic work. Video or computer game is considered as one of the dangerous media that impact negatively on children.

Children can play video or computer games at home, Internet café or at a video-viewing centre. Most video/computer games have been designed to specifically resolve 'conflicts', or manage sticky situations or scenarios. Here, the viewer is an active participant whose duty is to stimulate the actions of the opposing sides by pressing buttons or triggering remote controls to set the animated characters in motion.

'Role playing', they say, 'is a practical way of stimulating life experiences or situations.' Thus, as the players engage in the games they acquire positive or negative behaviours and attitudes.

Positive Impact: Studies have shown that non-violent and edutainment video games help the players to:

1. Develop fine motor (mental or cognitive) skills and coordination capabilities.
2. Improve their manual dexterity and computer literacy.
3. Enjoy a more 'realistic' virtual playing experience as the ever-improving new technology provides better graphics for that.

Negative Effects: Many studies have corroborated the devastating effects of video games on children and adolescent youth. Let us consider the following conclusions on the negative effects of videos.

1. That, excessive exposure to video games results in the similar negative effects of television viewing, viz. inactivity, asocial behaviour and violence.
2. That, violence-prone video games cause harmful effects on children's mental development.
3. That, many video games that have been classified as safe and suitable for all audiences, have been found to contain enormous doses of violence.

4. That, several studies concur with the assertion that video games, especially those dosed with violent content, contribute adversely to the aggressive behaviour of teenage youth.
5. That, one of the contributory factors to an increase in aggressive behaviour is the amount of time children are allowed to play video games.
6. That, majority of teenagers interviewed admitted that their parents 'do not impose a time limit' on the number of hours they are allowed to play video games. Furthermore, most parents and guardians, are not aware of the content of the games their children play.
7. That, adolescent girls play video games for an average of 5 hours a week whereas boys use an average of 13 hours a week.
8. That, teenagers who play violent video games for extended periods of time manifest the following behaviours:
   - Tend to be more aggressive
   - Are more prone to confrontation with their teachers
   - May engage in fights with their peers.
   - See a decline in school performance.
9. That, aggressive behaviours can also be linked to the way video game players are rewarded for their simulated violent acts. Unlike the viewing of television programmes or movies where the viewer is passive, in video games, the players 'become active participants in the game's script'. Here, the player benefits when he engages in acts of violence to overcome an opposing force, and it is only through this that the player can move to the next level of the game.
10. That, playing video games may increase aggressive behaviour because '*violent acts are continually repeated throughout the game*'. (Repetition is an 'effective teaching method in reinforcing learning pattern'.)
11. That, video games inspire the 'players to identify with and role play (imitate) their favourite characters'. And that after playing violent video games for a period of time the player can "automatically prime aggressive thoughts" (i.e. the mind automatically fixes the scenes of aggression; only waiting for an opportune time to explode or demonstrate the acts he has learned against someone or group of people.)

12. That, players with prior experience of playing violent video games would respond with an 'increased level of aggression' when they encounter confrontation.
13. That, a recent study by a German Psychologist, Ralf Thalemann, revealed that, *"Brain reactions of people who play computer games excessively are similar to those of alcoholics or cannabis addicts."* And that stimulation from excessive playing of computer games can cause an increased release of *dopamine* into a <u>player's brain</u>, which produces a <u>sensation of well-being</u> that can eventually create an "addiction". That, this might occur in over 10% of those who play video games.

3. MUSIC VIDEOS

Young people can lock themselves up in their apartments or living rooms just to enjoy music videos for hours. Of late, what they have been watching, mimicking and practically demonstrating have come under public scrutiny. Several features of the current pop music culture seem to be distasteful and culturally unacceptable. In view of the fact that children are keen in mimicking anything attractive and pleasant, parents and teachers should be on the alert; actively helping to prune the negative characteristics of youth pop music.

Negative Influence Of Music Videos:
Some of the negative features of hip-life and other mundane music videos are:

1. Most of the hip-life songs are cast around perceived aggression, militancy, masculinity and power. 'Gangsta rap' is one of the parents of African hip-life music. Its characteristics include the 'use of words or lyrics that are usually aggressive and critical of women'.
2. Almost all the lyrics (the words) of hip-life music contain some amount of profane and vulgar language.
3. Some of the artistes perform indecent dances and floorshow coupled with gestures that are morally unacceptable and distasteful.
4. Some of the artistes appear in near nude and sexy dresses that may offend the sensibilities of the viewers. Unfortunately, women have been mostly used as the support artistes who dress distastefully and provide side attractions such as scintillating floorshow, sexy dances and erotic gestures.
5. The central theme of most hip-life songs is woven around romance, sex, stereotyping of women, aggression and 'man-power'.
6. Other research studies concluded thus:
    i. That, most teenagers who view music videos are likely to approve of pre-marital sex.
    ii. That, up to 75% of the videos contains sexually explicit material.
    iii. That, more than half of the music videos portrays violence that is often committed against women.
    iv. That, the videos often portray women in a condescending manner (that is, in a manner that suggest that men are more important and

play key roles than women). This expression of male chauvinism is likely to affect children's attitudes in respect of sex roles.

v. That, the attractive role models (music artistes) are the main aggressors in more than 80% of music video violence.

4. ANIMATED CARTOONS

What seem to children and their families as sheer entertainment shows are considered to be rather teaching the kids how to kill and commit other crimes. Cartoon producers in the USA or Japan generally aim at reaching children as their main consumers. Television stations frequently broadcast cartoon programmes targeting children, particularly after the kids have returned from school. Most of the time slots during Saturdays and sometimes Sunday mornings are mostly geared at 'entertaining' children with wrestling shows, war films and cartoons, but these products end up negatively affecting the psychosocial and behavioural development of young people.

i. Violent Features: Conflicts and aggressive actions are the characteristics of most animated cartoons that children watch. The negative features include:

1. *Fighting and Confrontation:* To most of us it is funny to see animated images engaged in fighting and other physical confrontations. Constant fighting and the display of power and strength are perceived as the hallmark of the 'best cartoons'. If fists do not fly, no fighting or arguing then it is not worth watching!

2. *Weapons are Displayed:* Cartoons which contents are conflict-oriented, depict different types of weapons. Knives, swords, axes, and variety of guns – pistols, machine guns and rifles – are common weapons used in resolving conflicts. Armoured vehicles and bombs are also often depicted.

3. *Explosion and Destruction:* Explosions and destructions resulting in the loss of life and property are common features of violent cartoons. Buildings and other installations or structures are made to explode or destroyed.

4. *Villains Must Die:* The approach commonly adopted for resolving conflicts is largely the killing or elimination of 'enemies' or 'bad characters' in the show. The mind-set of most audience is to see the villains (wicked or bad characters) die. Fist or hand blows and weapons are normally used to accomplish this feat.

5. *Applauding 'War' Heroes:* Cartoon viewers would applaud characters that are able to surmount or overcome difficult hurdles. Hero figures are adored especially when they are able to kill or eliminate their foes.

6. *Foul Language and Offensive Scenes:* Some animated cartoons contain foul language. Studies have revealed that 'evil' words are frequently used in reference to certain characters in the anime. The words used include, 'wicked, notorious, devil, monster, evil and crazy' and they are used mainly to 'demonize' the villains in the drama. A few other cartoons contain subtle pornographic contents that depict erotic scenes and language. Most of these products are packaged under the guise of 'more tame and decent series' and both children

and adults gullibly consume them. Children can also popularise 'catch-phrases' that emanate from televised shows, including Cartoons.

ii. Negative Consequences: The repercussions of excessive viewing of violent cartoons may be similar to those of violent video games. These include:

1. *Emulating the Heroes:* Children, mostly boys, would generally want to imitate the heroes in a drama, and hoping to emulate or put into practice some of their heroic tactics. It is more dangerous if they emulate 'violent heroes' who have used aggressive means, including killings and destruction, to resolve conflicts.
2. *Mimicking Roles:* The mimicry talent in children may cause them to easily put into practice whatever scenes they have experienced, whether good or bad. And at the least opportunity they would want to display the violent methods learnt in resolving conflicts or disagreements. Deviant kids would go to the extent of demonstrating the violent means used in the shows to perpetuate evil.
3. *Cumulative Effects on Children:* With time children may "show increased aggression from watching violent television if they believe the violence reflects real life, if they identify with a violent hero (as boys often do), or if they engage in aggressive fantasies." The short-term or long-term effects of violent animation may contribute to social vices such as *crime, aggressive behaviour, fighting and rowdy riots*.
4. *Demonizing Perceived 'Enemies' and 'Bad' People:* Studies have revealed that children who are 'repeatedly exposed to popular animated movies and cartoons' end up learning to demonize people they perceive to be their enemies or who are demonstrating what they consider as 'bad' behaviours.
5. *War Toys and other Merchandise:* Children who have watched violent anime in which military accoutrements or war machinery have been displayed may be attracted to replica or toy models of such materials. Parents may not find any harm in procuring toy guns and armoured cars for their children to play with, when indeed, the kids may not just be playing but learning how to commit crimes such as murder, armed robbery and other forms of aggression.

5. THE INTERNET

Children and youth constitute the mass of Internet users. Everyday a vast number of people (both children and adults) worldwide log unto the Internet to take advantage of the following services:

- Send E-mail (electronic mail) to a specific people or target audience.
- Post special messages on the electronic bulletin boards.
- Enter 'chat rooms' where they engage in interactive conversations based on a particular topic.
- Play computer games.
- Download information, images, or software that other users have made available on the 'worldwide computer network'.

What make the Internet more unique, thus having the edge over the other communication media, are these two main benefits:
- Accessing or transmitting of information is done in real time; that is, information is sent or accessed instantaneously (i.e. happening immediately).
- One has access to a myriad of references and database resources on-line which cover a wide range of valuable information on different subjects and topics.

Internet's Impact On Children:
1. The Internet has great potential for providing children and youth with access to a vast educational information, which may be compared to a huge home library. In Canada for example, the youth claim that 'the Internet is a defining part of their culture and an integral part of their daily lives.'
2. The Internet, however, lacks the necessary editorial standards, thus making its credibility as a source of information limited. Computer on-line or Internet services are carried through 'uncontrolled wire network' better known as the 'information super highway'. And since no particular entity or body is in charge of the network, you cannot trust all the information you access.

3. On the new media's impact on children, studies show that:
    - (i) The amount of time a child spends watching television or sitting in front of a computer screen can affect his/her *postural development* (that is, the way one holds one's body when sitting or standing).
    - (ii) Excessive amounts of time spent using the computer can contribute to obesity (putting on weight), undeveloped social skills and an addictive behaviour.
    - (iii) Some of the children with seizure disorders (a form of epilepsy) are more prone to attacks as a result of the flickering television or computer screen.
    - (iv) Children who are closely exposed to a computer screen may experience a weakness of the eyes.
    - (v) Paedophiles (people who are sexually attracted to children) use the Internet to lure and seduce unsuspecting and gullible children into relationships.
    - (vi) Children can be exposed to pornographic materials when using the Internet.
    - (vii) Children from African societies, who use the Internet, are likely to be exposed to unacceptable foreign cultures, values and worldviews.
    - (viii) Many African youth are not taking advantage of the full potential of the computer on-line network to enhance their education or professional career. Regrettably, most of them are using the Internet for excessive entertainments and pleasure. They use the medium for computer games, for impersonation and duping of on-line 'suitors' and business people.

(ix)   In Accra and Tema, some of the children operate an Internet fraud known as "sakawa". It is an on-line dubious means of acquiring or stealing people's credit cards to pay for services or goods.

Summary Of The Benefits And Dangers:

I. Benefits of the Internet

1. The Internet has a near limitless stock of information resource. It offers a huge electronic databases and information services that students can access.
2. It provides a wide variety of resources such as databases of reference material, and electronic bulletin boards that students can access, and post messages for other users around the world who may be interested.
3. The Internet offers 'chat room' services where students can communicate live with another person in 'real time'.
4. The computer on-line network is a great asset to anyone who wants to enhance his/her academic performance or research work.
5. It is also a vital communication tool for teachers and professors who want to link with their students, or vice versa.
6. The Internet enables its users to have an easy, rapid and inexpensive communication with other people via e-mail and audio-visual linkages.
7. It offers children, youth and adults with a variety of entertainment sources.

II. General Risks of Internet Use

i.   Because of its interactive nature, the Internet is likely to be used for excessive periods of time, which may lead to a state of 'internet addiction' (i.e. when one cannot do without or stop using the Internet).

ii.   The 'internet use disorder' (also referred to as 'internet addiction disorder'), is a known problem among adult users but likely to afflict children the more because they use the Internet for an unlimited time.

iii.   The desire of or the pressure on users to send instant messages or e-mails, is likely to interfere with their legitimate work at the workplace, or completing a school assignment.

iv.   Like the impact of television viewing, an excessive time spent on the Internet may interfere with the normal socialization between a child and his/her peers, and a child and his/her family.

v.   Inactivity and obesity can be fostered by excessive use of the Internet.

III. Specific Risks of Internet Use

These include:

(a) Misinformation

1. The Internet lacks a credible entity responsible for monitoring or verifying the appropriateness or accuracy of the information posted.

2. Thus, there are incorrect information on food, drinks and medicine, which are most likely to cause health problems to consumers.
3. The Internet may foster inappropriate ideas or perception in children and teenagers. For example:
    (i) Generating a strong sense of need to acquire material goods.
    (ii) False advertising or scams that are typically spread via e-mail.
    (iii) Temptation to acquire or steal credit cards to pay for on-line services or goods. The practice is referred to as 'Sakawa' in Ghana.

(b) The Effect on Cultural and Moral Values

1. Children and teenagers are prone to acquire alien cultural beliefs, worldviews, fashion taste and lifestyles.
2. Children, either by design or accident, are accessing pornographic websites where they consume a lot of materials that are inimical to their growth and development.
3. Paedophiles and sexual predators prey on under-aged children via chat room and e-mail communication. For instance, a recent survey among Dutch Internet users aged 12 to 20 who had visited a so-called 'profile sites' while using a webcam revealed: "40% of the boys and 57% of the girls reported having been asked to take off (their) clothes or perform some sexual act in front of the webcam."
4. Young people are attracted or seduced into on-line gambling. Addicted gamblers, who are short of money, may be compelled to steal.
5. Lazy and unscrupulous students plagiarize other people's work for their schoolwork without giving due credit to the source of information. Copying and using other authors and publisher's materials without acknowledging them is a breach of copyright law.
6. People who promote hatred or violence against specific individuals or group of people have abused the uncontrolled 'wire network'. Their targets may include, women, perceived socio-political 'enemies', and ethnic and religious groups.
7. School bullies, community mob or gangs also use the Internet for insulting, ridiculing, stigmatizing and spreading hatred and violence.
8. Unsupervised computer games have exposed children to violence and aggression, profane and vulgar lyrics.
9. Several African children have become preys and victims of what is referred to as 'SOB', meaning, 'Sexually Oriented Business.' It is an on-line exchange or viewing of pornographic materials, erotic messages and virtual promiscuity, mostly between 'on-line strangers – sex predators and paedophiles – and unsuspecting and gullible children.

CONCLUSION

In light of the threats that the Internet, TV/movies, video games, music videos and animated cartoon pose, it is important to create media awareness among young people. It is also critical that parents, guardians and teachers, among others, are empowered to help our children and teenagers use the media effectively and profitably.