

# Getting a clear picture: participative media education as a tool for improving the status of children<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper discusses the role of the media image of the children in creating and maintaining their low status in society, as well as participative media education as a way of improving the status of children, potentially benefiting both children and society. Results from the empirical study that was done in Serbia in 2001 were presented, and they indicated low visibility of children in media contents for adults, as well as portraying children mostly as passive, whether as an objects of adults' protection and care or as an actual victims. Besides raising awareness and training of journalists, an important contribution to improving the way children are presented in the media would be made by their own participation.*

*The effect of participatory media education is twofold: a) it supports cognitive and social development and affects the way children perceive themselves and b) it affects the way adults perceive children – the image of an active, capable and responsible child makes the solid ground for changing the relevant policies in order to improve the status of children in the society.*

**Key words:** media, image of the child, participatory media education

## **1. Introduction**

*The unsatisfactory images of children in the media can be improved by media education, but above all by media education that succeeds in bridging the gap to the media, that is, media education that also involves children's participation in the media and in the society. With that, some progress towards more worthy media representations of children, as well as to increased democracy, could be made (Cecilia Von Feilitzen, 1999).*

The quoted words of Cecilia Von Feilitzen highlight three very important points concerning the status of children: a) children have a low status in society; b) media play

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an important role in creating and maintaining such status; *and c)* participative media education can become a very important way of improving the status of children, potentially benefiting both children and society.

Low status of children is a product of the oppression that is reflected in attitudes/relations adults have toward children, which are characterized by paternalism, control and marginalisation (Qvortrup, 1998). Children are marginalised and almost invisible group all over the world, with little or no power at all, completely dependent on adults' care and protection. A very important role in maintaining the system of oppression is played by the media, which portray children as marginalised and hardly visible. The media, and especially television, are a very powerful tool by which a dominant group (adults) can project its particular way of seeing reality. Indeed, this projection is so successful that it is accepted as common sense (internalized domination), so much so that even those who are in fact disempowered by it (children) accept it as a part of natural order (internalized oppression). Media reflect basic social and cultural guidelines, such as philosophies of life, definitions of the good, normal, health, deviance, that are embedded in the networks of social and political control that Foucault (1977) called "*regimes of truth*". Regimes of truth operate to legitimize what can be said, who has the authority to speak, and what is sanctioned as true, often serving the primary function of providing individuals and institutions with the justification for social oppression. Oppression operates through everyday practices that do not question those underlying assumptions but take them for granted as the only possible truths. Those oppressive practices supported by the media can sometimes be very visible and explicit (such as explicit violation of the right of the child to express his/her opinion freely) and supported by explicit oppressive attitudes ("children are not mature enough to have their opinions expressed in public"). Sometimes they can be manifested through less obvious and very subtle forms (not informing children about some issues that concern them), supported by attitudes that are not explicitly discriminatory since they usually have a form of protection of the best interest of the child ("children should be protected from information that can affect their carefree childhood"). Image of the child presented in media thus becomes a very important part of the *regimes of truth* and serves as justification of different forms of marginalisation of children both on individual and institutional level.

One important mechanism for challenging oppression, according to Freire (1996), is to make visible and vocal the underlying assumptions that produce and reproduce structures of domination so that we can collectively begin to imagine alternative possibilities to organize social life. Participative media education is one important way of deconstructing the image of children that inevitably leads to a change of public opinion/attitude that would include both adults and children themselves, and that has important benefits for child development.

## 2. The image of the child in the media

The prevalent source of adults' information about children is the image of the child and childhood presented in the media. By finding out how often, and in which way, the child is present in the media contents intended for adults, it is possible to gain insight into perhaps the most important mechanism that shapes the *public opinion on children*. The key issue regarding public opinion is its influence on decision makers – parents and other adults directly dealing with children, as well as the governments and their

institutions. As a rule, the creation and implementation of state policies on children – in the fields of education, health and social care, but also economy, justice and information, and even security, defence and foreign affairs – are carried out in consultation with the relevant experts. Children's perspectives on themselves and the world they live in are hardly ever a part of this process. As setting priorities and putting children on social and political agendas are by no means independent of public opinion, there is no doubt that the media are the single most influential factor affecting it. Therefore, giving the children a voice in the media may well serve a very important function: that of cultivating an image of the child as an active agent in his/her own life, which may lead to gradual re-shaping of public opinion on children. Such a change of public opinion would then contribute to re-shaping the social and political agendas and policies related to children.

Media researchers recognize the importance of the role of the media in shaping the public opinion as well as their influence on setting social priorities concerning children. Dale Kunkel and Stacy Smith emphasize that "How any nation conceptualizes childhood, how it perceives or stereotypes its youth in terms of their patterns of behavior, how it treats its children in terms of laws to protect them and policies to benefit them, all depend upon how children are viewed by the nation's citizens. Certainly all of these factors are influenced by the information that people have about children, and one of the primary sources of such information is the news media" (Kunkel & Smith, 1999, p. 79).

Although recognized as an important issue, the image of the child in the media relatively rarely becomes a research topic. One such empirical study was done in Serbia in 2001 (Korac & Vranjesevic, 2003; 2006). Looking at *how often* and *in which way* the child is presented in the media contents intended for adults provided a basis for analyzing the ways in which this image can guide and shape the public opinion on children. This analysis also aimed to illuminate the mechanism of informing political decisions concerning children.

The best known research of the media image of different social groups, including children, is George Gerbner's Cultural Indicators Project. The most important findings of this 30-year study are those concerning *visibility* of different social groups in the media: those with less power and influence are underrepresented in the media, thus *cultivating* a corresponding public image and contributing to maintaining such social status. In other words – media do not only *reflect*, but also *maintain* the existing structure of social power (Gerbner *et al.*, 1993). The striking consistency of these findings during a period of thirty years clearly indicates that the image of the world shown on television is incomplete and biased, reflecting the social hierarchy as well as the relative importance of different social groups, thus leaving an open door to all sorts of manipulation and abuse.

The scarce empirical research on the image of the child in the media (Gerbner, 1999; Kunkel & Smith, 1999; "Kids these days...", 1999), in spite of the large differences in methodology and focus, indicates the following common features:

- low visibility;
- presenting children in predominantly negative contexts, either as vulnerable and helpless or as problematic and dangerous;
- superficial and sensationalist approach;
- using the child as a means for drawing attention or attaching importance to other themes;
- implicit or explicit judgmental attitude towards children, exclusively based on adult standards;

- stereotyped, often black-and-white portrayal (angels or devils), including prejudice against today's children due to lack of knowledge and fear of novelty;
- insensitivity to children's developmental, individual and other characteristics and needs.

### 3. Children in the Serbian media: A roughly mapped Terra Incognita

Visibility of children in Serbian media (Korac & Vranjesevic, 2003; 2006) - measured by the percentage of time dedicated to them (for radio and TV programs) and the frequency of child related themes on front pages, as well as the length of texts (for the press) - compared to the percentage of their actual presence in the population - is astoundingly low. With the addition of other indicators of visibility - the rating and scheduling (timing) of radio and TV programs mentioning children, as well as positioning of child related texts on the page, and the function of pictures of children in printed media - the invisibility of children becomes even more conspicuous. Compared to the findings of similar studies in other countries, which themselves found very low visibility of children, in Serbian media it was even lower.

Visibility, according to Gerbner, is an indicator of the importance attached to a given group in a society. The findings that additionally emphasize the disconcertingly small significance attached to children in Serbian society is the fact that the notion of the child tends to be quite generalized and undifferentiated in terms of age, sex and social status. Such generalized and undifferentiated portrayal of children indicates a superficial approach, quite uncommon for themes regarded as important. The single finding in this study that is seemingly encouraging is related to demographic indicators - the presence of boys and girls tends to be equal in all three media. However, the sad truth is that it reveals their *equality in invisibility*, i.e., in insignificance and marginal status. In Serbian media, therefore, the child is hardly visible. When visible, the image is rather blurred. When the picture clears, it reveals a depressing sight. In all three media the child is portrayed as, above all, *passive*, whether as an object of adults' protection and care, or as an actual or potential victim. Within the passive category, the child is most frequently portrayed as *endangered and/or victimized*, or as an *object of adults' protection and care*. In all three media *active* children are much less present and such portrayals are usually associated with the context of play and entertainment - successful children and even children as perpetrators of violence, are rarely seen. Perhaps the most indicative finding related to the active category is that the *proactive* child - a child presented as an autonomous agent of his/her own life and the life of his/her family and community, as someone who, in accordance with his/her developmental level and individual abilities, assumes responsibility and makes decisions, initiates actions and carries them out successfully - is virtually nonexistent. These findings should be supplemented with data showing how often children's voices are heard in the media. In relation to the total number of analyzed units for each medium, children's statements appear most frequently on television - in 16% of cases, in only 3% in the press, and in one single case on the radio. These data show that children are the least likely of all people to be asked about anything - as if it is implied that, exactly because they are portrayed as passive, endangered and helpless, they have nothing to say and therefore cannot be included in decision making on matters concerning them. Even when they are asked about something, it is usually for the sake of mere "decoration".

Finally, the study shows that children's rights are practically not mentioned at all. In this regard, an interesting and indicative paradox was noticed: while the child is presented as a (potentially and actually) endangered member of the society, neither his/her rights nor the document regulating them are mentioned! We believe that this indicates an important feature of adults' attitude towards children: what is not only declaratively recognized, but also legally regulated, is neither perceived as a *right* nor (automatically) recognized as a *responsibility* of adults (from parents to the highest state bodies and institutions), but is rather seen as a matter of their benevolence and kindness. Furthermore, media provide an excellent opportunity for adults to, while allegedly speaking of children, actually speak of themselves: by creating a picture of an endangered and passive child, they are painting an idealized picture of themselves as kind and caring guardians and rescuers.

To sum up, the findings of the Serbian study show that, if an ID of the child were to be based solely on the portrayal in the media, it would look like this:

**THE CHILD IS A MEMBER OF A RARE, HELPLESS AND RATHER ENDANGERED SPECIES. THE MEMBERS OF THAT SPECIES ARE MOSTLY OF INDEFINITE AGE, SEX AND SOCIAL STATUS. ALL THEY ARE CAPABLE AND FOND OF DOING IS TO PLAY AND HAVE FUN. APART FROM THAT, THERE IS LITTLE THEY CAN DO OR UNDERSTAND, AND EVEN LESS SAY. WE, ADULTS, ARE THERE TO PROTECT THEM FROM ALL RISKS AND DANGERS. THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT WE ARE DOING, AS FAR AS OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES PERMIT, BECAUSE WE ARE KIND, CONSIDERATE AND CARING.**

On the rare occasions when child related themes appear in media, they are essentially an opportunity for adults to boast of their good deeds or to complain of the conditions obstructing them, or both. If a child's picture or statement are accompanying the theme, they are usually there in the function of drawing attention to what adults are doing. This is not to say that it is done on purpose, but rather that it reflects an 'implicit philosophy of childhood' equally based on traditional conceptions and the striking ignorance concerning children.

The study has shown that the media are hardly helping adults to really get to know and understand children. Instead, just as Gerbner says (Gerbner et al, 1993), they are *reflecting* the already existing attitudes (based on the traditional 'implicit philosophy' and ignorance), thus reinforcing them and *maintaining* the existing structure of social power. However, by stressing the potential of the media to become an important *culturally enriching force* Gerbner implies that change in the way the media are used may reinforce the social and political change necessary for getting out of this vicious circle.

#### 4. Participatory media education: a way out of the vicious circle

A way out of this vicious circle is the same as the way out of many other vicious circles and is overlooked with equal ease: it is education. One day, maybe, knowing and understanding children and childhood, which is essential for the vast majority of inhabitants of this planet in their everyday lives, will become a part of regular education programs for adults. Until then, the media not only have the possibility, but also an

enormous responsibility, to undertake such an important task. Not only in strictly educational programs and contents (usually with low ratings), but also through a *systematic shaping of the public opinion on children*, which is mostly carried out through programs and contents reaching the widest audiences – above all, the news programs. In order to handle such an important task competently, the relevant awareness raising and training of journalists are necessary. The basis of this training would include elementary knowledge on children and childhood, as well as on children's rights, analogous to the knowledge required for a journalist to deal with any other theme, *e.g.*, economics, culture, or sport. Such knowledge is necessary in order to ensure adequate journalistic approach in the treatment of children and child related themes.

Besides raising awareness and training of journalists, coordinated with adequate media policy in this field, an important contribution to improving the way children are presented in the media would be made by their own participation. Local media provide good opportunities in this respect, which is the first step towards gaining space/time in national newspapers, radio and TV programs. Child participation in the media is naturally and strongly attached to media education projects. Such projects mainly involve adolescents and youth.

Media education of children and youth through various participatory projects became a trend in a number of countries, including the less developed ones. This kind of education is taking place in and out of schools (various local organizations, centres and clubs, NGOs), and is greatly facilitated by the availability of appropriate technology – especially its constantly becoming less expensive and more user friendly. These projects are often a part of widespread efforts to improve the lives and education to the children of marginalized groups. In teaching media literacy, they are aimed at training children to critically analyse media contents and messages, through active participation in creating them. One of the first such projects, Educational Video Centre (EVC), founded in 1984 in New York City, has been active for decades now. Their method, subsequently incorporated in a number of public schools curricula as well as in local community centres, used the process of documentary video production in teaching the children skills of researching, writing and reporting, in order to reinforce their critical and analytical skills, as well as abilities of creative expression. The quality of such training is documented by over a hundred national and international awards (including the prestigious *Emmy*) for the young authors, as well as by the fact that some of their documentaries were shown on the leading national TV stations (PBS, ABC, NBC & CNN). Outside the schools, a very similar approach has been used by the Downtown Community Television Centre (DCTV) and Global Action Project (GAP), both located in the poor, ethnically mixed areas of lower Manhattan. In all mentioned projects, the videos covered a wide range of issues faced by children and youth in big cities: from drug abuse, family violence, gender and ethnic issues, stereotypes and discrimination, police brutality, unemployment, local social policies and programs, to education, video games, or roller skating. In the more recent phases, the projects often include communicating with children from other parts of the world (South America, Northern Ireland, Russia, Israel and Palestinian territories), in the form of joint documentaries or video-letters.

In Serbia, projects of this kind are still rare and mutually isolated. One such project was initiated in early 2002, by the Child Rights Centre, Belgrade, in cooperation with the Children's Cultural Centre in Belgrade. *Children's Media Centre* was founded in order to teach children media literacy, focussing on (a) critical reception of media messages and

(b) acquiring basic knowledge and skills necessary for competent and effective use of the media to promote visibility and adequate presentation of children. The participants of this project were interested children (adolescents aged 13 to 19) from Belgrade central and suburban areas, the majority being female high school students. Standard group size was 20 children. Following a month (three afternoons per week) of introductory seminar on the social and technological features of different media (press, radio, TV and internet), the children discussed the possible topics for research and media presentation. After choosing the topic, the children formed subgroups according to their preference for the medium of presentation. In this way, subgroups cooperated in the research part and were able to share collected data and discuss the findings. After that, each subgroup dealt with presentation of the results in the chosen medium. It is important to note that after the introductory seminar, adult workshop leaders served as mere facilitators of the process, answering children's questions concerning research methodology and technical aspects of media presentations. The adults never interfered with the brainstorming and decision making process by which the research topics and media presentations were chosen. The first topic children chose to deal with were, at that time newly established, school parliaments. The results had shown that the majority of children found the levels of participation in them rather questionable, rarely transcending the third rung of Hart's (1992) ladder. The media presentations of the findings were quite interesting as well as critical, so that their joint presentation in the Children's Cultural Centre was followed by offers from several prominent media (including the leading national daily newspaper - which is considered to be rather conservative - and a very popular Belgrade city TV station) to publicize them. After this initial success, the next generations of participants (two groups each year) investigated the following topics: attitudes of young people toward gay population, religion, foreigners and the EU; street art, graffiti, music subcultures, street CD and textbook vendors, street violence, children without parental care and street children. These research findings were often quoted in daily and weekly newspapers, and sometimes on local radio and TV stations. It should be noted that what these media focussed and commented on were the research findings, not the researchers ('look at these nice kids doing something nice and useful instead of doing something bad or useless'). As psychologists, we believe that it is this kind of feedback that plays a very important role in bringing about the change of attitude towards children, not only in adults but also in children themselves.

These projects, as well as other numerous participatory media education projects from all over the world (Philippines, Brazil, Canada, China, Austria, Sweden, Greece, Poland, Germany, United Kingdom, Hungary, Czech Republic, Japan, Singapore, Ghana, Burkina Faso, India, Tanzania, Australia - cf. von Feilitzen & Carlsson, 1999) reveal the significance of connecting education to participation: children's participation in the media helps to bridge the gap between acquiring media literacy and participation in the lives of their communities. Enabling the children to critically understand the functioning and the products of the media, such participatory education projects also help them to get acquainted with the life and problems of their communities, stimulate them to effectively use their knowledge and abilities, thus strengthening their self-confidence, as well as their readiness to act in the direction of improving their own status. From a psychological perspective, this approach to media education could be expected to produce improvement in three important developmental areas:

- *Decentration*

Establishing and developing democratic values and institutions in a society requires, as a minimum condition on the part of the individual, what some psychologists termed *decentration*. Decentration basically refers to the ability of representing another point of view, as well as of coordinating it with one's own - something that younger children are typically incapable of. Accordingly, pre-schoolers, but also younger elementary school children, are said to be *egocentric*. Outgrowing/overcoming egocentrism is thus one of the critical processes in an individual's intellectual and social development. Enabling the individual to represent what other people see, think and feel, and to understand that they can have different needs, interests and desires, decentration certainly represents an extremely important factor in all aspects of social life. Decentration allows children to understand different perspectives, to coordinate them in order to be able to cooperate with others during the joint tasks. Decentration provides the ground for being realistic in estimation of one's own capacities/limits, as well as capacities and limits of others, and also for being able to estimate one's own best interest as well as the best interest of the whole group. Although it has been established that egocentrism is gradually overcome until the period of puberty and adolescence, i.e. that the child is first capable of taking into consideration the other person's perspective, then the perspective of several persons (multiple perspectives) and at finally (app. between 12 and 15 years of age) the perspective of the whole group, there is one special kind of egocentrism that is typical for adolescence (Elkind, 1967), provoked by the growing ability of the adolescent to consider different perspectives. Adolescents are incapable of separating other people's preoccupations and interests from their own: they tend to think that each person thinks about the same things as they do and that what is important for them must be of interest for others as well. Elkind uses the term *imaginary audience* to explain the process by which adolescents think that they are the centre of other people's attention: since the adolescent is preoccupied with his/her image and public self, he/she feels that these must be the others' main preoccupations as well.

Spontaneous outgrowing/overcoming of egocentrism (between 5 and 10 years age) is by no means sufficient for decentration to fully develop, i.e., to be integrated in the individual's intellectual and social functioning. Reappearance of egocentrism in adolescence illustrates the point that for this natural ability to be fully activated and used in both social and intellectual domain, adequate social stimulation/support is necessary. Participative media education provides opportunity for such social stimulation: by enabling the children to critically understand the functioning and the products of the media, by helping them to get acquainted with the life and problems of their communities, exposing them to different perspectives that might support their understanding of how one problem can look from different perspectives, by supporting cooperation between them and helping them to mutually experience their capacities/limits - such media education significantly supports decentration and critical attitude toward reality, that are the main features of responsible citizens in a democratic society.

- *Un-learning helplessness*

The notion of *learned helplessness* is used in psychology to explain the passive acceptance of all social conditions, without any attempt to do something to change them, even when the possibility of change exists. One of the most common arguments against the idea of child participation is that "young children are not interested in participation, so why impose those rights on them". This argument is reinforced through many



researches and practical examples that show failure of young people to participate, in spite of the given opportunities. When directly asked about their perspectives on participation, adolescents usually respond that they do not see themselves competent enough for decision making process (Brankovic, 1999) and they are willing to take responsibility for some minor decisions (going out, dress rules, friendships), but not for the decisions they consider as crucial for their future since they have long term implications (separation from parents, future career, life partner, political stance, joining different groups for protecting their interests, etc.). They think that they cannot make those decisions before formal maturity (18 years of age). Such results might lead to the conclusion that young people are not ready to make decisions (even when they are allowed to) and take responsibility for the long term and important decisions (Brankovic, 2000).

However, the argument that young people are not interested in participation, although reinforced through many researches, represent one social mechanism that is used (often unconsciously) among the members of the dominant group (adults) to justify discrimination of the marginalized group (children), usually known as “blaming the victim mechanism” (see Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007). It starts with the *identification of the problem* (“Young people are not interested in participation”) and then continues with *placing the cause of the problem into characteristics of the population affected by it* (“Young people are afraid of taking responsibility, they would like to have rights but without responsibility, they are immature, etc.”). Blaming young people for the lack of participation neglects the fact that during the process of growing up young people did not have the experience of speaking out, expressing opinions that are listened to and respected by adults and of taking part in decision making processes. The reason why young people claim that they are not interested in participation and that they are too immature for decision making process is that they did not have a chance to experience genuine participation. They did not have the experience of being active agents in the process of change because there was no one to show them and expose them to real participative experience, since neither their parents, nor teachers or other important adults had that experience during their childhood (Vranješević, 2004; 2012). Lack of participative experiences is solid ground for development of learned helplessness and it takes a lot of social effort, reinforcement and positive experiences for the person to realize that his/her actions might produce changes and that are worth trying.

One way of un-learning helplessness is through media education: by actively involving children in the process, by giving them specific tools to deal with problems they find significant (not the problems that adults find interesting from what they see as the perspective of children), by providing them the possibility to see the outcomes of their actions and to realize that they can make a difference and produce change, media education help them feel competent and in control, as well as to perceive themselves as (pro)active agents. Through participatory media education projects, children/young people gain experience of being listened to and respected and have the opportunity to make their own perspectives on themselves and the world they live in visible. This is closely connected to the development in the third area: sense of responsibility, i.e. internal locus of control.

- *Shifting locus of control – from external to internal*

Internal locus of control is very often mentioned as one the crucial competences for involvement of children in decision making process (Hart, 1997; Lansdown, 2005; Mortier, 1998). Persons with internal locus of control perceive their own capacities as

causes of different types of behaviour (failures or successes), rather than assigning it to others, i.e. different external circumstances. The shift from external to internal locus of control occurs gradually during the process of socialization, by learning to take responsibility for one's own feelings, thoughts and actions. This is a very important feature that distinguishes between a mature and immature person when it comes to ability to take part in decision making process. Capacity for cooperation and making decisions depends on the capacity to accept responsibility for one's own actions. Internal locus of control is usually associated with characteristics like high self-esteem and proactive attitude. By giving children the opportunity to own the project in a way that they are responsible for choosing the topics, the research methods, the medium and the way of presentation, participative media education helps them develop and strengthen the internal locus of control. The Child Rights Centre project of participative media education in Serbia is a good example of progress in child participation in terms of who controls the process, since it moves from *offered* to *protagonic* participation: as a result of the initial project, NGO YTA (Youth takes the action) was established. YTA was very active in cooperation with 'adult' media and included new members who were interested to become a part of it.

## 5. Bridging the gap

The effect of participatory media education is twofold: on one hand it supports cognitive and social development, by fostering development of decentration and critical attitude toward reality, self-esteem, proactive approach, sense of one's own agency, thus changing *children's perceptions of themselves*; on the other hand, it also affects *the way adults perceive children*. These two effects are inseparable and mutually reinforcing, since the way children see themselves is under great influence of how adults see them. The effect of *self-fulfilling prophecies* or *Pygmalion effect* (Rosental & Jacobson, 1968) is well known in psychology and it refers to the way in which the expectations adults have from children (even when they are quite implicit and subtle) make children behave accordingly.

If participatory media education helps children become visible as active, capable agents with specific perspectives on things around them, it might change their traditional public image. By allowing an alternative image to become visible - that of an active, capable and responsible child - media education may become a powerful tool for challenging and gradually deconstructing not only the traditional image of the child, but also the underlying assumptions that are taken for granted. The resulting emergence of the new image of the child should form solid ground for changing the relevant policies in order to allow for improving the status of children in the society.

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