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# Children and diversity in the media: What are we missing out?

## Abstract

Shrek, the frightening ogre of the swamp, yet dearly famous for children, falls in love with the pretty princess Fiona, who transforms into an ugly monster at night. Fiona, obsessed with her appearance, awaits anxiously to be saved and loved by Prince Charming and retain her daytime beauty, or else she will remain an ugly and unloved monster. There are some more children's movies that project the social reaction and rejection towards something or someone that is considered to be different than the norm. These images are mediated in various forms: be it films, cartoons, news, etc, thus creating citizens who are prone to exclude anything atypical, diverse, unusual. In any way, the selected information offered by the media affects people's familiarity with human diversity (Naficy & Gabriel 1993, O'Barr 1994 cited by Cortes 2000) as well as intensifies the social and cultural issues. Children receive their social construct mainly from information they receive from mass media, which helps them create models and define their understanding of the world. This information can be as simple as a cartoon or multi-layered as these movies, but it can have semantic and stereotypical nuances that are packed in an attractive way, presented as news or as entertainment, and offered as fact or fabrication. In a specific context, children tend to be prejudiced towards a different ethnic group (Teichman & Zafirir 2003, Cortes 2000) and this starts to demonstrate between the ages of 5-7 by socialising mostly with their similar peers and by rejecting all others who are different (Nesdale & Lambert 2007). Similarly, they react against those peers who show features that are deemed to be "abnormal" or atypical by the societal norms, such as colour, physical appearance or other differences such as speech disorders. Different studies have investigated the factors that affect this stereotypical behavior, but most stress the role of the media. This paper will take an interdisciplinary approach on literature in order to understand the volatility of children on media content and will try to identify some instances of Albanian media's contribution on creating biased perception on different social and cultural groups and explore the possible ways of educating children on diversity issues.

### Keywords:

Mediated images, cognitive knowledge, othering, gatekeepers

# Introduction

It should come as no surprise that children of today are more vulnerable to becoming prey to discrimination or stereotyping, because of features like size, shape, color, or any disability. One factor that could play into this increasing phenomenon of the othering of peers is the media content to which they are exposed.

This paper is going to explore the literature, by bringing an interdisciplinary approach, in order to give an overview and understanding of the processes that render humans to such behavior. Since the first attempt made to introduce media literacy in high schools, the process is still pending 10 years later, and children and youth are still vulnerable to every media production and with little understanding of its effects. However, the most disconcerting issue is that commercial media interests play a paramount role in determining media content and productions. Therefore, we will elaborate on some exemplary case studies of this last decade attesting to the role of the media in the way Albanian children form their attitudes and behave and we will also try and give some recommendations that can improve the situation in media.

## Literature review

Cognitive studies show that media content contributes highly to views and beliefs people hold, on issues like identity, attitudes towards racial and ethnic minorities and our attitudes about sexuality” (Berger, 2012, p. 14). It is this information selected and offered by the media, on which people base their knowledge on human diversity (Naficy & Gabriel 1993, O’Barr 1994 cited by Cortes 2000), and this happens subconsciously “even where we don’t expect it, even where we don’t want it, or even where we don’t realize it, (Cortes 2000, p 17). When this information is violent or fearful towards a specific category of persons, it is going to exert the same attitude in the real life. In line with this, researchers support that new movies and TV programmes containing violence can either push the envelope of violent content or attract attention because of their presumed “copy -cat” effects on some member of the audience (Sparks, Sparks & Sparks, 2009) where kids are included. Cortes (2000) suggests that subconscious learning from media, entertainment in particular, is stored until it is provoked by external stimuli, which, when perceived as dangerous, should, by definition, evoke fear. A related set of stimuli that typically evoke fear might be referred to as deformities and distortions, or familiar organisms in unfamiliar and unnatural forms (Cantor 2009, p 291). Organisms that have been mutilated as a result of injury could be considered to fall into this category and they are encountered in the form of realistic characters like dwarves, hunchbacks, and mutants (ibid). They are similar to real-life characters, but deviant from social norms in size, shape, skin colour, facial features, etc. In most cases, they are constructed as sources of fear for children and depicted as evil or are locked away. For the entertainment industry, “the depiction of events that either cause or threaten to cause great harm is the stock-in-trade” (Cantor 2009, p. 292), for which they are so successful. Experimental studies have proven that the perceived harm can lead children to avoid engaging with these persons who have these deformities, and in specific circumstances, when provoked by external stimuli, demonstrate an aggressive attitude towards them. Psychologist have proven that around the age of 5–7, many children demonstrate biased and prejudiced behaviours towards alien groups,

including those of ethnic and cultural identity (Teichman & Zafir, 2003, Cortes 2000) and they manifest it by showing preference and socializing with those close to their ethnical background and by refusing those who are different (Nesdale & Lambert 2007). The same behavior is manifested towards those people who have features or characteristics, be it physical or pathological, which are considered as 'abnormal' or 'atypical' by societal norms and depicted as such in the movies or shows. As such, violence, expulsion, disguise or fear towards the "different other" in physical appearance or difficulties in speech or else, activates limbic and neo-cortical system that prepare the organism for motor plans associated with either fight or flight (Murray et al., 2006). This is a neurophysiological reaction of the "old brain system", that may be essentially "preconscious" and have long term implications that extent well beyond the viewing period (ibid). This tendency, considered as the 'othering' of a human - which is to view or treat "other" groups or individuals as being inherently different from themselves, almost to the extent of foreign or alien beings - further divides groups of people and solidifies an individual's own behaviours and cultural characteristics (Canales, 2000).

The way in which children are exposed to any form of media content - depicting, however vaguely, deformations or deficiencies of characters - affect the subconscious mind of the child, creating perceptions that persist. Consistent and persistent exposure to a set of messages influence real-world social perception in such a way that the more the viewer watches the more they create a perception (Gerbner et.al, 2002, cited in Mastro, 2009, p 334) which, with repetition, make the viewer reflect those views. In this sense, watching response consequences delivered to deformed characters create schemas about the specific media model. These schemas or cognitive structures represent the knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, cited by Smith & Granados, 2009, p 349). Therefore, punishing characters with deformation or disabilities by locking them up in the castle or casting them away in the wild, much like Fiona, Shrek, or even Quasimodo, portrays a media model of exclusion or rejection, more likely to affect perception and behavior. As schemas form, information is judged as appropriate and subsequently as fitting (Huston 1993, cited in Smith and Granados, 2009, p 349). In this way, children learn about how the in-group members look, othering the rest who are different. As such, the beloved princess Fiona desperately waiting for Prince Charming to love and transform her to a beautiful princess, not the ugly ogre, is epic for conveying the message of beauty versus ugliness, or even fear from what is not the standard norm due to physical appearance, portraying it as the 'monster', 'ogre', 'beast', etc.

In line with this, come the perceived capabilities that we assigned these characters into. Because of this physical appearance, Quasimodo was punished to live up in the church bell tower and ring the bell, portraying also the capabilities linked to abnormality or deformity. This phenomenon is so strongly rooted to our collective memory that we are stunned and amazed when we encounter an achievement that, to the rest, might sound as normal. The invoked perception of incapacity with incapability affects the way we perceive the exclusion from the norm, reason for which the ability to do more than what we are used to believe is considered as be as exemplary. The tendency of media to report such examples within the frame of incapability, although explained as an attempt for acceptance and inclusion, in fact, creates peripheral cues that reinforce the pre-existing perception.

Matching characteristics of people with message content and/or frames creates a bewilderment of the audience, which might affect attitude. In the news environment, many have randomly heard or watched news articles stressing on mere achievements of individuals with limited capabilities as successes. Working as a students' mentor, I recall a case of a young journalist, who approached me suggesting to produce a podcast about a young paralyzed boy who is employed in one of the biggest telecommunications companies in Albania and simultaneously giving his expertise privately on IT matters. This is the same scenario we've seen in the movies, where the distorted character turns

out to be friendly, sensitive and gentle. Despite the fact that most children's movies, including the aforementioned ones, end up with the distorted character befriending the main character for whom the viewers are affectionate, still, cognitive studies report the persistent presence of fear towards the former due to the anticipation of empathy with the distress responses of the well-liked character (Cantor 2009, p 292). This points to the fact that people experience fear as a direct response to the fear expressed by others (ibid), reason for which the reaction towards these characters remains the same despite the 'happy ending'. On the other hand, for as long as cinematography depicts these characteristics as different from the norm, while understanding the way the human brain process and retains information, these portrayals would not feed the culture of diversity.

On the other hand, the mediated images of the 'different' and the tendency of naming them as such, encourages the disturbing phenomenon of 'bullying', against which campaigns are taking place.

Moreover, due to the invoked fear that these characters induce, the phenomenon of isolation or grouping takes place, which might be dangerous, for e.g., when individuals of the same identity group together.

## References to exemplary media cases

Psychologists support that children at a very early age consume media in large quantities. In Albania, a research conducted by Unicef and the Albanian Media Institute in 2011 showed that 50 % of adolescents consume 1-3 hours of TV per day, 19% of which reach beyond that number<sup>1</sup>. These data have doubled with the increased use (and coverage) of the internet. We do not have data specifically for the younger children, but we can assume that lifestyle tendencies and economic pressures render parents easily subjected to this phenomenon, where children are placed in front of a screen to perform even the more essential tasks and meet basic needs, like eating.

Parents consciously allow more screen time into their children's lives, like eating while watching a show on a mobile phone, playing unlimited hours of video games, most with violent imagery, spending time on a computer searching for information without having control of the content, possessing a phone at an early age, etc., which make children susceptible to unlimited sources of information and content, that can affect their view of the world.

In this sense, children construct their views and perception of the world through the lenses of cinematography, news, shows, in all media formats available. However, Berger (2012) supports that children watch television more than movies, because movie watching is often controlled by parents, whereas television watching often isn't. Therefore, they can come across any kind of information during this process, making them more susceptible to media content, including news.

Experimental studies attest that children living in environments with political conflict are highly stereotypical to other cultural or ethnical groups, but few investigate the way in which negative portrayals of other groups affects children's behaviour. A study conducted on children from the Middle East and children from Kosovo attest that positive portrayals of other social groups has had different effects, where in the case of Kosovo a positive attitude towards the other ethnic group was evidenced, although not to a considerable degree. On the other hand, the same conflict environment appears for different minorities, most of which are broadcasted in the electronic or online media.

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1 The study has no specific report on what kind of programme they watch on TV, leaving space for any kind of assumption on content.

Because, children's productions are absent in Albanian media, many cases that can illustrate its effects on behaviour are coming from the news section. Due to an environment overloaded with political conflict and issues, political news, political talk shows, and harsh language occupy the prime time in almost all media<sup>2</sup>. So, it has been a random occurrence that any political debate among neighbouring countries has been extended and commented on online, where children are present.

An extreme example is the case of young Aristotelis, member of the Greek minority, who was attacked and beaten to death by a group of young people at around 20<sup>3</sup> years of age, only because he spoke Greek. As cruel as it may sound, it is clear that in countries with increased conflict around identity or ethnic issues, media may affect attitude and behaviour. Despite these occurrences, the ongoing portrayals in news media of images of Albanian immigrants living in Greece using terrestrial borders to visit their relatives in Albania during holiday seasons, creating long queues, which comes with some frustration, affects perception. These news media depict images of frustrated elderly or irritated children which creates an emotional load against the other country and the large Greek minority in Albania, which can later manifest when external stimuli are presented. And the same goes on. Media portrayals towards Roma community as uneducated, beggars, grimy, help create a negative perception about them. This also counteracts any attempt they make when they attend schools, where they are unfriended and snubbed by the rest, reason for which they either fall into the societal moral trap by having low grades or in the worst-case scenario by dropping out of school. According to a study by Faktoje.al, most of the illiterate population in Albania are members of the Roma community, most of which drop out of school between age 11-14<sup>4</sup>, which is also confirmed by a study by Unicef. The same study reports that other categories that are prone to school abandonment are kids with limited capabilities.

Although legislation supports the education of these children, the reasons that prevent them from attending schools is mentality and societal norms, pedagogical approach, inclusion, etc.

In the worst cases, media can push kids to harmful behaviour towards themselves. In 2014, media news focus on suicide for religious purposes, (depicted as a way to connect with God) incited many cases of suicide<sup>5</sup>, some of which were young people. But the most recent case of unlimited and uncontrolled access to online content is that of a 13-year-old kid who hanged himself in order to be part of the challenge of the game he was playing, until November 2021 when he lost his life.

In the same way, media portrayals of love, friendship, sex roles or sexual orientation, power disbalances, can affect our attitude and behaviour towards them. Perhaps where our knowledge is lacking the most pertains to the effects of gender socialization and sexual orientation. This is especially important in restricted societies with very strong patriarchal culture. This is the reason why a debate about the LGBTIQ community erupted few years ago and ended up in fiery declarations and social uproar. Starting as a social contribution to mitigate skeletonization with sexual context it ended up creating more confusion, unclarity, exclusion of the other different. Moreover, the more emphasis media put on the declarations that the issue generated, the more the divisions deepened, proving to the isolation and strict mentality of the Albanian society towards sexual diversity. On the other hand, the sensitivity of this topic as an invisible, yet present element of the social identity, creates more social and psychological limitations for its individuals.

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2 Londo, E (2017) "Media shqiptare në kohët e politikës së mediatizuar" (Albanian media in the times of mediated politics), Journal on Communication and Media Studies, Sept 2017, AAB College, Prishtinë

3 The youngest of perpetrators of the group was 18 and the oldest 22. The coup consisted of 7 youngsters

4 Faktoje.al. June 10<sup>th</sup> 2021 " U premtua arsimi 100 % i fëmijëve të komunitetit rom-egjiptian, por shumicën e gjen në 'shkollën e rrugës'

5 Londo, Eva (2012) "Efektet e media ne konstruktimin e shoqerise" (Media effects on reality construction), Panorama Newspaer 30 oct 2012.

# Discussion and conclusion

## Media literacy as a way to target diversity

Frankly speaking, no one can create knowledge on the cultural, ethnic, and identity groups in the world through personal experience or school, placing great importance on the role of the media. Most people collect information about the world around them through mediated messages of the media, what Daniel Boorstin (1961) has named as “pseudo-environment”.

Although many studies support the cumulative effect of media content in shaping our perception of others, few of these have investigated the way in which the media contribute to this (Graves, 2008; Mastro, 2009; Persson & Musher-Eizenman, 2003). However, Perloff (2009) admits with certainty that media have influences that can engender a series of actions that would have been unthinkable in the absence of mediated communication (Perloff, p. 252). This could also explain the role of the media in leveraging major issues affecting societies. But for this to happen, an amount of information on media is required.

Assessing the increased role of information in obtaining knowledge and shaping our views of the world, where media plays a major role, recent discussions have focused on media literacy from an early age. On the other hand, the more information people get from the unlimited sources of information “the more central the receptor becomes” (Wolton, 2012). According to Walton, this receptor (public) can select, distribute, hierarchize, accept, and refuse.... And the more information he has, the more critical he becomes to it and its producers. Media studies assess the public of modern times far more different than the model of the passive receptor, considering him more of a negotiator of the meaning of the information. Therefore, the more cultivated the public is, the more efficient the use of the media becomes and there are two main actors that may play a paramount role in this: schools and family/parents.

Authors assert that media literacy is grounded in politics (Pombo 2003) and in the broader cultural-information field (McQuail 2000). Consequently, media literacy cannot be successfully acquired without intercultural literacy, intercultural literacy cannot be fully understood without using the knowledge and skills of media literacy (Belousa & Stakle, 2010). This might sound somehow challenging considering the current situation of media and society, explained by Pombo (2003) that media meaning is constructed and interpreted within unequal relations in society (Pombo 2003, p 100).

This fact prioritizes intercultural literacy to media literacy, whose aim is to explore the borders of their cultural identity, learn about their race, ethnicity, class, and other keystones of identity and to understand other cultural identities (McLaren 1995, 1997). This means that interpretation of media messages is always done with reference to culturally created images obtained by media exposure and explained in the education curricula.

In 2009, the European Commission published a report with recommendations and advice on the creation of media curriculums for early childhood audiences, which was intended to support the creation of a critical audience. Understanding the role of the media in creating and affecting perceptions, in 2013, the department of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tirana published the first book on media literacy, called “Mediology”, which was proposed to the Ministry of Education as a curricular subject. Still today, there is no media education until university level, rendering kids unprepared to media content.

## Parents as gatekeepers

Present circumstances of information overload with images, content, and skewed depictions around diversity issues may have serious consequences for children's information processing and schema development. Now, the main burden on the way children develop their media watching habits fall to the parents, considered as the 'gatekeeper'. They face grand challenges not only by selecting what media or content they expose their children to, but also helping their children process and interpret and internalize the information they receive from the media. Can it be helpful to apply any mode of monitoring to children's activities on any type of media to affect the way its content affects their behaviour?

The increasing economic pressures of modern times make parents easily fall into the trap of handing the remote controls or smartphones to their children, with less supervision. Parental mediation theory, initially developed in response to concerns about children's exposure to television (Clark, 2011) has nowadays evolved, capturing the various ways in which parents mediate their children's use of the new technology.

With the extended body of research relating media and cognitive psychology, parents are becoming more aware of the suite of risks and dangers framed by the media as threatening children's wellbeing. The fact that many parents render to this pact of handing over their smartphones to children as a way to help them entertain themselves has instead put more stress on the role of parents for creating monitoring tool of choice, in order to maintain their children's safety intact.

The expectations placed on parents today, however, are particularly onerous, as parents are expected to understand, assess, guide, monitor and regulate their children's activities (Willett, 2015) and constructs a set of norms about what it means to be a good parent in the digital age (Livingstone & Bober, 2006), which might require actively restricting and monitoring children's technology use (Mazmanian & Lanette, 2017). These include, for example, the expectation that parents monitor and control children's experiences with media (Mazmanian & Lanette, 2017); and that parents engage in what Lim (2018) calls transcendent parenting, (Lim, 2018, p. 32–33), whereby parents must "transcend every media consumption environment their children enter," and "harness these multiple modes of communication to keep watch over and keep in touch with their children wherever they may be" (ibid). However, this is a collaborative work that shall be harnessed starting from an early age at home and continuing later at the school level with practices and curricula to help kids use media and process its content.

## Media curriculum as a system of messages for reference

Media literacy includes not only the ability to use the media but also the ability to communicate in different context and environments. Therefore, the introduction of multicultural curriculum of mass media comes to play, which, includes not just simply the creation of images, but also their distribution. Therefore, every element of information is important to modelling behaviour from media content. Cognitive scientists support that media consumers learn more from background details and images than the kind of information that attracts their attention in the conscious level (Krugman, 1971, cited by Cortes 2000). This makes it important for media producers and audiences to understand how every element of information is constructed, focusing mainly to those images or information

that may seem trivial but have the greatest effect on the subconscious level. Therefore, media editors and journalists should come into terms between storytelling on an event and the perception that it may create, because ‘reality is nothing else than storytelling’<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, media producers should consider the public interest when producing media content, especially for the vulnerable groups who are unable to properly process media content or understand its effects.

This may seem difficult for commercial media, but the need for negotiation between media’s economic interests and media content is necessary.

Regarding media models that are presented to the young audience, very few tackle diversity. Even new technologies and the advantages of digital media offer not a single production for this matter. This is also true for public television, which is legally obliged to produce content that targets all categories of audience. Producing content, movies or kids’ shows, that address sensitive issues that are of paramount value for the Albanian audience would be a starting step to help model a more open attitude and behaviour towards diversity issues, such as identity, limited capabilities, power balance and leadership among sexes, sexual orientation, and more. However, Albanian Public Television lacks the principle of tackling diversity not only regarding audience targeting, but also programming. According to an editor of public TV, Edlira Birko, schools Public TV shall be considered the ideal ally for schools concerning media education - but this is, still, not happening.

Understanding the role of the media in society and using it as a channel for knowledge collection would help alter existing beliefs and attitude about diversity. Attributing this duty to the media enables the formation of that knowledge that is media-based, which - if properly created and processed, with constant exposure and repetition of the correct messages, even those that address subconscious levels of understanding - would help start a new belief that would persist. However, admitting the media function within the commercial context, the main contributor to media education are schools and family. In a situation when media importance on societal constructs is becoming prevalent, the initial strategies shall be applied in the family environment.

The different strategies suggested by scientists includes practices such as talking about children’s online activities, and sitting nearby while the child is online or the use of technical surveillance tools, or checking up on children’s online practices after use (Livingstone, Mascheroni, Dreier, Chaudron, & Lagae, 2015). Also, school curricula offer little to no info on media literacy, rendering audiences totally exposed to the practices of media sources and without any tool for critical thinking. This raises the value of parents who shall now deliver guidance and support to their children and learn about how to navigate the challenges of mediation, especially important today, in the digital age. This becomes even more important considering that parents do not have yet the proper information and neither the ways nor methods to help their children and fill this gap, which opens up a new area for future research.

Children, who are the most innocent receptors of media content, are also the easiest prey. The inability to filter and process information in a critical way contributes to the creation of wrong societal norms and models, that at a later stage of life become prone to imitation. The creation of an open society to diversity of any kind makes it easier for co-existence of ‘the majority’ with ‘the minority’ and “the different”. These issues are overcome in developed countries, but much work is needed to be done in the other underdeveloped ones, engaging all elements of the society; family / parents, schools and even media.

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6 Gerbner, G., *The construction of reality and the media*, p 425, Aleksandria, Athens 1998

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Unicef, July 2019, Monitoring guideline for children outside of education system



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