The Impact of Media on Children

Millions of people come in contact with media almost every second of the day. Media is everywhere. It is heard on the radio, seen on the television, and is even at the fingertips of most people with the spread of smart phones. Today, media is being more and more directed towards children rather than just adults. But how does this affect the market, and even more so, the children? Though some scholars do not agree on the degree of influence that media has on children, many of them do agree that media is an influential part of children’s lives and that it impacts children in a negative way, affecting their education as well as their perceptions of others.

In Neil Postman’s essay, “Television as a Teacher,” Postman argues that only entertaining material will be taught. He states that “[t]elevision-teaching always takes the form of story-telling, conducted through dynamic images and supported by music. … Nothing will be taught on television that cannot be both visualized and placed in a theatrical context.” (425). Postman goes on to explain that education is no longer education but more so simple, non-complex, entertainment. Postman describes this by stating: “The name we may properly give to an education without prerequisites, perplexity, and exposition is entertainment.” (425).
Entertainment undermines classroom curriculum and what the tradition idea of school is. According to Postman, learning by the means of a television lacks many things that are gained from a traditional style classroom. When sitting in front of a television, children do not experience social interactions as they would in the classroom. They do not learn to behave and obey standard rules. They are not able to ask questions to a television as they would be able to in a classroom (422). Overall, allowing children to learn from a television is simply inadequate.

Daniel Hade, much like Postman, agrees that education has been shifted to make it simpler and more entertaining. In her essay, “Lies My Children’s Books Taught Me: History Meets Popular Culture in the American Girls Books,” Hade brings up points about how the authors of the American Girls books often misconstrued historical information to make the book simpler and add to the “ideal American dream.” Hade argues “[t]he books are too busy telling the students how great the United States was and still is to give them much real history. The American Girls books perpetuate these same errors.” (568). The books were intended to motivated children, specifically girls, to learn about their history, however, due to the nonfactual content, the books are more for entertainment than learning. According to Hade, there are several instances in which the books could have better explained history. She talks about misspelled names, misleading statements, and inaccurate maps, all of which would have been great learning points for the children but were simply overlooked to ensure simplicity (567). Furthermore, this form of entertainment is brought into the classroom as educational material is available for sale to schools and teachers.

Along with educational items for children, there is a huge market for children’s, well, everything. The market aimed at children is now bigger than ever and continues to grow. The
market, aimed directly at children, often follows popular crazes and is fueled by clubs and media. According to David Buckingham, corporations work together to ensure the crazes are advertised on all forms of media from television shows, to computer games, to trading cards, to clothing lines and toys. This type of marketing is known as horizontal integration (595). Although all types of marketing are used, some, such as television, are more effective and, as a result, are used more commonly. As said by Schlosser, television takes up the majority of children’s advertisement. An average child in the United States currently spends about twenty-one hours each week viewing television (523). Corporations take advantage of this statistic and sell their product through very fascinating and playful television commercials. These promotions, however, are not just exclusive to the United States. A multitude of promotions go global, allowing the corporations to be more successful and the influence on children to be greater. One example is Harry Potter, children from various different countries can identify with the actors in the film and, therefore, it is a prime example of global media (602). Global media allows children to experience other cultures through virtual characters.

Not only does the market rely heavily on television promotions, but clubs are often very popular. This market, as a whole, is fueled by clubs that gather on a regular basis to promote new products and gather information to make new products. Hade describes how the Pleasant Company uses clubs to promote their product, American Girl dolls. Hade describes that “American Girl clubs meet regularly across the country, usually in bookstores, where scores of girls, each clutching her own American Girl doll meet to hear stories, make crafts, and learn about new products the Pleasant Company is developing.” (565). At the club meetings the children become more excited about new products. Along with Hade, Eric Schlosser agrees that
clubs fuel the market and also create a sense of belonging for children. Schlosser, in his essay “Kid Kustomers,” discusses “Children’s clubs have for years been considered an effective means of targeting ads and collecting demographic information; the clubs appeal to a child’s fundamental need for status and belonging.” (522). He continues to give one example, “According to one Burger King executive, the creation of a Burger King Kids Club in 1991 increased the sales of children’s meals as much as 300 percent.” (522). Children, at such a young age, desire to fit in and be like the other kids. The foundation of clubs allows for this to be a reality for the children.

Exposing children to media not only keeps the market growing, but it also shows children some of the unfortunate truths of American society. In children’s books and movies racial and sexual inequalities are depicted. Hade shares that in one the American Girl books, Changes for Samantha, Samantha has a black companion, a girl named Nellie who lives in an orphanage. Samantha and Nellie are said to be friends but Samantha is more like a mom figure to Nellie and often takes care of her when she needs something. Hade also explains that these children do not play with each other. Samantha plays with other girls, but not Nellie. In fact, Samantha only plays with girls who are socially equal to her. This shows that Nellie and Samantha do not have a true friendship. Their relationship is one that the fortunate would have with the less fortunate (570). Although the child may not realize that this is in fact showing racial inequality, it sets a standard for the child. American Girls books are supposed to be aimed at young girls who can relate to the girls in the books. But who is really an American Girl? Hade brings up this point in her essay, she states “[a]ccording the Pleasant Company, the few privileged girls such as Samantha are American Girls, but the poor, such as Nellie, are not.” (571). This is only one case
of the exposure of inequalities to children, but there are several more and many of them can be found in popular children’s movies. Many, almost all, children’s movies that have families in them have the common nuclear family. Children are only exposed to families with the basic mother-father relationship, and although there might be an occasional divorce, there is almost never a family with homosexual parents. Often the evil villain in the movie is depicted as homosexual through subtle cues. In Noel Sturgeon’s essay, “‘The Power is Yours, Planeteers’: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Children’s Environmentalist Popular Culture,” Sturgeon talks about this. He states that “[o]ne of the best illustrations of this figure is the character Scar, the evil uncle in The Lion King, voiced by Jeremy Irons, who depends on his past history of playing sexually perverse, socially dangerous characters to animate his depiction of Scar.” (580). This, along with many other examples, such as the evil man in Pocahontas “who is more concerned about the state of his hair than the people he callously orders to kill as ‘savages,’” shows that children are truly exposed to sexual inequalities and discriminations (581). Children are exposed to the inequalities and will, unknowingly, grow up with prejudices due to this exposure.

Overall, media has a great influence on children. They are exposed to it on a daily basis as it is found everywhere. Media is not only used for promotions, but as a teaching mechanism in classrooms. Due to the exposure of media to children the market has seen a drastic change, there is now a market solely for children, run by children’s clubs and crazes. These crazes are often even brought into the classroom where they mix with other forms of media. Generally, the media shows children the many inequalities in today’s society. As media continues to grow, so will its influence on children. Will there be a day when all forms of social interaction is smothered by
media? It is hard to tell, but if that day comes, children will be swayed to think that what the media tells them is true, and it may not be. It may just be slightly catchier than the real truth.

Works Cited


