

## **THE CHALLENGES OF MEDIA ECOSYSTEM TO CHILDHOOD**

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### **Abstract:**

*Virtual environment occupies a notable and expanding place in the interests of children. The proposed text refers to the challenges posed by the media ecosystem (the blending between traditional and new media) to the children in Bulgaria. The paper is developed in three major topics. Firstly, some significant children's issues (educational, social, media) in a country with an ageing population are explored. Secondly, some basic aspects of the dynamics of the media system (press, radio, television, and Internet) are analyzed. Thirdly, the impact of the virtual reality on children is examined. The paper also covers some of the regulatory practices of the Bulgarian Council for Electronic Media. Finally, several issues which are important for the future correlation of children's welfare with the media ecosystem are outlined.<sup>1</sup>*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bulgaria's accession to the European Union in 2007 has not resolved yet some important social challenges of the period of transition, especially in the domain of real incomes, health care, education, children's welfare, etc. There is a steady downslide in the number of children and an increase in the number of retired people, who are already twice as many as the adolescents.

The products and services offered by the new information and communication technologies strongly compete with family values and school knowledge and quite often even challenge them. Undoubtedly, information derived from these products and services affects the formation of the intellect, psyche and behaviour of children. Virtual environment occupies a notable and expanding place in their interests. Various studies show that children spend a substantial part of their time watching TV programmes, surfing in the Internet, chatting and SMS-

ing via mobile phones. It has been proved that virtual world is rich in positive and negative behavioural models, which children, due to the peculiarities of their psychological development, transfer into the real environment too quickly. Their preferences for certain types of models change with the progress of their maturity and it is exactly during the puberty that they become extremely vulnerable and unpredictable in respect to their choice. Quite often children apprehend the audio-visual and cybernetic space as a shelter, where they feel free from the daily stress, fear and loneliness. The TV set, the computer, the mobile phone provide them with opportunities for dialogue and social contacts, which they are missing or which are insufficient to them in the real world. However, audiovisual and cyber space is not yet a safe shelter for the minors.

The proposed text refers to the challenges posed by the media ecosystem (the blending between traditional and new media) to the children in Bulgaria. The paper is developed in three major topics. Firstly, some significant children's issues in a country with an ageing population are explored. Secondly, some basic aspects of the dynamics of the media system (press, radio, television, and Internet) are analyzed. Thirdly, the impact of the virtual reality on children is examined. The paper also covers some of the regulatory practices of the Bulgarian Council for Electronic Media. Finally, several issues which are important for the future correlation of children with the media ecosystem are outlined.

## **BULGARIAN CHILDREN**

### **Population ageing**

The process of transformation to democracy and market-place economy in Bulgaria since 1989 has posed significant social challenges to the population. Although Bulgaria joined *NATO* in 2004 and became a member of the *European Union* in 2007, the stressing economic conditions of the period of transition influenced strongly the infrastructure of the population. According to the latest census in 2011 Bulgaria's population amounts to 7 364 570 (Bulgarians – 84 percent, Turks – 9 percent, Roma – 5 percent, others – 2 percent. 84 percent profess the Eastern Orthodox faith, while 12 percent are Moslems). The population has decreased by over one million and a half since the last census prior to the period of transition – 8,948,649 (1985). The proportion of urban population has increased to 73 percent, with prevalent migration from villages to towns.

Emigration was particularly significant in this period - over a million, most from the 20-39 years bracket have left the country (NSI-Census, 2011).

Bulgaria is one of the countries marked with population ageing: 2.5 for 1950-1955, 2.2 for 1975-1980 and 1.1 for 2000-2005. Currently, while the 15-59 years group remains comparatively stable (a little over 60 percent), the number of children under 14 is sharply going down, while the percentage of people above 60 years of age has nearly doubled. Projections are discouraging – it is expected that by 2050 the percentage of the elderly people above 60 years of age will reach 38.6 or nearly three times the percentage of the younger ones – 13.8 (UN, 2002).

Since the beginning of the eighties a stable tendency to decreasing households in the country has been observed. The average number of members per household has been also decreasing. Of all households in the country in 2011 – 3,006,376, a significant proportion, 75.5 percent, is without children. Households with children under 16 are classified as follows: 15.5 percent with one child, 7.5 percent – with two children, 1 percent – with three children, 0.5 percent – with four and more children. The negative national increase per 1,000 inhabitants of – 5.6 is a disturbing tendency (NSI-Census, 2011).

Following the introduction of the *Currency Board* Arrangement in mid-1997, relative financial stability was achieved in Bulgaria but the process of social stratification and impoverishment of the population was not brought under control. Along with that, the unstable government system encouraged the development of the ‘gray economy’ that gave rise to a thin layer of *nouveau riche*.

In 2011, 21 percent of the households in the country lived under the poverty threshold, calculated according to the Eurostat relative method. Currently GDP per capita equals 21,280 leva (Euro 10,892) and the average monthly wage is 727 leva (Euro 372). The high unemployment rate (10.7 per cent) creates additional stress to the population (NSI-Expenditure, 2013).

The tendency towards growing differentiation and polarization of households by income may be expected to continue in the next decade.

## **Legislature**

Bulgarian society attaches top-order importance to the supreme interests of the child. National legislation recognizes the general principles of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and

other international conventions, which guarantee the civil, political, social, and cultural rights of the children in Bulgaria.

The status of the Bulgarian child is formulated by Bulgarian legislation. Protection of children is featured almost in any national law. It is most prominently formulated by the *Child Protection Act*. The rights of the child in Bulgaria are also protected by numerous normative documents, such as: the *Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria*; the *Family Code*; the *Penal Code*; the *Penal Procedure Code*; the *Social Security Code*, the *Labor Code*, etc. as well as by many other acts, rules and regulations.

The Radio and Television Act also contains texts relating to the protection of children. According to it, the radio and TV broadcasters must refrain from the creation or distribution of broadcasts aimed at impairing the physical, mental or moral development of the minors and adolescents (Council, 1998).

In order to guarantee effectively the rights of the children, several ethical codes for self-regulation have been adopted, too. Within the framework of self-regulation, the adopted ethical rules obligate the radio and TV broadcasters to pay in their work particular professional attention to the specificity of the child audience. Regarding the protection of infants and minors it stipulates that journalists shall: demonstrate special responsibility in respecting the rights of children, including their right to be heard; not take advantage of the children's innocence and trust; not publish information or photographs about the private life of a child unless there is an overriding public interest; protect the identity of children involved in or affected by tragedy or criminal activity, in case it might turn out to be harmful; seek to avoid interviewing children without the consent of an appropriate adult (Union, 2004).

The principle of bringing the action of all public organizations in line with the supreme interests of the child is normatively regulated in their daily work.

## **Education**

Education is a traditional value for the Bulgarians. Obligatory primary education was introduced in the country in 1891 (a decade after the national liberation from the Ottoman oppression) and obligatory basic education – in 1921. Starting school at the age of seven is compulsory for the children and they are obliged to attend it until they are 16 or until they complete secondary education. Equal opportunities for all children in various genders, ethnic, religious or economic groups to attend free of charge the public schools are granted. Special measures are taken to

educating of disabled children, students with chronic diseases and children who are socially disadvantaged (permanently or temporarily deprived of parental care and a family environment).

Currently the educational policy of the Republic of Bulgaria is characterized by active development of new legislation (*Public Education Act* (1991), *Higher Education Act* (1995), *Vocational Education and Tuition Act* (1999), *Level of Education, General Education Minimum and Curriculum Act* (1999), etc.). However, the fulfillment of the specified objectives is challenged by the growing tendencies to social stratification and deinstitutionalization of family and school. The insufficient funds, allocated for education in the national budget, are a negative factor for the teachers' motivation. The conditions for bringing up of schoolchildren have worsened: refectory nutrition; summer, winter or spring holiday camps; extracurricular activities have deteriorated. Some traditional social benefits such as free textbooks and appliances for the primary education, school healthcare, etc. are gradually dropping off.

Irrespective of this and despite the rising cost of living, Bulgarians traditionally do not grudge spending their money on the education of their children. For this attitude speaks the high literacy level – 98 percent of the entire population. Traditionally students from high schools are still harvesting the first places in world Olympics in mathematics and sciences. However, a steady tendency to decreasing of students is observed, mainly due to the low birth rate.

The number of educational establishments likewise declined: in 2012/2013 general and special schools numbered 2,112 (153 - primary, 1,402 – basic, lower secondary – 11, upper secondary 140 and combined – 406), or 2,520 less than in 1990/1991 - the year right after the changes. The number of schools that were closed down or transformed was much higher for rural than for urban areas. Vocational schools (including art schools) have slightly decreased: 494 (2012/2013) to 497 (1990/1991).

Introduction of private schools in the country started in 1992/1993. In 2012/2013 the number of private general, special and vocational schools is close to 100. The relevant equipment and technical back up of the education process is substantially better in private schools compared to that in the public ones. Both public and private schools follow uniform educational plans and issue equally legitimate documents for an educational level completed.

Almost all teachers, 98.8 per cent, have higher education. The majority of teachers, 83.0 per cent, are female (NSI-Education, 2013).

A disturbing trend in the period of transition is dropping out of school. Poverty on family or municipality level is named as one of the major factors for that, as well as affiliation to

different ethnic minority groups (Roma, Turks), place of residence (city ghettos and isolated rural areas), quality of education, and ineffective regulation. The direct connection of crime rate among adolescents to lack of education is also shown. Dropping out of the education system has proven a powerful factor for getting into a risk group. Unregistered children usually belong to marginalized parents living outside the framework of the normal social relations and institutions.

The Libraries (chitalishta) have been known in Bulgaria since the years of the Bulgarian National Revival as institutions of enlightenment and culture. Their work does not target only the children, though one can say that children are their major customers. Work in most libraries is aimed at expanding the knowledge and culture and at enhancing the talent and abilities of children from the municipality in which the respective institution is located.

The Sports Federations and Associations, which mainly target the promotion of one or another sport, engage in disseminating the principles of physical culture and in creating conditions for training and physical development not only of children, but mostly for them.

Despite the economic difficulties, special efforts are made for modernizing the school system and training. Positive measures are taken towards priority objectives, such as high quality of teaching, civil education, early foreign language training, introduction of new information and communication technologies, variety of vocational training, diversity of higher education.

### **Social problems**

Family foundations also falter. There are an ever growing number of parentless children. About 21% of all persons under age in Bulgaria are raised in one-parent families. The patriarchal type of relationship still dominates in Bulgaria, where children are regarded by adults rather as objects, instead of as equal subjects in the family interrelations.

The use of alcoholic drinks and narcotic drugs, widening spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, early pregnancies and growing number of abortions occur ever more frequently among the adolescents. There is a discouraging pattern of juvenile delinquency, as well as of children suffering from violence (rape, incitement for soliciting and mendicancy, ill treatment in the family, pornography, etc.).

The social problems of the Bulgarian society from the period of transition seem to reflect most distinctly on the crisis of values. This gives rise to some grave deficiencies in the social behaviour of the children. Quite unnoticed, a whole generation has grown up with gravely

impaired status and rights. Apparently, the society has failed to ensure a safe environment that would encourage the development of children.

All these problems are only sporadically discussed in media. Children's programs and programs on children's issues are not welcomed in TV programming. The current commercialized trends in TV developments exclude these societal problems from the daily linear audiovisual menu, which offer in majority inappropriate for children's audiences content.

## **THE DYNAMICS OF THE MEDIA SYSTEM**

To understand the profound transformation of the mass media system and its development trends in Bulgaria, one should go back to the roots of political upheaval after the falling of the Berlin wall. Following the profound democratic developments throughout all Eastern European countries after 1989, the tendency to fundamental changes in the mass media system became irreversible.

The new Bulgarian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression for any citizens. It stipulates that the press and the other mass information media shall be free and shall not be subjected to censorship" (National Assembly, 1991). Along with the overall economic and political crisis of the time, the transformation of the mass media system developed on practical, trial-and-error efforts, rather than on a legal basis.

Of all institutions in the country, namely the mass media helped transformation to democracy and market place economy in the fastest and most profound way. The processes of decentralization, liberalization and privatization began spontaneously, however with no sharing of common perspectives. In a short time a completely new journalism landscape was formed in which different patterns of media consumption and new advertising strategies were introduced. The emerging professional principles and styles of journalism were created and mastered ad hoc, in an atmosphere of turbulent events. It turned out that the media were fulfilling the dual function of transmitters of protest and accelerators of political change. The transition period has provided journalists with a strong hold on public opinion. Thus, the mass media system often operated as a Fourth Estate, influencing social attitudes, political opinions and decision-making on national priorities.

Political pluralism and varied media environment in Bulgaria still experience systematic difficulties. The still-in-the-make civil society fails to assist the creation of a stable public basis for professional journalism. According to the *World Press Freedom Index 2014* Bulgaria has

dropped down to 100-th place (among 180 countries), which proves that freedom of speech and independent journalism is still convertible phraseology for most of the media outlets and for many a non-governmental organization disbursing the funds of European and Transatlantic institutions (Reporters, 2014). Their activities proved erratic, limited and ineffective in the long run.

## **Press**

Many challenges were encountered in the process of establishing the new press. The early 1990s heralded the age of deregulation of the print media leading to a tremendous change in the entire industry. The tight ideological control over the mass media was replaced by economic motives. Some factors such as the soaring prices of newsprint, printing services and distribution expenses sped up the process of catering to audience expectations and needs rather than narrow political interests. In this situation, it was quite natural for advertising to prosper and the profits from it became the main economic resource for print media. In the post-1989 years many new publications did come and go. Right after the political changes extreme media partisanship has been developed. Political pluralism fostered the emergence of multi-party press. A wide range of highly varied editions quickly took shape: political, popular, quality, topical, and specialized publications. This brought the decrease of the party press circulation. A new press emerged which declared itself politically independent. These periodicals quickly gained the largest audience share and took over the expanding volume of advertising. Under the auspices of privatization and commercialization, aggressive press corporations laid down the basis of media concentration.

Data provided by the National Statistical Institute vividly show the trends in the development of the media within the first two decades of the transition period. As for printed media, 301 newspapers (17 dailies) with an annual circulation of 895 265 000 were published in 1989, compared to 436 newspapers (70 dailies) with an annual circulation of 370 789 000 twenty years later, in 2008. The corresponding figures for magazines and bulletins were 827, with annual circulation of 57 849 000 in 1989 vs. 775 with an annual circulation in 2008. There has been a significant trend for preserving and even increasing diversification of supply, while at the same time considerably reducing circulation. Currently due to the economic crisis the number of the print media has been reduced: 307 newspapers (54 dailies) with annual circulation of 324 310 000 and 622 magazines and bulletins with annual circulation of 20 091 000 are on the market place (NSI-Press, 2014).

## **Electronic media**

In contrast to the turbulent transformation in the print media, the changes in the electronic media were slower, incomplete and lacked general consistency. They started and were carried out in an atmosphere of deregulation – the *Radio and Television Act*, as well as the *Telecommunications Act* was adopted only in 1998. Both of them have been amended frequently. Bulgaria joined the *Television without Frontiers Directive* (1989) and later ratified the *European Union's Convention on Transfrontier Television* (1997). Current media legislation has been closely aligned with EU regulations. The two national institutions that regulate the electronic media - the Council for Electronic Media (CEM) and the Communications Regulation Commission (CRC), jointly issue radio and TV licenses and register cable and satellite broadcasters. CEM (formerly The National Council for Radio and Television) is the regulatory body that monitors compliance with the Radio and Television Act, including issues such as advertising, sponsorship, product placement, copyright, and protection of minors. The Council also considers complaints by citizens and organizations. CRC (formerly The State Commission of Telecommunications) enforces the Telecommunications Act and manages the radio frequencies spectrum.

For nearly 25 years a highly saturated radio and TV landscape has been gradually established. Several telling trends in radio program dynamics could be discerned during this period of transition.

### *Radio*

Radio broadcasting had displayed an enormous increase. In 1988, prior to the political changes, some 46 810 hours of programming were aired. In 1989 the number had increased to 48 498 hours; in 1993 the introduction of private radio bounced the total number of on-air hours to 161 278. By 2008, twenty years after the changes, the public was enjoying 797 683 hours of programming, more than sixteen times the number of hours broadcast in 1988. Due to various reasons (mainly economical) the number of hours broadcast by the end on 2013 dropped to 650 464. Program supply had been strongly diversified. The local radio stations had been developing a clear-cut public profile as well as introducing technological innovations, such as computer-run, RDS and on-line versions of the regular radio programs. The introduction of new styles, formats and standards lead to steady segmentation of the radio audiences. The dynamics of structure and

format of the programmes is notable: the news programs drastically increase: from 19 090 hours in 1988 to 26 154 hours in 1989, 72 358 hours in 1994 and 75 679 hours in 2013 (NSI-Rado, 2014).

### *Television*

Compared to the other media, changes in television came much more slowly. Some major reasons for that included: state monopoly over national telecasting; political pressures resulting in frequent replacements of TV executives (in the course of 25 years, fifteen General Directors in succession headed the public *National Television* and only three of them have completed their office term without suspension); the lack of research and development concepts and strategies; inefficient management; economic constraints, obsolete equipment, etc.

The introduction of commercial television from 1994 on encouraged program diversification in the national TV landscape. A diverse TV market was gradually established in the country. Meanwhile, the almost uncontrolled reception of satellite, transborder and cable programs exerted significant pressure on the domestic channels. Infiltration of foreign audio-visual products had an equally strong impact on national broadcasting policies.

The TV program dynamics was accompanied by several important trends. TV broadcasting had displayed a significant increase. In 1988, prior to the political changes, 5 886 hours of TV programming were aired. A dramatic growth of 500 hours of telecasts was registered during the critical year of 1989. By 1994, when private television was officially introduced, audiences enjoyed 7 178 hours of TV programming, while in 2008 the number of hours reached 716 466 – nearly 100 times increase! (NSI-Television, 2014). The diversified program supply encouraged higher audience selectivity. Digitalization, mobile- and web casting are the current technological challenges to the Bulgarian TV broadcasters.

Although the advertising market is still not very big, the radio and TV environment is oversaturated. Lack of clarity about the media ownership obscures the fact how dependent the electronic media can be on political and business interests and impacts on the media policies. The weak market, which fails to maintain the numerous licensed radio and TV stations, has left a loophole for companies with capitals of doubtful origin. By the present moment the legal, technological, regulatory and social framework is rather contradictory and often serves corporative interests.

In 2013, 337 radio stations and 187 television channels are listed as registered, operating on national, regional and local level terrestrially, via cable or via and channels. Radio and

television broadcasting on the Internet is rigorously developing (Council, 2013). The privately owned radio- and TV stations undoubtedly challenged the monopoly of the state-owned public radio and television. However, the public service broadcasters enjoy the highest audience credibility: *BNT* is approved by 72.5 % of the population and *BNR* – by 58.6 %, compared to other institutions such as police – 42.3%, army – 41.9%, Parliament – 23.4%, and Court – 17.0% (National Center, 2012).

### *Internet*

The increasing popularity of the Internet during the last two decades has definitely impacted the media system status quo. However, the online media business model is still problematic. The combination of content sales, subscription fees and advertising revenues can not bring sufficient income to assure content variety for attracting bigger audiences. Searching for their identity in the transforming social and market environment, the online and traditional media are serving more eagerly to advertisers rather than audiences. Because of the quicker reaction to breaking news events, online-only media slowly but steadily take over the niches in the breaking news areas, competing successfully with the traditional print media.

In addition to traditional media and online-only news sites, some citizen-generated content has entered the World Wide Web. The Internet is beginning to be used for so-called “citizens’ journalism.” Weblogs on different social and political issues have multiplied. Using other social media platforms, as well as networking and microblogging services such as Facebook, Google Plus, Instagram, Twitter, and hashtags are becoming more and more popular. The media ecosystem, where the traditional and new, Internet-based and interacting media are positioned, comprises a number of social and cultural challenges to the sustainability of the transforming media environment, such as the development of media ecology.

### **Media ecology**

The subject of media ecology is an extremely important scientific and interdisciplinary problem related to cultural cultivation and socialization processes of the individuals in society. It encompasses a series of fundamental manifestations which are decisive for the democratic functioning of the socium, for its sustainability, for the system of values and cultural ideology. The media ecosystem, where the traditional and new, Internet-based and interacting media are positioned, comprises a number of social and cultural ingredients, which expose the state of spiritual dimensions of any society. Media ecology reveals the democratic mainstays, namely:

freedom of expression in the public sphere; right to seeking and obtaining information, including participation in the creation and dissemination of information and values of various nature, etc. With the help of the media the cultural norms and rules are identified, as well as the generally acceptable models, social and cultural continuity, cultural and historical memory, national doctrine and ideals, cultural pluralism, culture of participation in the processes. Media facilitate the control option for the work of public institutions and political actions, as well as of the business-oriented models, thus ensuring transparency for the socium's existence. Media provide educational, popular science and artistic forms, as well as an environment for co-participation in their production, thus actually taking part in the process of ensuring literacy and creative and critical encouragement of the people. With their educational formats they also play an important role in economy and, respectively, in the economy of knowledge by contributing to the people's creativity, encouragement of their entrepreneurial spirit, to formation of competent persons, their participation in decision-making, in the creation of innovations and new jobs, in generation of incomes, etc.

These problems are also topical on European scale. *Recommendation CM/Rec(2011) 7* of the Committee of Ministers to member states on a new notion of media, adopted on 21 September 2011 explains not only the concept of media ecosystem, but emphasises also the trends in its development. It stipulates that the significant changes in the media ecosystem were defied by the developments in information and communication technologies and their application to mass communication. In broad terms the media ecosystem encompasses all actors and factors whose interaction allows the media to function and to fulfil their role in society. The adoption of new modalities, procedures and outcomes diversified media's editorial practices. The functioning and existence of traditional media actors, as well as their economic models and professional standards, are being complemented or replaced by other, new actors within the media ecosystem. They have assumed functions in the production and distribution process of media services. Furthermore, some of these new actors have developed services or applications which have put them in a dominant position on a national or even at a global level (Council, 2011).

Irrespective of the fast development of new media and of taking the public debate online, television is still the most trusted medium in the Bulgarian society: 64% against 45% for the radio, 42% for the Internet and 35% for the press (European Parliament, 2014).

## **VIRTUAL SPACE**

The virtual world, which merges time and space and offers provocative amusement possibilities is of great interest to the Bulgarian children. Various studies show that children spend a substantial part of their time watching TV programs, in front of the PC, playing and surfing in Internet. The new media and information technologies have with no doubt positive effects on children's maturing and development. According to the reality, however, the audiovisual and cyber space is not yet a safe shelter for the children.

### **Television**

Bulgarian children spend on the average three hours a day watching television. Usually this happens at home and as far as a small part of the families may afford a second TV set, children share TV watching with their family. This, however, does not mean that a parent or an elderly family member controls every program choice that the child watches. Due to parents' work schedule children spend a big part of the day alone at home, which makes them free to watch whatever they want no matter what effect that will have on them. The technical methods for filtering TV programs with harmful contents are not yet broadly spread in Bulgaria and the culture of preventing the children from harmful TV influence is still at an embryonic stage. Of interest in this sense remain the issues what exactly the children prefer to watch and whether the programs of the TV operators guarantee the protection of their interests.

The liberalization of the country's audiovisual market gives the children the chance to watch a variety of foreign and domestic satellite and Bulgarian cable television programs. A telling problem is whether the supply guarantees the possibility of a wide choice. It rather does not, because the variety of genres is reduced to a minimum, which can hardly satisfy the cultural, aesthetic and information needs of the audience. Once again the typical paradox of the contemporary society is observed – quantitative supply, reduced quality, lack of variety and a limited choice. In the context of TV production for children such a mixed situation speaks of at least two disturbing tendencies: reduction of children audience's options for educational and personal development through television and its transformation into a consumer and a consumer commodity. The problem gets even worse when it gets to children with intellectual, mental and physical disabilities. They are not included in any audience frame and no TV station produces programs specially designed to satisfy their specific needs.

The approach of the Bulgarian television stations as a whole towards children's audience is subordinated mainly to the entertainment function. Television programs include much less cognitive and educational issues.

The insufficient production of educational programs in the country raises the issue of the extreme commercialization of the TV landscape. The public channel BNT is dedicating a large amount of professional efforts to children's programme-making. Otherwise, a distinct inadequacy of TV programming of the commercial broadcasters in respect to children's lifestyle is observed, although television has turned into an important part of children's life. Specialized programs for children audience are practically missing in their program schemes.

A disturbing tendency is the limited production of quality children's programs. Producing of own and quality programs for children is becoming more and more difficult for the Bulgarian TV broadcasters. Imported film production (American as a rule, mostly cartoons) prevails in the children's audience oriented program modules. In the absence of good quality content appropriate for their age and adding the lack of sufficient control in the family, children are subjected to the risks brought by the spectacular cheap film productions full of sex and violence, which account for the major part of the movie program of the Bulgarian television stations, especially distributed by cable. The under-age population that is in the process of building up its personal identity is notable for its greater suggestibility and susceptibility to these screen risks, higher psychic vulnerability, higher credulousness, higher curiosity and activity as consumers of the audio-visual media.

In addition to all that, it is obvious that regarding the practices of TV broadcasters no clear statutory requirements exist, which should guarantee children's protection from inappropriate content as well as their right to watch programs designed for them, thus stimulating their development and provoking their talents. All this combined with the disharmonic actions of the institutions, the civil sector and the media in Bulgaria confirms child's position as a victim to circumstances but not as a member of the society, enjoying equal rights of choice and protected interests.

## **PC and Internet**

Internet was introduced in Bulgaria in 1997 and currently the country enjoys one of the fastest Internet services worldwide. Ever since then its market expanded at encouraging rates. The turn of 2000 marked the peak of that development. Some 386,400 people then used the Net in a

population of 7,977 million (4,8 per cent of the Bulgarians are on-line, 2001). In 2013 almost half of the 1, 437,496 households using broadband are families with children (NSI-Internet, 2014).

Use of the Internet in Bulgaria still means utilization of high-tech services, requiring computer handling skills and command of a foreign language. This comes to explain the fact why the age limit for active use of Internet is about 40 years and why its users are well educated. What resources can evoke market growth in the following years?

- Younger generations (in a country with Bulgaria's demographic problems no fast development could be expected along these lines);
- Expanding the use of Internet in the educational, administrative and business areas;
- Penetration of the Internet into other spheres of life: development of Net trade, expansion of services offered on the Net (Penetration of Internet is most perceptible in the most active social strata of the well educated and employed).

Unlike television Internet use has a definitely interactive character and it requires a certain minimal educational level. In this sense, the alarming tendency of constantly increasing polarization in Bulgaria's primary and secondary education shall be pointed out in the first place. This process is a direct consequence of the extreme impoverishment of a substantial part of the Bulgarian population during the social transformation period and the transition to market economy under utterly insufficient social protection. Thus, more than half of Bulgarians' expenses are attributed to food and utilities. The high relative share of the low-income households is not a promising situation.

All children have the right of equal access to new information technologies, of education in competent and responsible behavior in the Internet, of access to Internet materials, that are of social and cultural benefit to the child, of freedom of speech and information through the new information and communication technologies, of protection against harmful content in the Internet, of protection against exploitation or against being involved in illegal activities through the network. According to these texts which were included in international documents on children rights, and which Bulgaria has ratified the child is treated as an important and qualified person in the virtual communication world (*Penal Code*). It is more important, however, whether Bulgarian children do really enjoy this status.

The young Bulgarians perceive the virtual world of Internet as a compensation of the live dialogue and entertainment they are lacking. They enjoy exchanging e-mails, chatting in chat-groups, playing games.

## **Mobile telephones**

The mobile telephones are spreading fastest in the everyday life of the Bulgarian population. Further to *Mobicom* (based on outdated analog technology) three GSM operators – *Mobitel*, *Globul* and *Vivacom* are currently operating in the country and the start up of a fourth national GSM operator is pending. Although the liberalization of the telecommunication sector market is established, due to the big demand costs of mobile telephone services are still relatively high. Most experts expect the costs of mobile services to drop down rapidly after the start up of the fourth GSM operator.

The other substantial factor for the distribution of the mobile telephones in the country is the income of the households. From an expensive business instrument when they appeared, mobile telephones have turned into a everyday necessity for a substantial part of the population. It has to be noted though, that at the beginning the usage of mobile telephones was considered as a symbol of power and wealth.

Mobile telephones are accessible to children in families with an average monthly income of over Euro 75. Usually these children receive their first mobile telephone when they are 10-11 years old. Apart from the purpose of demonstrating a material status, children's mobile telephones, from a strictly functional point of view, are also used for:

- Providing greater ease for the parents by potentially constant mobile connection with the child;
- Communication with the coevals, which most frequently is not pragmatic and has the clear character of a game (SMS fashion);
- Using the entertainment functions of the mobile unit – mini-electronic games (especially at the beginning), frequent change of melodies, own melodies composing, change of display's layout, using decorative panels and other fashionable accessories for the mobile telephones, etc.

Due to financial reasons, insufficient self-dependence and to a lesser degree – developed sense of responsibility, children's mobile telephones in Bulgaria are used at the utmost economic regime, using prepaid cards or other type of limits. Despite their strictly limited financial resources, Bulgarian children show a definite affinity for using the new mobile communication technologies.

### **The practices of the Council for Electronic Media**

The Council for Electronic Media is an independent and specialized body which enforces the Radio and Television Act, while at the same time protects free speech, free flow of information and independence of radio and television broadcasters in Bulgaria. The regulator has imposed numerous property sanctions on a number of broadcasters for infringing the generally accepted moral norms, for impairing the physical, mental and moral development of minors and adolescents, and for violating the good morals.

Guided by its obligation for protection of minors from any media content unsuitable for them, the Council regularly holds discussions with the non-governmental sector and the professional organisations of the radio and TV broadcasters.

A successful move to fight the disturbing prevalence of cheap transatlantic programmes with content inappropriate for children was triggered in 2002 by the Parents' Association against Broadcasting the 'Raw Force' and 'Smack Down' wrestling shows in the daytime programmes of the largest private TV broadcaster – bTV. The Council for Electronic Media organized public discussion and following it, adopted a decision, ascertaining that airing broadcasts of WWF matches containing violence before 23:00 contravenes the law, and ordered the Balkan News Corporation to comply with the requirements of its licence and to terminate those broadcasts before 23:00 hours. The CEM rested its decision on the grounds that the broadcasts affect adversely the psyche and behaviour of children and teenagers, and have led to a drastic increase in traumas and injuries as a result of imitation of the fights between WWF wrestlers shown on bTV. As a result the shows were withdrawn from the daytime programme.

Another case is related to obscene chat postings featured in a video clip, broadcasted by MM – a musical channel. The Sofia Regional Court upheld the penalty decree issued by the Chairperson of CEM, pointing out that the broadcasting of the video clip constituted an administrative violation of the RTA. The court held that children and adolescents are more vulnerable, their worldview is still unstable, their value system is in the process of formation, and the protection of their health, mental and psychological development, as well as the creation of normal conditions for their moral development is in the interest of the whole society and the State. In this sense, broadcasting obscene and indecent expressions in a broadcast addressed to infants and minors contravenes the principles of upbringing of adolescents and of the formation of a correct worldview, moral principles and value system. This is so because children and adolescents are

most susceptible to the negative effects of the uncontrolled dissemination of information and they usually cannot make a free and informed choice of radio or television programme services.

The Council for Electronic Media is persistent in its support to the co-regulation. Following the concerted efforts of the three broadcasting televisions with national coverage, CEM adopted a decision by which it recommends to the operators to prepare and introduce a unified marking system on the so-called principle of “controlled access” (Bulletin, 2002). This is one of the major achievements in the process of media co-regulation. Taking into consideration the increasing distribution of songs containing indecent wording and vulgar gestures, CEM adopted a special *Statement on the Need in Protection of Minors and Adolescents during Broadcasting of Songs in the Radio and TV Programmes* (Bulletin, 2003).

The Council for electronic media adopted also several documents of preventive nature: a *Declaration on the Increasing Cases of Alcohol Poisoning among Minors*; a *Declaration on the Big Brother Programme*; and a *Freedom of the Speech Charter in the Republic of Bulgaria*. Since the international acts and national legislation lack a juridical definition of the “good morals” concept, The Council for Electronic Media, in partnership with the UNICEF National Office in Bulgaria, organised in 2005 a round table, where numerous aspects of the protection of minors and adolescents from the adverse effect of some radio and TV programmes were discussed. Following the discussion, CEM voted a standpoint on the application of the “good morals” concept in respect of protecting minors. However, this standpoint was not met friendly by the broadcasters and the media and CEM had to withdraw it.

Under the conditions of media pluralism in Bulgaria, the children are still not protected from the harmful media contents. Although according to the *RTA*, the radio and TV broadcasters shall be held responsible for the content of the programmes they offer for distribution, within the framework of self-regulation they do not yet apply effectively the professional standards, while covering scenes of violence and cruelty. Deficiencies in the protection of the interests of children in the domain of the mass media generally find expression in the lack of: technical means for programme filtering; programmes for children with impairments; programmes for children in risk; access of the children to the media; quality children’s programmes; media pedagogy. It will depend on the adults’ efforts what the Third Parent (the television) of the children will offer: teaching the positive, or escaping from the negative.

That is why the Council for electronic media is working on outlining the parameters of a wide-ranging **national programme** intended to address the impact of television on the adolescents in a dynamically developing media environment.

For the television, this could be achieved at several levels:

- **in the domain of regulation:** by adding to the RTA some clearly formulated texts demanding from the broadcasters actions directed at protecting the children from unsuitable contents, and setting up fixed volumes (in line with the programme profile of the broadcaster) for distribution of children's, youth and educational programmes;

- **in the domain of self-regulation:** by achieving a broad consensus among all TV broadcasters on the introduction of a unified system for marking the programmes with unsuitable content for children and of mechanisms for its application;

- **in the domain of programming:** by paying special attention to the production and distribution of quality children's and educational programmes which, besides their informative, educational and entertaining function, would present to the children models of behaviour, critical thinking and perception of the environment, for strengthening the system of values and their national self-awareness, and for upholding the purity of the Bulgarian language.

## CONCLUSION

The transition to a civil society and market economy involved a number of issues in children's welfare. A stable negative tendency of birth rate has been observed since 1989. Family and school as traditional mainstay in children's life have dramatically lessened their significance.

The growing influence of television through numerous broadcasting and cable outlets combined with the invasion of the new information and communication technologies tend to shape predominantly the everyday existence of children.

The relationship between 'virtual space' and 'real space' requires greater thoroughness, especially when children stand between the two spheres. The analysis usually concentrates on the answers to the questions why and how do children and teenagers turn to and use the virtual space and what is stronger: the interactive cybernetic world, which skilfully applies manipulative techniques to its young users, or the choice of the children, who through the challenges of TV programmes, computer games or chatting, create their own virtual universe, thus gaining their best from the offer of the contemporary information and communication technologies. The

answer by all means contains arguments for the benefit of both sides as well as examples of temporary victories of each of them.

It has been proved that the virtual world is rich in positive and negative behaviouristic models, which children, due to the peculiarities of their psychological development, transfer into the real environment too quickly. Their preferences for certain types change with maturing and it is exactly during the puberty that they become extremely vulnerable and unpredictable in respect to their choice. Quite often, Bulgarian children apprehend the audio-visual and the cybernetic space as a shelter, where they feel free from the daily stress, fear and loneliness. The TV set, the computer or even the mobile phone screen provide them with the opportunities for dialogue and social contacts, which they are missing, or which are insufficient to them in the real world.

Undoubtedly, the information, which children receive from the TV screen or from the broadband Internet, increases their average intelligence coefficient. Despite the allegations that illiteracy abounds, that children do not read books, that they are killing their time and this is bad for their health, the surveys show explicitly that in the cyber era children are much more practical, know more and adapt to their environment much easier. Furthermore, being acquainted with the virtual world (which to a great extent is an imaginary projection of the everyday life) makes children feel as an important and integrated subject of the real world.

The medal, of course, has two sides: virtual screen information damages the children's eyes, debauches their innocent consciousness, promotes antisocial behaviour and creates further a number of indecent habits, the results of which children bear in accordance with the real life rules.

Balance can be reached by establishing effective rules for staying in the virtual space, by teaching children sustainable values, which will block out any attempt for encroachment on their psychical and physical health. Its establishment would evidently require efforts, and what's more, concentrated and coordinated efforts of the children themselves, their parents, their teachers, and all institutions and organizations, considering children as their priority.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some of the findings in this paper have been published in: Raycheva, L., K. Hristova, D. Radomirova & R. Ginev. **Bulgaria: Childhood in Transition.** - A chapter in: Jensen, A., A. Ben-Arieh, C. Conti, D. Kutsar, M. Phádraig & H. Nielsen (eds.) „Children's Welfare in Ageing Europe”. Trondheim, Norway: Norwegian Centre for Child Research at NTNU, 2004, pp. 469-526.

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