

The Role of Media Education in Developing Children's Critical Thinking Toward TV Programs

Antar Venus

Pengaruh televisi terhadap anak masih menjadi isu hangat yang diperdebatkan hingga saat ini. Sebagian pakar komunikasi berpendapat bahwa televisi memiliki pengaruh negatif yang bersifat langsung terhadap pembentukan kepribadian anak, ahli lainnya meyakini bahwa pengaruh tersebut bersifat tidak langsung dan cenderung positif. Sementara, pakar komunikasi lainnya lagi berdiri di tengah-tengah kedua kubu ekstrem tersebut. Namun apapun bentuk pengaruh yang ditimbulkan televisi terhadap anak, sebagian besar pakar komunikasi sependapat bahwa sebaiknya anak dibekali kemampuan berpikir kritis ketika menonton televisi. Salah satu cara terbaik untuk menumbuhkan daya berpikir kritis tersebut adalah dengan melibatkan anak pada program edukasi media.

Tulisan ini bermaksud menganalisis benarkah program edukasi media tersebut mampu mengembangkan kemampuan berpikir kritis anak ketika menonton televisi. Hasil-hasil studi tentang program edukasi media di beberapa negara yang dipaparkan di sini memberikan kesimpulan yang berbeda. Hal ini mengindikasikan perlunya dilakukan penelitian lebih lanjut.

No informed person can say simply that television is bad or good for children (Schramm, Lyle, and Parker, 1961)

1. Introduction

Now days television sets are omnipresent. They have become a vital part of every household. Not only that they also have been considered as a foster mother. Many mothers allow their children to watch television freely without opposition from parents or other member of the family. The communication expert and psychologist have warned that children spend too much time watching television. Jeanne and Criticos (1994) states that in many countries both developed and developing countries children watch TV on average approximately 24 hours per week. Beside that research conducted by Dominguez and Rincon in Colombia (1992) found that TV emerges as the medium which children (78,5% of responses) liked most and knew best. Cinema is the second most popular medium, followed by newspapers and

finally radio. (Dominguez and Rincon, 1992:112).

The nomination of television as the most popular medium among children indicates it has a great power in attracting children's attention. Moreover it also has a significant influence on them. Many research findings that will be described later support this statement. We must make a balanced decision with regard to this matter, we can not simply get rid of televisions. In fact, television has both positive and negative effects. The positive effect such as pro-social behaviour can be accepted without argument whilst the negative effects such as aggression behaviour must be prevented.

Communication experts believe that such negative effects—as undesirable effects—can be minimized by socialization and implementation the media education., unfortunately the implementation of such education is scarcely carried out. Furthermore, investigations in this field are also very rare.

This *essay* will analyze the role of media education, specifically television, in preventing the

negative influence of TV programs on children by equipping them with critical thinking and making them critical viewers. The discussion of this paper will focus on ; Clarification of definition of media education and critical thinking, the need for media education of children, and research in media education in relation to the development of children's critical thinking. These three aspects are systematically directed to find out the answer to following question; Does Media education develop children's critical thinking toward television programs ?

2. Discussion

Before continuing the discussion, it is better to clarify the term media education and critical thinking applied in this essay. The word media here refers to television. Thus in this context media education for television will be discussed.

a. Definition of Media Education and Critical thinking

There are several definitions of media education. The oldest definition come from British Film institute the definition is as follows;

" Media education as a general term describing any progressive development of critical understanding which seeks to extend pupil's knowledge of the media and to develop their analytical and creative skills through critical and practical work. Such work should increase their capacity to understand both content of the media and processed involved in their production and reception. Media education include teaching about the form, conventions and technologies through which media are manufactured, the institutional arrangements and context, and their social. Political and cultural roles. It aims to create more active and critical media user who will demand and could contribute to greater range and diversity of media products". (Prinsloo and Criticos, 1991:21).

Stevenson (1996) states that media education is an integrated and systematic activity which is directed to developing the critical and creative thinking of the media user. Another definition pro-

posed by Fuenzalida explains that media education is planned programs which are carried out to develop audiovisual perception, to strengthen attention, awaken the critical thinking capacity and advance a creative imagination. In short, media education strives to create the critical awareness of the audiences toward mass media (Fuenzalida, 1992:141). And finally Minkkinen (1978:18) argues that media education means teaching children how to use sensibly the mass media, particularly television, for enriching the development of their whole personalities.

Regardless of the differences between the definitions given, principally all definitions share the following common aim. The aim is to develop a critical thinking of the viewer or in other words to create a critical viewer.

The second term, which must be clarified here, is the word critical thinking. In fact, it is not easy to give a comprehensive meaning to critical thinking. For this purpose critical thinking means an ability of the children in giving a critical judgment about something . In this context that means giving a judgment or evaluation of the content of TV programs. This also means audience or viewer will not take any values, norms or stereotypes depicted by television for granted.

Robert Ennis (McPack, 1981:2) points out that critical thinking has three dimensions : a logical dimension (how to use logic in dealing with TV programs), a criteria dimension (how to judge TV Programs based on an ethical and an esthetical aspects) and a pragmatic dimension (How to analyze practical values and get direct benefit from TV Programs). In this paper the teaching of media education will be related to these three aspects.

b. Do children need media education ?

Childhood is a critical period. In this period the development of their personality takes place. Also at this time various stimuli can easily influence their opinion, attitude and even behavior. It can happen since they have not yet a good filter sensor, which enables them to select from the stimuli coming to them.

The social learning theory of Albert

Bandura (Southwell and Merbaum, 1978 : 206) argues that children form their behavior through an imitation process. Various stimuli which appearing in front of them will be imitated. Meanwhile new behaviorist theoreticians in their Stimulus-Organism-Response theory say that any stimulus coming to the children's minds will be processed in accordance with the personality of the children and their daily experiences. It can be imagined what will happen if children spend a great deal of time in front of TV. Of course they will get a lot of experience from it. Considering this theory they tend to absorb any image, values, norms and stereotypes portrayed on television.

Moreover TV itself has a tremendous social power on its audience or viewers. The Independent Effect Theory (Selfe, 1993:120) argues that the media do have direct and independent effects on public attitudes and behaviour and even if these are only small. Another theory proposed by Psychologist and Communicologist (Selfe, 1993:120) is Reinforcement Theory. This theory suggests the media do strengthen pre-existing attitudes. In fact there are still several theories, yet all theories state that mass media particularly television has either positive or negative effects.

The following research findings will show difference results regarding the impact of television on children. Cumberbatch and Howitt who made fifteen studies on 2000 children in comprehensive schools and reviewed and analysed 300 studies into media violence concludes that there was no direct effect televised violence on children's behaviour. Nevertheless they found a great deal of contradictory evidence in the studies. (Selfe, 1993:120.)

However, other research made different findings. After conducting six months research, The Surgeon-General's report -USA (Selfe, 1993 : 126) come to the conclusion that TV violence does increase levels of aggression among child audiences. As many as 25% may be seriously affected. Of programmes classed as 'adult', 85 per cent are viewed by young children. Noble (Selfe, 1993) in 1985 found that for a small proportion of children with aggressive personalities viewing violence had

a 'cathartic effect'. Yet there may be some danger for children where there is no opportunity to discuss issues with adults. Many delinquents were found to be avid TV watchers.

The research findings stated above are convinced us that Television has both positive and negative effect as well as direct and indirect effect on children. This is in line with the statement stated by Schramm;

"For some children , under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it will be beneficial. For most children under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial (Schramm; Lyle, and Parker, 1961).

Although the television's influences on children are still debatable, the preventive action to protect our children from some negative effects of television is still beneficial to be carried out. This means children can not be allowed to watch television without limitations and also without being equipped with critical thinking. However, evidence shows that most children watch TV freely and excessively. Several surveys report that children in many countries watch television on average more than 20 hours per week. For instance, The YLKI-survey carried out in Indonesia argues that children watch television more and less 26 hours per week. The other survey conducted by Pye (Bryant and Anderson, 1983) found that on average each child in USA spent approximately 22 hours per week watching TV. The recent research conducted by Buckingham in 1993 found that on average children in Britain watch Television 28 hours per week. (Buckingham, 1994: 125)

What do children watch on TV ? The research conducted by Dominguez and Ricon in Colombia (1992: 48)) showed that 53,5% of the children watch adult programs without opposition from parents or other member of the family. This means children not only watch children programs but also adult programs. It seems this phenomenon will degrade rather than enrich children personality. This fact also indicates that children have be-

come vulnerable victims of Television. More than that the content and quality of television are not always educationally valuable and desirable.

Considering the theory as well as the research findings mentioned previously, it is reasonable to say that media education is needed for children. Theoretically by learning media education children will be more active and critical when watching television.

c. Research Findings on the implementation of media education

Like differences in definitions, the implementation of media education in various countries also varies. Seen from the organizer, media education can be divided into three types, these are media education conducted by government, religion institution (Church) and non governmental organisation (NGO's). So media education can be carried out in formal or informal way. The word Formal here means the activity conducted by government through a formal school. In this context the teaching of media education is integrated into school curriculum. While Informal media education is run by religion institution or NGO's.

The materials which generally covered in such education are teaching the form of mass media, basic Knowledge about film/news production, how to create sound effect, how to analyze the content of mass media (television) logically, how to discuss TV content by using ethical and esthetical criteria, and basic principle of television. So in general this concept is almost equivalent to Ennis's dimension of critical thinking (see page 3 of this paper).

Both formal and informal ways, technically media education programmes can be done through discussion either among peer-group or with the involvement of parents and instructors. Very often children watching a certain program first and then analyze it using a brainstorming method.

To my knowledge, the implementation of media education including investigation on this field is still carried out in a few countries such as Britain, United States,, German, Australia, Jordan, South Africa, Japan, India and Colombia.

The investigations concerning the role of media education in developing children's critical thinking conducted in those countries show different results. Dennis Bombardiers who investigated media education in Colombia (1990) found that media education activities had been successful in stimulating children to be critical and active viewers. Further he says that knowledge of what goes on behind the screen in the media also can sharpen the public's critical reactions. (Bazalgette, Bevort and Saviro, 1992:204).

The significant findings were also achieved in South Africa. Louis Shutterland explains that the implementation of media education in Natal Province showed a good result. Children (67% of the respondent) become critical and very active in evaluating television content. (Prinsloo and criticos, 1992:98).

However, the result of the implementation of media education in India was not satisfactory. There is no significant progress in children's critical attitudes toward television programs. Keval Joe kumar, the researcher who is responsible in carrying out the research apologised, that the application of media education in India was not conducted professionally. For that reason the developing of children's critical attitude shows no significant results. (Bazalgette, Bevort and saviro 1992 :281)

Several studies mentioned above indicate that the role of media education in developing children's critical thinking toward television programs is not yet proven scientifically. The lack of evidence makes the writer difficult to draw a conclusion or to give precise answer as stated in the beginning of this essay. Therefore it is needed further research to examine and prove the effectiveness of such education in improving Children's critical thinking.

3. Conclusion

The effect of television especially on children up till now is still debatable. But it does not mean children can be allowed to watch television excessively without control. Things that should be done

are to educate the children so that they become more critical when watching television. This can be done through media education. Through media education Hopefully children will be able to prioritize what kind of programs that should be viewed, when they should watch television and how to analyze the television content. However the scientific evidence of the role of the media education in developing children's critical attitude is not sufficient. This means needed further research in that area. ●

Reference

- Bazalgette, Bevort and Saviro. 1992. *New Direction of Media education*. London : BFI-Clemi and Unesco.
- Bryants, Jenny and Daniel Anderson. 1983. *Children's Understanding on TV*. New York: Academis Press.
- Buckingham, David. 1994. *Children Talking Television*. London: The falmer press.
- Dominguez and Rincon. 1992. *The Influence of Television*. in *New Direction of Media Education*, Buckingham et.al (ed). London : British Film Institute.
- Fuezalida, Valerio. 1992. *Media Education in latin America*. London: British Film Institute.
- Hamelink, Cees and Olga Linne. 1994. *Mass communication Research*. New Jersey : Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- McPeck, John. E. 1981. *Critical Thinking and Education*. New York :St.martin Press.
- Minkkinen, Sirkka. 1978. *A General Curricular Model for Mass Media Education*. New York: Unesco.
- Prinsloo, Jeanne and Costas Criticos. 1994. *Media matters* . New York: St. Martin Press.
- Schramm, Wilbur, Jack Lyle, and Edwin Parker. 1961. *Television in the lives of our Children*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Southwell and Merbaum. 1978. *Personality : Reading in Theory and Research*. Monterey California: Brooks/ Cole Publishing company.
- Stevenson, N. *Undesrtanding Media Culture*. London : Sage Publications. 1996.
- WNET Project. 1988. *Critical Television Viewing*. New York : Cambridge publisher.