

European Media and Communication Policies

Tommaso De Benetti

Student Number 0130211584

What are harmful contents in the media? Do they differ from media to media? In your opinion, what would be the best way to control them?

Introduction

Since media exist, their potential harmfulness has been discussed, blamed, demonstrated or proved wrong according to the interests of the parts involved. In the times when freedom was not a social priority but rather a nightmare for aristocrats, the very same idea of giving access to information to all people sounded odd, blaspheme or inopportune. Considering for example the western religious point of view on the matter, it's worth noting that the Old Testament itself identify the end of the Golden Era of mankind with the disobedience act perpetrated by Adam and Eve, whose taste of the forbidden fruit determined the ban from the Garden of Eden. For the ones who do not remember the whole story, the forbidden fruit was an apple (or more likely a pomegranate) growing on nothing less than the "Tree of Knowledge".

Freedom of speech, with some questionable exceptions discussed later, is nowadays one of the highest and more important values that developed nations try to promote. Media are audiovisual and interactive, and the possibilities to access information wide-ranged. New channels and tools appear almost on monthly basis, along with technical development and increasing user involvement. Television, radio, written media, Internet: all of them have common features but also specific characteristics that make it hard to define an international shared framework to control what kind of content is therein published or broadcasted.

However, most of the policy makers and citizens agree on the fact that there is a need to protect the youngest and defenseless group of the population, that is to say children and minors.

According to Ulla Carlson "many parents, teachers and policy-makers are concerned about the negative influence they believe media exert on children and adolescents. Such concerns have been voiced as long as mass media have existed, but the concern has grown in pace with developments in media technology. There is particular concern about depictions of violence in the media

and in computer games. Concern is also expressed about pornographic films and images, and other potentially harmful content that is being distributed more widely via satellite/cable television, the Internet, computer games and mobile telephones." (Carlson, 2006, 12).

Differences between audiovisual, written and interactive media

At this moment in time, the differences within media are already strongly defined: radio is a recipient for audio contents, speech and music; newspaper, books and magazines publish written text and still images; television and cinema are both audiovisual media, while the Internet and video games add to the multimedia elements a new important feature: interactivity. Harmful contents are commonly identified with extreme violence, pornography, pedopornography but also with some political issues or specific topics. As Eva Lievens highlights: "...freedom of expression is not an unconditional right. Constraints can be imposed if they are (1) prescribed by law, (2), introduced with a view to specified interests, such as the protection of health or morals, and (3) necessary in a democratic society." (Lievens, 2007, 317) In this regard my position is that in this historical moment we do not have by any means a real, shared, freedom of expression: especially considering the forbidden topics or political issues that cannot be freely discussed, we are somehow accepting the restriction that "by law" we are not supposed to speak about some uncomfortable topic. Independently from the real threat that such topics can represent, I feel that what we are enjoying now is not "freedom of speech" in its absolute meaning, but rather "freedom of speech about a great variety of issues, with some relevant exceptions". It's important to stress that this "freedom of speech concept" is not shaped around a shared international vision, but rather influenced, often on local basis, by religious authorities and/or peculiar political or ideological views. A next big step is needed: clear through the forbidden topics and leave to the individual citizens the decision about what they can argue about, why and how; the "market law" will do the rest.

Different European approaches on movies rating

A good example of the cultural barriers impeding coherent regulations on movie rating are given in the study *The Protection of Minors Against Harmful Media Content in Europe - How European Film Classifiers View Childhood and Adolescence* by Christian Büttner. Different nations, as he found out, approach the matter from very different perspectives, and filling these gaps seems to be a

priority for a consistent European strategy on media. Often *"such decisions are based less on general, scientifically founded principles than on certain concepts about childhood and adolescence."* (Büttner, 121)

From his "German perspective", Büttner is finding out that *"In Great Britain [...] the young are assumed to be highly impressionable, with limited self-control and lacking in emotional strength [moreover] the approach to the representation of sexual acts is also conservative: 'It is clear that Great Britain is much more conservative than the rest of Europe where sex scenes are concerned...' [...] and sex is something that 'should take place under the bedclothes'. Young people are not expected to develop their own position on this subject on the basis of their own experience or the impressions they have gathered from watching films. Instead, the state does this for them."* (Büttner, 123)

The situation is very different in other parts of Europe, even in those where for historical reasons one would expect even tighter limits. In Spain *"..it is up to the younger generation to decide at their own discretion which films they want to watch. In this respect, the freedom of the individual – and the young are not excluded here – seems to be an issue of central importance and something to be defended at all costs: 'Prohibitions always curtail somebody's freedom, and that's something to be avoided.' [...] In the Spanish approach, young people are urged to live freely and adopt a positive attitude towards life – which is not a position compatible with prohibition: 'Ultimately, the important thing is whether someone knows how to live or not. We shouldn't be setting out to proscribe things right from the word go – banning something is the very last resort. Instead, we should be teaching people how to live.'" (Büttner, 125)*

Generally speaking the Nordic Countries rely more on the responsibility of parents, while Great Britain prefer to intervene directly in the moral conduct of English people, while France set itself in the middle, not caring about violent American movies but carefully considering violent situations (like suicide scenes) that French minors can recognize as closer to their personal experience.

Television Programs, Written Media and Radio

Television programs undergo a classification which is similar to the one regarding movies, with the difference that the division is usually simplified (e.g. "For Children", "To see with an Adult", "For Adults"). Contents are normally rated according to the national standards of morality previously mentioned, and therefore violence, swearing and nudity can be shown in accordance with the meaning of the "restriction levels" enforced in that specific country. For example, in Italy partial/complete women nakedness is not a tabu, while complete male

nakedness is; in Germany references to Nazism are seriously considered; and so on.

Written media and radio usually enjoy a wider tolerance on topics that can be discussed or written about. It seems, for some reason that are not completely consistent and with some noticeable exceptions, that text is considered "less harmful" than a visual or interactive input, even though there is no need to underline that religious or political texts like the Bible, the Coran, Das Kapital or Mein Kampf are not completely irrelevant to the death of millions in the past. Very seldomly some books or magazines are forbidden to minors or even to adults, if they do not publish pornography. Serious reason of censorship for texts or radio programs usually have something to do with political apology to certain unwelcome ideologies, racism, discrimination or offence of religious beliefs, but it's worth noting that these directives are not always applied with the same fervor and neutrality.

Internet and Games

As expressed by the European Commission, "Illegal, harmful and undesirable content and conduct on the Internet continues to be a concern for law-makers, industry and parents. [. . .] Taking into account the ever-increasing processing power and storage capacity of computers, and the fact that broadband technologies allow distribution of content such as video on 3G mobile telephones, the need for a safe environment is greater than ever." (European Commission, 2004, 2-3)

Internet is a tricky media. It gives access to every kind of content that the other media reproduce, adding interactivity and also the possibility to access illegal material with relative ease. The very same nature of the Internet make it difficult to control, because regulations change from country to country and because the viral spread of contents is hardly stoppable. Filters are hard to apply and work is such a way that they also filter perfectly legal material, slowing down technological development and infringing users privacy. Piracy, moreover, has been in the past years hardly pushed by an industry far too greed and blind to the social, cultural and technological changes that the Internet brought along.

To give an example of how hard is to control the Net, last year in Italy there was a case about a flash game published by the political active multimedia ensemble Molleindustria (<http://www.molleindustria.org/>) on the topic of pedophile priests and the omerta promoted by Vatican on the issue: the game quickly reached the

Parliament, that asked right away for immediate removal. Few ours later, the game disappeared from the Italian server and was hosted by dozens of servers in the USA. The authors obeyed to law, but not before making sure of receiving backup from the whole Internet community, which is famous for being anarchic and often allergic to authorities.

Compared to Internet, games are even harder to judge, being often extremely expensive multi authorial productions involving visual, audio and interactive stimuli. Nikken, Jansz and Schouwstra conducted in 2007 a study about the PEGI rating system and the knowledge of it that parents have. They claim: *"The majority of parents thought it very necessary to have ratings. Warnings of realistic gore and gross were considered most important, followed by warnings regarding alcohol/drugs, fantasy violence, bad language and, finally, nudity [...] In order to ensure that 'innappropriate' games are not played by children under certain ages, most countries in Europe in 2003 embraced PEGI rating system. This rating system has pictograms for six types of possibly harmful content [...] and five age categories [...]"*. (Nikken, Jansz, Schouwstra, 2007, 316)

The problem with games is that the influence of interactivity on young minds is hard to evaluate. There are studies proving both positive and negative outcomes according to what they are trying to demonstrate. The example used by the supporter of harmfulness of games is that *"watching somebody dying in a movie is one thing, swirling your Nintendo Wii Remote Controller in the air to smash his head is another"* (cfr. Manhunt 2 case). It's hard to come up with an answer to the question *"who's right?"*; games are very different from each others, often they have a multi layered structure and eventually every game is a different case. Moreover, the community of gamers itself - composed by casual player, hard core players, developers, game theoreticians and so on - is very divided about the issue. I think it's also interesting to note that in the discussion about their results, Nikken, Jansz and Schouwstra are claiming *"We suggest that the PEGI system reconsider its emphasis on possible harmfulness and takes into account that some parents want information about game content from the perspective of undesirability for children, rather than harmfulness"*. (Nikken, Jansz, Schouwstra, 2007, 331)

Anyway, even being such a young media, still in search of it's own identity (being it interactivity, new form of visual narration or something else), video games are at least in one respect more advanced than any other media: transparency. To be more specific, given the importance that the "harmful content issue" is assuming, the last generation of consoles has been built with the problem in mind. By

default, the recent machines of the 3 biggest market players are giving access to filters that can inhibit the reproduction of games that belong to a certain PEGI classification (e.g. "18 years"). PC, for historical reasons the gaming platform of older players, is following closely. It's a brilliant and smart move, because it's now hard to blame Sony, Nintendo or Microsoft if your child is playing something that you do not like.

It's also true that one of the problem of PEGI is that it's just a suggestion, and it's not binding anyone. This means that in many countries games with very different classifications are sold on the very same shelves, and the sellers most of the time do not really care what he's selling you. Under this light, we should consider the perspective of some nations that Büttner's study dig out: citizens themselves should be aware of what they do, what they see, what they consume and what they do hand out to their children.

Conclusion

Like Büttner is noticing, I think that one of the problem in deciding what is harmful in media is that the European cultural background cannot be reduced or summarized in just one final position, especially in the light of technical developments that continuously challenge what a user can get or do. Historical, religious and social differences are still too influent on the evaluation scale of Europeans to find common basis that do not cover only the most widely accepted concepts (e.g. pedopornography is a crime). The solution lies probably in shifting the discussion from the different moral beliefs to concrete scientific evidences. Researches carried on by independent groups should aim at finding objective "European" (or "Worldwide") criteria for the evaluation of media and to the development of a common and recognizable evaluation method (like the PEGI for video games) that extends to all the media production. It's also my belief that the road to progress lies there where the citizens are becoming responsible of their own life and of the one of their relatives, leaving the legislator in the background for every choice that involves personal development. It's still a long road, but not one impossible to follow.

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