

*Television and computers have a tremendous impact on our children.
It is for us to see how we can get the best from these technologies*

Whiz Kids

by Vasanti Rao



The word millennium connotes different challenges and opportunities to different people. Yet one thing common, we all accept is - the inevitable role technology will play in and on our lives - in

this millennium.

Children and young people are among the most active citizens of the new era, and are often first in their family to use the new media. From transistor to

television to telnet to transponders to transmission – all these communication technologies have become part of our day to day vocabulary and often even our lives. Prominently among these new modern technologies – television and computers are here to stay and they're changing the way children learn, play, and get ready for their work life.

Since television's introduction into households, in the last two decades, it has been the most controversial and yet most important source of information, education and entertainment in our lives. Though this medium's technology has more or less lost its novel sheen, it is still the most attractive. Now equally controversial and impor-

tant today are the computers and specially the access to the Internet. Television and Internet – are two phenomenal potential for the course of human evolution. How have these two important media technologies affected and altered our lifestyles? What are their implications for our children? What can we to do to get the best from these technologies?

Television is almost as pervasive as everyday language in most homes. The average child in Britain, Australia and United States watches over 14000 hours of television up to the age of 18. In India, children spend almost two hours per day watching television and on weekends this time goes up to almost four hours. That is after school, children spent most of their time with the television!

Children in general prefer programme types that are the best available for their cognitive development: cartoons for younger children, prime-time serials for older ones, in spite of often expressed disapproval by parents and educators. Children are more vulnerable to this medium because they (unlike most adults) have difficulty in understanding and differentiating between "reel and real" and "fantasy and reality" and do not understand that the purpose of programmes is entertainment and that of advertisements is to sell a product.

Marshall McLuhan in his famous book *The Medium*

is the Message made the following comment: "Today's child is growing up absurd, because he lives in two worlds, and neither of them inclines him to grow up. Growing up – that is our new work, and it is total."

Negative Effects

There is no denying the fact that television is a very important source of learning for today's children. There is a lot everybody, including children, learns like information about different parts of the world, improving vocabulary, providing entertainment and making us laugh. But the concern and debate now, and specially for children is the negative effect it has on their psyche, values and overall development. Incidences of children imitating violent acts of television characters, picking up foul language, creating artificial demands in poor homes, creating barriers in inter-personal relationships and even having behavioural problems due to television have come to light. Slowly and steadily the impact and implications of the 'idiot box' are coming to light. The fact that television often manipulates reality and gives an exaggerated version of life has been an argument against it. Research has proved that excessive television viewing also influences our physical well-being and even distorts our vision of the world.

Just as one drop of water on a stone seems to leave a stone unaffected but continual dripping in time can wear away a hole, so with television we must be careful to pick up effects that may be invisible at the level of programme, or series, but important over a lifetime.

Individual Variations

I want to add a word of caution here. Impact is never a direct cause and effect relationship. How a particular person understands and perceives a certain content differs from another. There are many factors at play during this content-viewer interaction. Some major factors include: for the viewer – nature, personality, experience, age, gender, socio-economic background, *et cetera*; in terms of content – format, style, transmission, time, *et cetera*. Environment, both personal and socio-cultural, is a factor by itself.

It is really interesting to note that often when we talk of impact and effect of television, it is in terms of the 'weaker others', this often being children and not us.



Influence Of Television

It's time to recognise the potential and influence of this powerful medium, on all of us, and to take control. Whether the influence of television is negative or positive, depends on how it is used.

Usually children learn from everything they see on television therefore teaching children to be critical viewers is very important. Experts agree that the best way to teach children to understand television and to be a television critic is to watch with them and help them question what they see and hear. Each of us, whether adult or child, gets involved in television programmes with different levels of understanding because of who we are and what life experiences we bring to our television viewing. Thus we can filter and change what television presents by the way we watch it. We can question, challenge and contradict - or support and reinforce - what we see and hear.

Media Literacy

The need of the hour today is media literacy (specifically in schools) which is concerned with helping children develop an informed and critical understanding of the

nature of mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques. More specifically, it is education that aims to increase children's understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organised, and how they construct reality.

Computer As A Learning Tool

Computers are, at a very fast pace, becoming a part of our lives just like television did. It has an advantage over television because it is more interactive and has unlimited choices. We can read, talk, watch and even discuss online with people around the world using the Internet. In fact few say that if television is the extension of the human eye, the Internet is an extension of the human brain.

But in a country like ours where there are social restrictions to some information (like pornography; *et cetera*) - the Internet is the ideal way out! I know of fathers who have got the computer to make their children computer savvy and help them with their education but they have ended up using it to view pornographic material.

The computer as a learning tool, is fast becoming an electronic tutor for children. They can help children learn skills using information resources and technology such as problem-solving, fact-gathering, analysis, and writing on computers. Computers can open up new worlds of rich learning experiences to children through schools, libraries, and home and can increase access to children who have been shut out. Children with disabilities can participate more fully in learning, in art programmes, and in socialising.

But computer and on-line time alone can't make children get the best marks nor a well-rounded, successful adult. Children learn best when they receive individualised attention and encouragement from teachers and parents. Every kind of technology from the blackboard to slide presentations to cable television in the classroom, is simply a tool effectiveness of which depends on using it well.

In fact the fear now is that will computers go the television way? Already there are lesser known effects of the Net like information overload, alienation, disassociation, *et cetera*, surfacing. Going by the phenomenal growth of the Net and the status it has acquired in such a short time, the process of its influence on society has become evident. Cyber cafes and dating on the Net are two visible effects.

Parental Guidance

Again, how we use and get the best of this media depends on us. There's a lot of great stuff on the Internet, but parental guidance and involvement is essential to help steer children towards the best sites and away from potential trouble. Establish clear ground rules for Internet

use for children. Place your computer (and television) in the family room or another open area of your home.

We need to be cautious of the addictive potential of television and the Net which can change our version of reality. Our only consolation is that since man is a social being, the television or the Net can at best serve as a digression not a destination. Though these technologies are here to stay and play an important role in our lives, children still need the balance that comes from outdoor activities, friends and family, solid academic skills, and



healthy relationships with strong adult role models.

As Edward R Murrow says, "This instrument can teach, it can illuminate, yes, it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise, it's nothing but wires and lights in a box."

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