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Youth in the Media Culture

The Internet Revolution: Farewell to Protective Pedagogy?

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“What was the best day of my life? It was when I could finally be online as long as I wanted!” The 12-year-old boy smiles at me delightedly. But his response perplexes me. What about Christmas? Or the vacation in Tuscany? Childhood is supposed to be a time of venturing out into the world, playing with the neighbor kids, building a hut with your cousin, a time of experiences shared with parents or friends. Could the boy perhaps recall a satisfying moment in school? Hasn't he participated in hundreds of school-hours' worth of projects and group endeavors? His face tells me those were secondary events. Nothing surpasses the day on which he was granted access to world events as transmitted by the media.

Childhood and adolescence today are quite different from what they were twenty, thirty or more years ago. In former times youngsters were absorbed by outdoor play, excursions to amusement parks, exploring a cave or engaging in an illicit voyage of exploration to a building site. The world had clear outlines; things terrible and incomprehensible were banned, or at most flickered on the edges of youthful awareness. Adults regarded children and adolescents as existing in a protected space which could be meaningfully molded by education. Delicate subjects were avoided. As an adolescent you had to spend your Saturdays gathering old newspapers and magazines in order to finally see pictures of naked women, and you worked out your fantasies of violence in games of dodge ball or Cowboys and Indians. The TV was ensconced in the parlor, under the more or less strict supervision of the parents. They decided what reached our eyes and ears. The horrible and the obscene were carefully excised – except perhaps for an occasional crime movie or a relative who behaved in an unseemly fashion at a family gathering.

In the last ten years, however, the life experience of childhood and adolescence has been revolutionized. The limits set by parents and teachers have become porous, if not entirely permeable. Thanks to the interconnectedness generated by the Internet, the borders between the protected space of childhood and the terrible world “out there” have been virtually eradicated. From the moment when a youngster decides to, he/she can participate in a flood of information and images unobserved by adults. A mere mouse-click gives him access to knowledge, scandals, crass and horrible events, problematic images. The social seclusion of the computer makes it possible for a youngster to devote him/herself to subjects that lie outside the family moral code or the pedagogical scale of values. One can surf porno sites from the privacy of one's own room, shudder in viewing the scene of a horrible accident or of an execution in Iran.

In virtual space, no limits are imposed on the urge to explore. Youngsters exchange hot tips on YouTube or other sites among themselves. Not only can they click onto foreign cultures and new areas of knowledge, they can also play around with more dubious things which are frowned on by educators – throw rocks at police on the streets of Los Angeles, visit low-down bars, spend time with a prostitute in a filthy old Chevy. Once youngsters discover the Internet and the potential of the computer, traditional games do not stand much of a chance against more notorious ones. Children brought up media-savvy quickly find hide-and-seek boring.

The Internet revolution has also altered social behavior. No need to use the hall phone to talk to your girlfriend and worry whether Mom is listening; your communications strategies remain hidden from adults in the private space of the Internet. Relationships become experiments carried on virtually. Thanks to chat rooms, Twitter, Facebook and the cell phone, youngsters can establish contact networks of which their parents and teachers are ignorant. Girls can flirt with unknown men in chat rooms, post erotic pictures of themselves, and thanks to Facebook build up an enormous circle of friends. Instead of making appointments in advance, kids send out numerous text messages to get a sense of the current scene and their friends' plans before making definite plans. And of course, one can also be downright nasty electronically, posting an embarrassing photo on Facebook in order to accuse someone of drinking or fooling around on the side, or even opening a hate page. The virtual world opens new ways of ganging up on others, and people can end relationships in a moment with a simple text message.

Many parents, politicians and educators are worried about these developments. They fear that the coming generation will be cruder, nastier. Will they confuse pornography with healthy sexuality? Do violent computer games generate more violence, and ugly pictures leave emotional traumas behind? Are children and youth losing their sense of reality and being laid open to questionable contacts? We fear that we are exposing our children and adolescents to subjects and temptations they are not mentally or emotionally equipped to handle. Counter-measures are being considered. There are calls for a ban on killer games, for regulated computer access and increased parental controls, so that we do not raise a generation of unrealistic computer junkies who are disoriented and unequal to direct social contact.

Two centuries and more ago, childhood and adolescence did not occupy a prominent role in social discourse. Youngsters were regarded as incomplete adults who would mature and one day naturally blend into family life and the workplace. Upbringing was more or less structured by the youngsters themselves. Crass misbehavior brought parental intervention, while those who behaved properly were left alone. Children and adolescents were disciplined, expected to behave and to do their part at home or in the workplace. They were not comprehended as people with a special psychology and needs of their own. Even on into the 18th century children and youth did not live in their own particular space. At public executions, the front seats were reserved for the youngsters;

at drinking bouts in taverns, adolescents drank right along, and youngsters served tea in bordellos.

It was only with Rousseau, Froebel, and the later rise of psychoanalysis and pedagogical reform, that there was widespread realization that children and youth need a special habitat in order for healthy development to take place. They were then discovered to be creatures with special needs and concerns, who were not to be integrated into society any old way, but should have available to them a space where they can evolve in keeping with their own inclinations and concerns. The idea took hold that childhood and adolescence comprise a sensitive time of life in which the character of a child is formed. Our adult efforts and attention determine whether its character will develop in a positive way. Love, nurture and the transmittal of social codes are not enough; also needed are the appropriate actions, attitudes and stimulants.

The discovery of childhood as a crucial phase of life had consequences in the realm of policy. The field of education came to be seen as a way of transmitting social goals and turning ideologies and ideals into realities. Childhood and youth became the objects of society's ambitions and values. The coming generation would have to be carefully raised, educated and nurtured if we wished to maintain our state, transmit our values and have an impact on the future.

With this paradigm shift, children and youth became the carriers of adult projections, infused with desires and visions. Through the education of our children, Nature was to be upgraded and better protected, society was to be disciplined, the patriarchal social model overcome, the relation to authority more critical. If we would treat children and adolescents properly and lend meaning to their environment, so it was thought, equality of opportunity could be improved and social conflicts prevented. There was a perceived need to find ways and means of transmitting positive guidelines to the next generation. Kindergartens were designed along the lines of the Garden of Eden, and Paul Geheb had schools built outdoors. The emphasis was not on the confrontation with the uglinesses of this world, but on designing a protective space appropriate for youngsters. In this "child-based pedagogy," self-realization was the focal point. Parents and teachers were to make every effort to allow young people to pursue their own development with a minimum of worry and negative influences. Consequently, since the realization that childhood is a formative phase of life, there have been repeated warnings about negative influences. During the 20th century educators issued warnings about the harmful influence of alcohol, of premature sexual contact – but also of the railroad, the radio, the automobile, jazz, and the hip-swings of Elvis Presley. There was a widespread conviction that masturbation would lead to feeble-mindedness, and the youth magazine "Bravo" to sexual degeneration.

"My son really gave me hell when I refused him the right to log onto the Internet!" admitted one father angrily. He decided on this drastic measure when his 14-year-old

son had spent night after night at the computer and as a result overslept and was late for school the following mornings. Our children do not always appreciate our efforts to protect them from negative influences and lead them to positive activities. The enormous efforts we make to create a world of education and leisure appropriate to youngsters are hardly greeted with appreciation. They regard immersion in the virtual world as a natural human right which they will not be denied by firewall or commandment.

We can no longer turn back the wheel of history. It is inconceivable to send young people back into a protected living space. In today's liberal society we no longer have the power to do so. We must come to terms with the loss of our monopoly on knowledge and our power as watchdogs of information. At a certain age, youngsters feel a natural curiosity to get to know "the world out there." They recognize the opportunities which society offers them, and want to take advantage of them. They are no longer content to have adults pre-select for them, but want to find out how things "really" are. Frequently the emphasis is on the search for the alien, the completely different, which breaks the bounds of the horizons of thought provided by family and school, enabling them to set themselves apart from the adult world. Information about indecent things must no longer be laboriously fought for by way of deals and accommodations; it is available gratis, readily accessible if you know the right Web address. Thanks to the Internet there are no longer any limits imposed on curiosity and the desire to experiment. The appropriation of knowledge happens anarchically, amorally, and often out of genuine curiosity. Adults are condemned to a peripheral position. To ban such activities as killer computer games is as difficult as our attempts to meaningfully mold the media world through education. Censorship makes its object doubly attractive. Young people realize that the world of the Internet gives them enormous freedom. *They* decide what information and which games to download and spend their time on.

Because of the Internet revolution, we must radically re-think our attitudes to childhood and adolescence. The discussion today can no longer focus on *whether* young people may look at problematic Web sites or play violent computer games, but on *how* to deal with the media revolution. What self-responsibilities can be encouraged in youngsters, so that they can orient themselves in the flood of information and make thoughtful choices? What psychological conclusions can be reached so that young people may protect themselves and so that their occupation with unsuitable subject matter has no harmful consequences?

It has been amply demonstrated that violence-prone youngsters spend more time with these unappetizing games than peaceful ones do. But it is questionable whether there is a causal connection with their unsocial behavior. Problematic youngsters look everywhere for models of and reasons for their aggressivity – in comedies, the behavior of the police, presumptions of injured family honor. Young people these days mold their own spheres of life. They choose from the immense flood of information and images

whatever suits their own inclinations.

Perhaps we need to let go of the idea of a protective pedagogical space and return to medieval ideas about childhood and adolescence. We must start with the assumption that young people today are once again growing up in a world in which they are confronted with the shadow side of mankind. Since we have little control over the process, we must concentrate on our areas of competence. What kind of preparation is required so that youngsters can orient themselves in the chaos of information and images? It calls for a concept of education which looks squarely at the awful things with which young people are confronted on the Internet. The dark side of humanity must no longer be set aside until "later." The uncanny fascination with violence, the attraction of pornography, the glee in destructiveness and the tricky maneuvers of which people are capable – these things must be included as subjects of education. We must not allow our sons and daughters to be subjected to these things on their own.

This re-thinking is not simple. Old thought patterns must be overcome. We would naturally prefer to continue talking about our "brave new world" and the efforts to achieve paradisiacal conditions, filling our schoolbooks with idealistic proposals and banning horrors, cravings and addictions from their purview. In our pedagogy, however, we can no longer assume ideal situations, but rather include and reflect the treacherousness and darkness of mankind, so that young people, along with the adults, can find a way to handle these matters. Children and adolescents should no longer serve as screens onto which we project our desires for a better world.