

## **‘Media Degeneracy’: A Cause of School Failure and Juvenile Delinquency?**

Christian Pfeiffer

Family Müller has just taken delivery of a new television. Its predecessor is only a few years old and still works, but it seemed like time for a change. Because the shop didn't offer much for the old one, it ends up in the room of thirteen-year-old Max. This means no more arguments over the choice of viewing, and Max is happy because he can at last watch what he wants.

Events like this must be a frequent occurrence in German households. According to data from media education researchers at Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, about half of all German children aged 13 to 15 now have a television in their own room, rising to just under 70 per cent for 16 to 17s. Even among German six-year-olds the figure is one in four. The data also show striking differences between eastern and western Germany. Some 55 per cent of eastern German children aged 6 to 13 are proud to call a television their own, compared with 28 per cent in the west.

TV-happy parents who shrug and ask ‘So what?’ should perhaps be pointed to the many representative surveys that have been done on child and adolescent media consumption. These show that giving children their own television raises daily viewing time by about an hour – from two-and-a-half to about three-and-a-half hours on workdays and from four to five hours at weekends. That's more time in front of the television than in the classroom – bearing in mind that most German children have half-day schooling and that there is no school at all for 135 days a year.

The 135 mornings when German children can stay in bed have another affect. Boys in particular tend to spend the previous evening watching TV late into the night and without adult supervision – taking the opportunity to see films that cannot be shown before the eleven p.m. watershed because child welfare experts have rated them unsuitable for minors. Recent surveys reveal that 56 per cent of boys aged 12 to 17 frequently watch films of this kind. The figure for girls is only 25 per cent. And this is not all: Boys predominate among those who watch television most. In a representative survey back in 1998, 18 per cent of male ninth graders (around age 13) said they watched more than four hours' television a day, as against 13 per cent of girls. On top of this, two-thirds of boys regularly play computer games that are rated unsuitable for minors and hence banned for under-18s. Again, only 14 per cent of girls play games of this kind.

Taking all three aspects together, we can fairly state that at least a fifth of males aged 12 to 17 have fallen into a state of 'media degeneracy'. Their leisure time is dominated by viewing action and violence films and playing PC games that are unsuitable for minors.

And what does this mean for those affected? First of all, their social life atrophies. Children who spend more than four hours of their leisure time in front of the television or a computer literally miss out on life. They have no time left for training with the football team and learning how to be good losers at the Sunday match. They have no time to rehearse with a band or orchestra and so miss out on the joys of putting on a good show with friends. And for want of time to fall out with a best friend, they never learn what it means to make up and bury their differences. As a result, their social skills remain underdeveloped. Even if they spent their time watching Astrid Lindgren films, the outcome would be the same. Practice only makes perfect if it takes place in real life, not in fantasy.

Children who watch hours of television each day barely have time to make a proper job of their homework. They also get too little exercise, which is bad for the mind as well as the body. Neurobiologists have shown that children's mental development suffers if they have too little opportunity for physical rough and tumble. We should also heed what neuroscientists report about the effects of excessive television on learning in children and adolescents. They tell us that what children hear at school or take in while doing homework is initially committed to short-term memory. The process of transfer to long-term memory and so to

retained knowledge takes at least twelve hours and critically depends on what emotional experiences the child undergoes in the hours after learning in school. The brain responds highly sensitively to strong feelings. It concentrates its memorisation efforts on more emotionally moving experiences.

Spending one's afternoon completely spellbound by disturbing, shocking film scenes will effectively swamp out anything previously committed to short-term memory. Curricular knowledge pales against the emotive power of film images. And anyone who makes the added mistake of watching a horror or action film shortly before going to sleep massively impairs the sleeping brain activity needed to establish long-term memories. Neuroscientists stress that both dream-intensive REM sleep and deep, non-REM sleep have an important role in consolidating memories. We do indeed learn in our sleep – but only if we avoid disturbing images beforehand.

Given this knowledge and the data on juvenile media consumption, one trend made visible by school statistics over the last decade comes as no surprise: boys are doing worse and worse at school. Ten years ago, girls predominated among early school leavers by 52 to 48. By 2002, boys were 'leading' on this count by 64 to 36. The imbalance in eastern Germany is even bigger, at 66 boys to 33 girls. In eastern Germany, the proportion of school leavers comprising adolescents leaving school early is 12 per cent – significantly higher than the 8 per cent recorded in the west. Eastern German girls achieve a larger share of *Abitur* (roughly, A-level) passes than their western counterparts (57 versus 52 per cent). Boys also make up a clear, 60-40 majority among pupils required to repeat a school year. Finally, male *Gymnasium* (grammar school) pupils lag behind girls by 0.4 of a grade.

Other factors no doubt contribute to the emergence and growth of these performance differences. One is the large influx in the nineties of immigrant ethnic groups in which boys tend to be spoilt while girls are expected to be highly disciplined. Consequently, gender differences in school achievement are even more pronounced among, say, Turkish than among German children. All the same, the neurological findings leave little doubt that differences in media consumption between boys and girls are a key factor.

Besides school achievement, there are growing discrepancies between boys and girls in other areas, as police and crime statistics show. The difference in crime rates between male and

female adolescents has increased continuously since the mid-eighties. Crime among girls has risen significantly. The number of girls aged 16 to 17 with a police record as crime suspects has gone up from 2.1 per cent to 3.7 per cent. But the increase among boys is far stronger (from 7.0 per cent to 12.5 per cent). The differences come out even more strongly if we focus on violent crime. Here, the gender difference in figures for recorded crime suspects has grown almost threefold since the mid-eighties. This should come as no surprise, as bad marks are known to increase the risk of sliding into juvenile crime. Those who lack success at school simply seek it elsewhere.

There is manifestly a further link between excessive consumption of violent films and juvenile delinquency. Findings from more recent studies imply a small, high-risk group of five to ten per cent of male adolescents for whom such films directly affect their liability to commit acts of violence. For these juveniles – considered at particularly high risk due to family and social factors such as domestic violence, emotional neglect or failure at school – excessive portrayals of violence can serve as immediate models for identification and action. An extreme example is the 19-year-old school student Robert Steinhäuser from Erfurt in eastern Germany: after failing at school, the fan of first-person shooter computer games and aggressive music ran amok in his school, killing sixteen people.

So what can be done? American scientists at Stanford University are attempting to find an answer. An interesting field experiment is currently underway at two schools there. In a project coupling written information for parents with carefully prepared teaching units in schools, nine-year-old children were asked to voluntarily restrict their television viewing. An equally sized control group of nine-year-olds at other schools are not involved in the media education experiment. After six months, pupils at the trial school showed a marked reduction in television use and significantly lower aggression, while the control group showed no change. Preliminary findings as to whether pupils at the trial school have also improved their school performance are anticipated towards the end of this year.

The Stanford scientists' experiment inspired a group of German neurobiologists, media scientists and criminologists from Delmenhorst, Magdeburg and Hannover to plan an even larger pilot study in the states of Lower Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt. As well as 9-year-olds, our study will also include school students aged 12 and 15 so we can systematically explore the chances of motivating children, adolescents and their parents to make more sensible use of

the media. Our hopes of achieving positive results with this project are not only based on the encouraging findings of the Stanford experiment. They also draw on the fact that various parent-teacher grassroots action groups have recently come into being in Germany with the aim of combating media degeneracy among children and adolescents. An initiative of this kind has come into being in Osnabrück under the aegis of the Catholic women's network, and groups of parents with children at several schools have joined forces in the Elsterwerda district in the south of Brandenburg. These parents are aware of one crucial thing: It is not enough to remove the TV from children's rooms and to monitor their PC use more closely. We need to give children and adolescents enjoyment in life to prevent them from devoting their leisure to questionable media consumption.

Even if the project fully attains its objectives and is copied nationwide, the problems we have described will only be partly solved. To break the links between media degeneracy among children and adolescents and its consequences, we need both public debate on the topics we have touched upon and systematic plans for reform. For example, the specifically German imbalance – where children and adolescents spend more time in front of the television or computer screen than they do being taught in class – can be changed to lasting effect by significantly increasing the number of all-day schools. This would be of particular help to children and adolescents from families who for financial or other reasons are unable to offer attractive alternatives to prevent media degeneracy. The 'Schau hin' ('Look!') media education initiative started by Germany's Ministry for Family Affairs and the ZDF television channel is another step in the right direction. It could be supplemented by a series of short informative television spots educating parents in the right and wrong ways to deal with children – in general and not just as relates to television and home computers – along similar lines to Germany's long-running and successful public education broadcasts on driving skills.

When I was still Minister of Justice in Lower Saxony, I tried out another way to improve protection of minors in the media. The sixty leading advertisers in private television received a letter from me in which I began by explaining the facts presented in this article. Based on these arguments, I then asked the companies if they would consider refraining from advertising in adult-rated late-night violent and horror films. To my delight, Volkswagen, Toyota, Microsoft, Hansa Saturn and twelve others were readily prepared to join an initiative of this kind. The great majority either refused or failed to reply, however. I also advocate a radical policy in support of these various approaches: banning television broadcasts of films

that the national board of film classification has issued with an '18' certificate due to their unsuitability for minors. Adults who really want to see violent excesses and hardcore porn can go to the cinema or obtain films on video. The presence of televisions in children's bedrooms leaves no other option in my view if we want to protect our children from the destructive power of such images. We only need to take seriously the message Johann Wolfgang von Goethe left us 200 years ago in the second of his *Zahme Xenien* or 'Tame Epigrams':

Talk nonsense with impunity  
Write it where'er you want.  
It can do no harm nor injury  
Nor cause undue affront.

But nonsense put out for all to see  
Takes on a life unto its own.  
It holds the senses in its fee  
And turns the intellect to stone.