

A study of the story-bound world of our children

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ABSTRACT

Humans are a narrating species. We narrate ourselves and in doing so we find our place in the world, we interrogate and understand the realities we inhabit. If we argue that stories are the bread and butter of a growing mind what are the stories that we as children are hearing?

What's their content? Are they full of hope, joy, wonder, grace and love or are they about dangers, betrayals, sorrows, blind faith and superstition? What are the sources of these stories? Are parents mindful of what stories their children are hearing and seeing?

As our children grow up more in a digitalised and mediatised world how will things come to shape? How much of an influence would parents and families be in shaping the narratives of the children in comparison to the mass media?

The study explored the role of stories in the world of our children. The study looked at the sources of the stories and the degree of mindfulness that parents invested in storytelling as they brought their children up. The working hypothesis was that children were primarily exposed unwittingly to stories of family and family members, both living and dead, present and absent. However, a large proportion of the stories that children were exposed to came from the mass media.

Keywords – storytelling, children, mass media, digitisation, mediation, parents.

1. Introduction

In modern society, mass media is a very influential source of acquiring content for children and adolescents. The influences have a long-lasting, subtle, cumulative impact of which the parents, educators and paediatricians aren't aware and neither are the teenagers and the children. The "third-person effect" states that young people along with adults are strongly influenced by the media. (Strasburger, 2004)

The current scenario witnesses an environment that works on social media and digital devices. This has seeped down in families wherein they are constantly a part of groups on platforms like WhatsApp and others where content in forms of the story flows. The access is rapidly increasing since the current generation is extremely tech-savvy and are exposed to this form of storytelling. Younger children too are a part of this since a lot of content on the internet or other platforms target them leading to early exposure.

Media plays an important role in developing cultural orientations, world views and beliefs along with the distribution of values and stereotyped images globally. They mirror and channel cultural trends and are major agents of society. They are direct means of war propaganda and also lead to inter-group violence. In all, it is important to consider prevention possibilities and identify the propagation of violence. (Groebel, 1998)

Family storytelling has a notable, profound and long-lasting effect on a child, the parents, the caregivers and the relationship they share. These stories form the child's experience of the world and broaden their education in human psychology. An increase in emotional literacy is noted by the thoughts, feelings and actions of the characters in the story. The child's emotional response is based on how the storyteller responds to the characters, plot developments and their comments on the story. Storytelling in comfortable spaces like homes provides the child with an assurance to confront demons like the threat of abandonment. Attachment theory suggests that storytelling is powerful and it strengthens attachments in many important ways. (Frude - Killick, 2011)

The past two decades have seen the phenomenon of the digitisation of the media, reshaping the media landscapes. This process has affected areas of the media industries in terms of production practices, over distribution technologies and the audience reception which has made the media mobile, interactive and versatile. Media is involved in processes of convergence on the borders between media technologies. It is very difficult to make differences between these technologies since they work and carry out functions and forms from each other for example, how we can listen to the radio on television, computers and mobile phones or how a movie can be seen at the cinema, on television, mobile phones and computers. With digital technology based on transistors and integrated circuits, the computers are said to be the heart of the development. (Winston, 1998) The computer is the medium surrounded by the discourse of convergence, so it 'melts' older media into its technology. (Bolin, 2007)

Our working hypothesis for the paper was that children were primarily exposed unwittingly to the stories of family and family members, both living and dead, present and absent. However, large proportions of the stories that children were exposed to came from the mass media. It was observed that the majority of working parents have no time in hand to narrate stories to their children and if they do, they either rely on fairy tales or the audio-visual stories available on the internet. The parents were interviewed with the aim to find out how their children were exposed to storytelling and what has changed in comparison to older times, the sources of the stories and the awareness among the parents about what their child has been consuming digitally.

2. Methodology and Method

The approach of the study was qualitative descriptive in an attempt to explore and describe the situation from the parents' point of view. In-depth, detailed interview method was used and the interviews were conducted over the telephone with fifteen parents whose children were three to seven years old. Presented below are the questions and the responses received.

3. Findings

Do you narrate stories to your children? What kind of stories do you tell them? It was noted that out of fifteen, eight parents did not narrate any kind of stories to their children. The rest told them either fairy tales or fables from the older times. The stories were either moral based or fictional in nature. Since they lived in nuclear families, not a lot of stories regarding their families or their elders were narrated to the children.

How are the stories different from what you (the parents) heard when you were growing up? It was found that parents were exposed to a lot of stories from families along with parables that had meanings associated with life and the different ways of dealing with pressure, struggles, etc. in life. They said that the stories very different from what their children came across today in terms of subject, context and themes.

How do you think mass media shapes storytelling and the child's career much later and how do you keep a check on the mediated consumption of the child? The parents weren't very particular and precise when they answered this question. Majority of them said that mass media was important and had influential properties when exposed to at a very young age. They said they kept a check on what their child was seeing at on platforms like YouTube etc.

How much of an influence would parents and families be in shaping the narratives of the children in comparison to the mass media? The majority had a similar answer to this question. They said that families are an integral part of an individual's life. The media, on the other hand, had now invaded the time the families used to spend together. Even during the leisure hours, the individuals of a house are engrossed in their respective devices. Even though they (the parents) are well aware of the situation, none of them said that they made an effort to change the situation.

4. Conclusion

Humans are influenced by mass media and live in a world that is controlled by narrations. The parents are well aware of their child being exposed to a media-based reality leading to different narrations of that reality. The children, at a very young age, are exposed to mass media and get the majority of their stories from platforms like YouTube, television etc. The parents aren't the source of narration of stories to their children anymore and even if they are telling them stories, they aren't about their family members, living or dead, present or absent. The stories that the children are being told are noted to be age-old fables about honesty, bravery and survival through the worse. The parents insisted on the fact that they keep a check but the content the children are exposed to in the contemporary urban scenario is extremely digitalised leading to a heavy digital consumption and the lowered levels of storytelling are hampering the parent-child relationship.

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