Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1276 (1995)[1]

Power of the visual image

Parliamentary Assembly

1. We are increasingly surrounded and influenced by images: photography and cinema, but also television, video and computers. Visual images are becoming increasingly powerful. So powerful is this surge in visual imagery that we are now confronted with the concept of "virtual reality" with the further risks of manipulation of images portraying news and information that it entails.

2. Technology is evolving quickly and visual images cross borders unhindered. The proliferation of satellites, cable and video games, and the developments in digital or interactive television, virtual images, new television advertising techniques and electronic communication superhighways are such that "the rules of the game" have to be reviewed. Even if responsibilities remain the same, supervising the respect of such responsibilities becomes increasingly problematic.

3. Visual images record reality but they also convey stereotypes. In some cases images undermine written messages and are used to by-pass advertising regulations. Most people do not know how to "read" visual images and this can lead to misinterpretation and manipulation. However real they may seem, images should not be taken for reality.

4. In central and eastern Europe people were brainwashed and manipulated by visual images for a very long time. Today the simplistic notion that all that was censored during the communist period, including violence and pornography, was what came from the West (and therefore was good), is still very much alive.

5. The instant availability of pictures from all over the planet plays an important role in changing the way in which people watch television. On the one hand we are led to believe that we are watching "history in the making"; on the other hand, the relative importance of events is imposed on us. Such availability often influences editorial judgements on what should constitute a news bulletin and determines the order of priority.

6. One of the major influences in the nature of television programming has been the substantial increase in television channels which developed as a result of specific legislative initiatives during the 1980s and subsequently. With the increase of television stations competing for the same sources of funds it was inevitable that many tended to cater to the lowest common denominator.

7. Society has been active in teaching children how to read and write, in fighting illiteracy, but interpreting visual images is also part of literacy and this continues to be mainly overlooked. Most of us still believe in the images we see, for instance in news bulletins. On the other hand, television screens have become the "electronic baby-sitters" of today: too many children spend too much time in front of them.

8. Questions of society such as the absence of a family environment and the increase in violence, together with increasing evidence that, under certain circumstances, a direct relation may exist between viewing violence and acting violently, prompts the call for tighter controls over violence on television screens and to a better protection for children against such violence.

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1. Assembly debate on 30 June 1995 (24th Sitting) (see Doc. 7314, report of the Committee on Culture and Education, rapporteur: Mr Berg). Text adopted by the Assembly on 30 June 1995 (24th Sitting).

9. Twelve years after adopting Recommendation 963 (1983) on cultural and educational means of reducing violence, the Assembly reaffirms its concern at the increasing tendency towards emphasis on violence in the media, and in particular on its portrayal in the visual media: television, video, film, advertising, photography and computer programmes. The problems identified then have since gained in acuteness and most of what was recommended is still topical, and much more urgent.

10. Freedom of expression, a fundamental human right enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, should be ensured together with the responsibility it carries. In certain instances the limitation of freedom of expression can be justified in terms of its reconciliation with the need to protect other rights and freedoms, with special reference to children.

11. The Assembly would therefore propose the following set of basic principles and recommends that the Committee of Ministers take them into account when policy-making in the field of visual image or when advising member governments about such policy-making:

11.1. self-regulation and adoption of codes of conduct by television programme makers, news editors, film makers and makers and distributers of video films, video games and computer programmes should be strongly emphasised, subject only to national laws on privacy where appropriate;

11.2. visual literacy and media awareness should be promoted from the earliest possible stages of school education;

11.3. teacher training for visual literacy and media awareness should be promoted at all levels of school education;

11.4. emphasis should be put on the responsibility of homes and parents for television programmes watched by their children; television must not take the place of parents or diminish the time that ought to be spent assisting their children's development;

11.5. research should be developed on possible links between violence on the screen and violent behaviour;

11.6. professionals should be made more aware of the influence of their work on viewers and the public in general and especially with the development of new technologies (from subliminal advertising to virtual reality);

11.7. the creation of associations of viewers, readers and consumers in general should be encouraged and complaint systems should be set up wherever they do not yet exist;

11.8. the funding of public service television should be given an appropriate and secure framework in order to enable it to offer an alternative of high quality programmes without recourse to commercial sources;

11.9. an evening time threshold before which scenes of sex or violence may not be transmitted on television should be implemented either by self-regulation and codes of conduct or by licence conditions;

11.10. means should be found to encourage high quality television programme production in Europe;

11.11. xi.the above-mentioned measures should be co-ordinated on as broad a European level as possible.

12. The Assembly also asks the Committee of Ministers to follow-up the implementation of measures to counteract violence on television (in close co-operation with broadcasters) and of educational measures in the field of media awareness.