

**POLICY BRIEF****THE CASE FOR A SAFER SCREEN MEDIA ECOSYSTEM FOR CHILDREN: LINKING EVIDENCE TO POLICY AND PRACTICE**

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**ISSUE OVERVIEW**

The wellbeing of children is a public interest concern worldwide expressed through the adoption of regulatory and supervisory interventions (1, 2). As a corollary the protection of minors in the new audiovisual environment has become an important undertaking but one that is often eclipsed by other adult topics relegating child issues to a virtually inconspicuous position. Yet there is compelling argument that children's media exposure may be potentially harmful to their physical, mental and moral growth. While children are relevantly impacted globally, in poorer countries the issue is barely elevated to prominence as a national policy agenda.

Although it is true that there are well-documented benefits children's media exposure is also potentially detrimental to their physical, mental and moral growth. Yet the issue barely makes it to a national policy agenda. However the media environment is fast changing and thus the context and character of screen media is bound to continually affect children unless regulated.

Together with the demography the Ethiopian media ecology has transformed to one of more abundance over the last few years with children even in some rural areas reaping benefits of media technology as well as being

impacted by its downside. The evolution of the media infrastructure has led to the emergence of players of diverse make and character. These have included federal, regional, urban, community, religious, and children's TV. The picture is compounded by the rising penetration of internet and telecom services that have helped to transmogrify the media scene. Further Ethiopia's location in the Middle East has changed the chemistry of TV menus on supply. The focus of the media developments has been seen from democratic/political parameters. There is virtual silence about the implications of the new media environment for children. Yet children are an important demographic that deserve safety and protection from influences that can undermine their wellbeing and healthy development. For good or bad, the consumption of media is related to children's development (neurological, emotional, and cognitive), their acculturation and nurturing and their understanding of the world around them.

**Current State of Knowledge**

In series of studies authoritative organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization (3) and UNICEF have recommended careful use of screen media in respect of the effects on children's lives (4).

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While there are certain benefits, meta-analytic reviews of screen time effects on children have documented adverse effects that range from insomnia (5) to mental health issues (6) and reading delay effects that arise as logical sequels (6). Academic effects were reported to be significant in a systematic review of 58 international studies (7) but the need for disaggregation by channel type was underlined.

The health effects are worrisome as studies have established heightened risks of insulin resistance and other morbidities associated with heavy viewing (8) arising from inactivity related to long-term watching (9).

A mega study by Yale University, National Institute of Health and California Pacific Medical Center analyzed 173 studies that examined the link between media consumption and seven health effects: namely childhood obesity, tobacco use, drug use, alcohol use, low academic achievement, sexual behavior and attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity and found positive associations (9,10) and a wide range of addictive behaviors (12). Interventions seem to work. For instance global cognition was more favourable when sleep and screen time recommendations were observed (10). Parental mediation was instrumental in curbing the effects of screen time on children (10,12). Studies have shown child health to be a critical element of human capital and established nexus between child health and national economic returns (13,14).

Hence it is important to recommend policy and program actions in light of fast changing realities of the Ethiopian child media environment

### **National Media Regulatory Body**

Existing legal and policy frameworks, at the continental level to which Ethiopia is signatory have underscored the need for creating a safe and nurturing environment where children thrive and learn to reap opportunities presented to them to reach their full potential as adult citizens. Ethiopia has a broadcast media legislation that has come into force since recent years. For all intents and purposes the legislation has marginal references to children and the media. There is a single relevant clause which is further characterized by ambiguity and operational dearth. Further Ethiopia's relevant clauses of the broadcast media legislation are out of step with the unprecedented developments that have taken place in the matter of media diversity. Thus TV is far more abundant and the audiovisual media ecology has broadened to include a broad variety of formats and platforms. With telecom and broadband and cell phone services there are now far more areas to police with each media category having its own defining features and presenting attendant challenges. Relevant amendments are needed in specific reference to child media jurisprudence in the context of the emergent reality of media convergence.

A simple jurisprudential examination would show the current Ethiopian communication legislation falls short on specificity, detail and modernity. Revision for re-codification, simplification and modernization of media statutes pertaining to children and the media is in order. This codification would aid in the provision of specific detail regulating the creative industry and the children's media market. Regulatory reform is called for to provide better protection to minors for a safer childhood and a navigation of the broad wealth of audiovisual and digital resources. In addition to revision of statutes, an ethical code by which media operators and content creators would abide would further enhance child safety.

A subsidiary legislation; or a completely new child specific enactment is necessary to more accurately oversee the details of the transforming media ecology.

### **Ethiopian Pediatric Society**

As the premier stakeholder body, the Ethiopian Pediatric Society needs to provide more guidance to schools and parents together with child psychologists in regard to media and health of minors. The Society may further influence clinical practice, as is the practice elsewhere by promoting the important idea that it may be necessary that children's medical visits possibly include media habits as an important aspect of history taking and consultation of parents on a child's wellbeing in relation to media exposure. In consideration

of changing media technologies and consumption habits, pediatricians should strive to provide continuing advice and direction to parents and caretakers using interpersonal and mass media modalities and channels to advocate for child health as a corner stone of sustainable national development. More research may also be necessary to ensure policy is evidence informed and in the best interest of the child as an important ingredient of a national children agenda.

Pediatric health services should provide information and act as advocates for health promotion and prevention messages and strategies as part of their commitment to the healthy development of babies and young children.

For higher visibility and greater impact EPS needs stronger media relations programs and secure air time with more media outlets to influence policy and practice.

### **Schools**

It is important schools run media literacy programs in addition to other measures. Literacy programs can arm minors with awareness of how to stay safe online and train them in the use of online safety measures. A simple protectionist approach may be less useful than critical literacy approaches that focus on empowerment enabling accessing, analyzing, evaluating, and producing competencies. Training in the use of reporting tools would be an important step. While schools can lock the social media sites that expose

children to risks, children may find a roundabout way of unblocking sites given they are technology savvy. For instance while there is an age requirement many children according to some studies close to 40 % of 9-12 year olds have social media profiles.

### **Parents**

Parents as the prime care takers would naturally have the most concern. While TV is fairly not a direct cause of worry, new media can introduce new risks to children as they navigate an entire world of adult content and predatory networks. In view of their age children may not understand the risks posed when they interact with adults having hurtful motives, or are subject to bullying as a new online experience telephonically, textually, digitally /electronically on their or a family member's cell phone. It therefore rests with parents to have an oversight over their children's online activities at home or in internet café platforms. Also many risks offline migrate to online platforms that are more insidious and difficult to track given the breadth and enormity of the digital cosmos. Parental mediation is a potent instrument to add to the

safety tools. It is important parents seek guidance from pediatricians or consult guidelines for media use by children. Good practice would include watching TV together with minors, set curbs on screen time, and consider more natural play time and activities.

### **Media**

Media have special responsibility that is rooted in the social responsibility commitment. It is important that they monitor their own programming and ensure that they comply with relevant provisions of the media law. The child's sensitivities and vulnerabilities must always be considered. Harmful content, the depiction of children, observance of their rights, and the promotion of child rights need special consideration.

Following the model of The EU Code on Audiovisual Media Services and Radio Media Services local media may strive to label program content in terms of the level of risk it poses for children and its appropriacy and set guidelines indicating which programs or content categories are suitable or unsuitable for a designated age.

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