A ROUGHLY MAPPED TERRA INCognITA: IMAGE OF THE CHILD IN ADULT-ORIENTED MEDIA CONTENTS

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The study analyzes the image of the child in the media contents intended for adult audiences in Serbia, considering the importance of the role media play in shaping public opinion on children, as well as the influence of such public opinion on adults' attitudes, decisions and actions concerning children. The study focuses on visibility and portrayal of children in the media, in order to determine to what extent children are present in them, and in what way. Relevant data were collected for three media - press, radio and television - mostly covering the entire territory of Serbia, over two consecutive months (April – May 2001). Content analysis revealed that children are not only underrepresented, but also misrepresented, in Serbian media.

Key words: developmental social psychology, image of the child, media content analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Almost every day, practically each adult decides and/or does something directly or indirectly concerning children: as a parent, as a teacher, as a professional, as an administrator, as a politician – sometimes as all of these together. Such decisions and actions shape the physical and social contexts in which children grow up, thus greatly affecting the future of the society. Attitudes towards children, typical of a given society, are considerably influenced by the (often implicit) images, conceptions and values related to the nature of the child and childhood prevailing in that society (cf. Arijes, 1990; Benedict 1976; Korac 1983; Trebjesanin 2000). Those

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images, conceptions and values are based on what adults know, or believe to know, about children.

In today’s world, with the exception of the professionals dealing with children’s issues, adults’ knowledge about children is mainly based on their immediate personal experience – as children and (most often) as parents. The subjective and incidental nature of such knowledge, in contrast to the importance of decisions and actions based on it, reveals an astounding discrepancy between the declarative public importance assigned to children and the ways adults are typically informed about them.

In addition to personal experience, adults’ knowledge on child development, characteristics and needs, is also based on popular literature on children, usually marked by a practical focus and an "ideological" bias. However, the prevalent source of adults' information about children is the image of the child and childhood presented in the media. This is the reason why the image of the child in mass media was chosen as the subject of this study. By finding out how often, and in which way, the child is present in the media contents intended for adults, we attempted to gain insight into perhaps the most important mechanism that shapes the public opinion on children.

From the perspective of the interests of the child, the key issue regarding public opinion is its influence on decision makers – primarily parents and other adults directly dealing with children – but also the government and its institutions. As a rule, planning and implementation of state policies on children – in the fields of education, health and social affairs, but also economy, justice and information, and even security, defense and foreign affairs – are carried out in consultation with the relevant experts. However, setting priorities in this area and putting children on social and political agendas are by no means independent of public opinion. There is no doubt that the media are the single most influential factor affecting public opinion.

Researchers in this area recognize the importance of the role of the media in shaping public opinion as well as their influence on setting social priorities concerning children. Dale Kunkel and Stacy Smith emphasize that “How any nation conceptualizes childhood, how it perceives or stereotypes its youth in terms of their patterns of behavior, how it treats its children in terms of laws to protect them and policies to benefit them, all depend upon how children are viewed by the nation’s citizens. Certainly all of these factors are influenced by the information that people have about children, and one of the primary sources of such information is the news media” (Kunkel & Smith, 1999, p. 79).

The main purpose of this study was to analyze the image of the child presented to adults by the media in Belgrade and Serbia. The answer to the question of how often and in what way the child is presented in the media contents intended for adults provided a basis for analyzing the ways in which this image can guide and shape the public opinion on children. This analysis also aimed to illuminate the mechanism of informing political decisions concerning children.
The best-known research of the media image of different social groups, including children, is George Gerbner's Cultural Indicators Project (Gerbner et al., 1993; Gerbner, 1995). The most important findings of this 30-year study are those concerning visibility of different social groups in the media: those with less power and influence are underrepresented in the media, which *cultivates* a corresponding public image and contributes to maintaining their social status. In other words – media do not only *reflect*, but also *maintain* the existing social power structure.

The striking consistency of these findings during a period of thirty years clearly indicates that the image of the world shown on television is incomplete and biased, reflecting the social hierarchy as well as the relative importance of different social groups, thus leaving an open door to all sorts of manipulation and abuse.

According to Gerbner, this *televised construction of the world* bears a serious political threat. In the USA, he says, “television is a modern-day religion. It presents a coherent vision of the world. And this vision of the world (...) is violent, mean, repressive, dangerous - and inaccurate. (...) Television has the capacity to be a culturally enriching force, but today it breeds what fear and resentment mixed with economic frustration can lead to - the undermining of democracy." (Stossel, 1997, p. 93).

The scarce empirical research on the image of the child in the media (Children Now, 1998; Von Feilitzen & Bucht, 2001; Gerbner, 1999; Kunkel & Smith, 1999; “Kids these days…” 1999; UNICEF, 2001), in spite of the large differences in methodology and focus, indicates the following common features:

- **Low visibility**;
- Presenting children in predominantly **negative contexts**, either as vulnerable and helpless or as problematic and dangerous;
- **Superficial and sensationalist** approach;
- Using the child as a **means for drawing attention** or attaching importance to other themes;
- Implicit or explicit **judgmental attitude** towards children, exclusively **based on adult standards**;
- **Stereotyped**, often black-and-white portrayal (angels or devils), including prejudice
- **Insensitivity** to children’s developmental, individual and other characteristics and needs.

### THE PROBLEM AND AIM OF THE STUDY

The primary purpose of this study was to analyze the image of the child in the media contents intended for adult audiences in Serbia. This was done in view of the importance of the role media play in shaping public opinion on children, as well as...
considering the influence that such public opinion has on adults' attitudes, decisions and actions concerning children. The study was focused on visibility and portrayal of children in the media. In other words, its aim was to determine how present children are in our media, and in what way.

Concerning visibility, the diversity of media (the press, radio and television) required diverse indicators, but in all three cases they were defined as quantitative indicators enabling (a) comparisons of the frequency of child related contents with other contents in each of the analyzed media and (b) comparisons of the presence of children in each of the media with their actual presence in the population of Serbia. Additionally, visibility of children in our media was compared with the data on visibility of children in foreign studies in this field.

The analysis of the portrayal of the child in the media, i.e. the way in which children are presented, required a more complex methodology. The indicators used were based on careful consideration of those used in other studies, as well as on our own observations of how media in this country present children. In view of this, four basic categories of portrayal were defined as follows: passive child, active child, the child in socio-cultural context and indefinite portrayal.

**METHODODOLOGY**

**Technique**

The study was done using the technique of content analysis, which is “objective, systematic and quantitative description of manifest contents of communication” (Berelson, 1971). The unit of analysis was defined as theme, which can be textual or pictorial, depending on the analyzed medium. Such a specific unit was chosen because a sentence is too restricted and thus insufficient informative unit of analysis, and a whole article/story about children is too complex, since within an article/story children can be mentioned in various contexts. Additionally, it was previously noted that children in our media appear considerably often in incidental comments, are portrayed as an illustration of some other theme, or their presence has a mere decorative function. Theme was chosen as the unit of analysis since it can be understood in a flexible way: sometimes it is only a single sentence referring to children (example: Halo Pink question: “Are you worried because of increased presence of drugs in schools?”), sometimes merely an (static or moving) image of the child, and sometimes a whole article or TV/radio news story about children.
Categories of Analysis

Categories of analysis were based on formal and content criteria.

Formal categories concern the frequency of child related themes and the importance given to those themes in relation to time/space, as well as context and form of their presentation (e.g. whether a text on children is published on the cover page, middle or back pages, the length of child related theme in relation to the text as a whole, whether the headline of the text appears on the front page, whether a child related news story appears in the newscast headlines, etc.). Classification criteria were adapted to each medium and differ accordingly.

Content categories concerned the image of the child presented in the media, i.e. whether a child is portrayed as active, as passive, in socio-cultural context or in an indefinite portrayal:

PASSIVE CHILD – this type of portrayal includes all the themes in which the child is presented as passively accepting environmental influences, either positive or negative. This type of portrayal included the following categories: (a) endangered and/or victimized child; (b) the child as object of adults’ protection and care (c) the child as a means of adults’ promotion (d) stereotyped child, i.e. a child presented in terms of some usual stereotype.

ACTIVE CHILD – this type of portrayal included all themes in which a child was presented as an active participant in various spheres of life, either with positive or negative meaning: (a) successful child (b) the child as perpetrator of violence (c) proactive child – autonomous participant in the life of the family, immediate and/or wider community; (d) the child at leisure (in the context of play and leisure time).

SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT – themes which portray a child within the context of tradition, customs and culture of a certain society.

INDEFINITE PORTRAYAL – themes which were difficult to define in terms of representing children as either active or passive (topics concerning developmental standards, indicators of development, advice to parents how to feed children or protect them from illnesses, etc.)

For each unit of analysis, information regarding sex, age and social status of the child were noted down in order to capture possible differences in visibility between some of these categories.

Attention was also paid to whether a given theme contained explicit reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, an implicit one (referring to a right from the Convention without mentioning the Convention itself – the right to life, education, non-discrimination, and the like), or merely symbolic mentioning of child rights (children have a right to a happy childhood, children have a right to love, to life without problems...).

The source of information on children was also noted for each unit of analysis: whether it was a child or an adult (parent, expert, journalist/anchor, other).
Sample

The sample in this study was formed according to the rating of the media – the press, radio and television – covering the territory of Belgrade, the vast majority of which also reaches other parts of Serbia. Data collection took two months (April and May 2001) and was carried out on two different samples. The single criterion for the inclusion of units in the April sample was the rating of the press, and radio and TV programs, regardless of whether they were expected to include contents on children. In May, the sample was composed of the same media as in April, but the contents were targeted to include child related themes. Accordingly, the criterion for selecting TV and radio programs was the expectancy that, at least occasionally, child related themes would be included: family oriented programs, or those dealing with a wide range of themes of general (social-political) importance, expected to attract wide adult audiences. The press in the May sample, besides daily newspapers (the same as in April), additionally included weekly magazines dealing with themes related to family and children.

Analysis of the press was done on the sample of 170 copies of five daily papers (Blic, Politika, Glas javnosti, Večernje novosti and Danas) published in April and May, and three weeklies - Porodica, Mama and Viva (alltogether 12 copies), published in May.

Analysis of TV programs was done on the sample of 172 hours of programs. April sample included the most popular programs on the channels selected according to the Strategic Marketing data. News programs (Vesti Studija B, Telefakt – BK, Infotop – TV Pink and Dnevnik 2 – RTS), Otvoreni studio, Jutarnji program and Beogradski program (RTS), Biseri (BK), Svet plus, Zabranjeno spavanje popodne and Do poslednjeg daha (TV Pink). Commercials from TV PINK (before the 21.00 News) and RTS (after the 20.30 News) were also included. The May sample consisted of programs which were expected to possibly include topics on children: Beograd dobro jutro, Beograd dobar dan and VIN (Studio B), Dok andjeli spavaju, BK Parlament (BK), Nešto više, Obrazovni triptih and Put u Civilno društvo (RTS).

Radio program analysis was done on a sample of 166 hours in April and May, including Radio B92 (Dnevnik, TV manijak and Nedeljni doručak), Studio B (Na beogradskim talasima and Beogradska razglednica), Radio Index (Dnevnik, Da li se čujemo, Alternativni vodič) and Radio Beograd I Program (Novosti dana, Vreme radoznalosti, Otvoreni program). The May sample consisted of: Beogradska razglednica, Vreme radoznalosti and Otvoreni program, Apatria, Peščanik and Jutopija on B 92 and Oblak u pantalonama on Radio Index.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Visibility

Press

Indicators of importance given to children in the press were the placement of child related themes (Table1), appearance of headlines about children or text on children beginning on the front page (Table 2), positioning of child related themes on the page (upper part, lower part, or the whole page – Table 3).

Table 1 – Frequency of child related themes on cover pages, middle pages and back pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Daily papers</th>
<th>Weekly magazines (targeted)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cover pages</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle pages</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back pages</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – Frequency of headlines about children, child related texts and pictures of children on the front pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Daily papers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headlines about children</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning of text on children</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 – Position of child related themes (text) on the page

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Daily papers</th>
<th>Weekly magazines (targeted)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper part of the page</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower part of the page</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole page</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With regard to Tables 1 and 2, let it be mentioned that the Kunkel and Smith (1999) study found 11%, of child related themes on front pages, which the authors saw as indicating alarmingly low visibility of children, considering the fact that they represent 26% of the US population. In our country, according to the latest
estimates (December 2000), children represent 23% of the population, which makes 3% and 1% of child related themes on front pages even more alarming. The pictures of a child/children on front pages usually have a merely decorative function, either attracting attention to some other theme (e.g. the text with the headline *Kostunica and Hackerup on safety matters of the Serbs in Kosmet* was illustrated with the picture of a child from the protests of the families of kidnapped and missing Serbs from Kosovo) or with no relation to the text whatsoever. Table 3 shows that texts on children were mostly placed in the bottom part of the page, and that only 3% of all texts appear on the whole page. Even when they appear in the middle or front pages, texts are mostly placed in the lower parts of the page, all of which indicates marginalization of children in the press. In the magazines collected in May, attention given to children is considerably higher (more than half of the texts take the whole page) which was in line with our expectations.

**Radio and television**

The clearest measure of visibility of children on the radio and television is the percentage of topics connected with children in relation to the sum total of the recorded hours of the program (Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Visibility of children on the radio and television*  

The results show that the visibility of children on the radio is extremely low (0.3% in news programs and 1% in targeted programs, expected to broadcast child related themes). Visibility of children is somewhat higher on television (7% in most
popular programs and 10% in targeted programs), although visibility of children in news programs (2%) is still very low. Additional measures of visibility of children on TV were timing of child related stories in prime time news programs (i.e. whether they appear at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the program), shown in Table 4, as well as whether a child related topic appears in the news headlines (Table 5).

Table 4 - Frequency of child related themes in the beginning, middle and end of news programs

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning of the program</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle of the program</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of the program</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 – Frequency of child related themes in newscast headlines (raw scores)

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>newscast headlines</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sum total of child related topics</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that child related themes mostly appear in the end and in the middle of news programs, which also indicates the minor importance assigned to children. The same is indicated by the finding that less than one third of child related themes are announced in the headlines (Table 5).

Visibility, according to Gerbner, is an indicator of the importance attached to a given group in a society. Besides low visibility, the rare involvement of professionals/experts on children as sources of information, also indicates the minor importance attached to children in our media. Figure 2 shows that professionals dealing with children are present as sources of information to a much smaller extent (21%) than the journalists themselves (53%). In comparison with 87% of experts' statements in the press and 76% on television in the Kunkel and Smith (1999) study, our data additionally emphasize the disconcertingly small significance attached to children in both media and the society.
This interpretation is supported by the fact that the portrayal of the child tends to be quite generalized and undifferentiated. This is indicated by the finding that “indefinite portrayal” is usually the first or the second most frequent category for demographic and socio-economic indicators (age, sex and social status). Such generalized and undifferentiated portrayal of children indicates a superficial approach, quite uncommon for themes regarded as important (Figures 3 and 4).
The single finding in this study that is seemingly encouraging is related to a demographic indicator – the presence of boys and girls tends to be equal in all three media (Figure 5). However, the sad truth is that it reveals their equality in invisibility, i.e., in insignificance and marginal status.
In our media, therefore, the child is hardly visible. When visible, the image is rather blurred. When the picture clears, it reveals a depressing sight.

**Portrayal of the child**

In all three media, on the average, the child is portrayed as, above all, passive (72%). Passive type of portrayal is about five times more frequent than the active type (15%). *Indefinite* portrayal, eluding definition whether the child is passive or active, is present in 11% of cases, almost as frequently as the active portrayal. The *child in socio-cultural context* (within the context of tradition, customs and culture of a certain society) is shown very rarely (2%). These findings are shown in Figure 6.
The most frequent within the passive type of portrayal is the image of the child endangered and/or victimized by various factors (poverty, war, catastrophes, illnesses, family violence, exploitation, etc.). Second most frequent category is the child shown as an object of adults’ protection and care: a passive child, receiving adult care and help, an object of various adult actions performed as aid, protection or support. The child as a means of adults’ promotion appears in 7% of the cases, and the stereotyped image of the child is the rarest (1%). These findings are shown in Figure 7.
The active type of portrayal is dominated by the *child at leisure*, in the context of play and fun (70% - three times more than in all other categories taken together). *Successful child* appears in 11% of the cases, followed by the child shown as *perpetrator of violence* (7%), while the *proactive child* appears very rarely (3%). These findings reveal the prevalent pattern of active child portrayal: mostly carefree and joyful, rarely successfull or violent, and hardly ever autonomous and taking initiative. (Figure 8)
This is complemented by the finding that children's voices are heard, i.e. the child appears as a source of information, in only 7% of cases (see Figure 2). In relation to the total number of units for each medium, children’s statements appear most frequently on television (16%), quite rarely in the press (3%), and in one single case on the radio. These data show that children are the least likely of all people to be asked about anything – as if it is implied that, exactly because they are portrayed as passive, endangered and helpless, they have nothing to say and therefore cannot be included in decision making on matters concerning them. Even when they are asked about something, it is usually for the sake of mere “decoration”.

The study shows that child rights are practically not mentioned at all (1.5% of all textual units of analysis). In this regard, an interesting and indicative paradox was noticed: while the child is presented as an (potentially and actually) endangered member of the society, neither his/her rights nor the document regulating them are mentioned. We believe that this indicates an important feature of adults’ attitude towards children: what is not only declaratively recognized, but also legally regulated, is neither perceived as a right nor (automatically) recognized as responsibility of adults (from parents to the highest state bodies and institutions), but is rather seen as a matter of their benevolence and kindness. Furthermore, media provide an excellent opportunity for adults to, while allegedly speaking of children, actually speak of themselves: by creating a picture of an endangered and passive child, they are painting an idealized picture of themselves as kind and caring guardians and rescuers.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

If an ID of the child in our media were based on the findings of this study, it would look like this:

THE CHILD IS A MEMBER OF A RARE, HELPLESS AND RATHER ENDANGERED SPECIES. THE MEMBERS OF THIS SPECIES ARE MOSTLY OF INDEFINITE AGE, SEX AND SOCIAL STATUS. ALL THEY ARE CAPABLE AND FOND OF DOING IS TO PLAY AND HAVE FUN. APART FROM THAT, THERE IS LITTLE THEY CAN DO OR UNDERSTAND, LEAST OF ALL SAY. WE, ADULTS, ARE THERE TO PROTECT THEM FROM ALL RISKS AND DANGERS. THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT WE ARE DOING, AS FAR AS OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES PERMIT, BECAUSE WE ARE KIND, CONSIDERATE AND CARING.

Visibility of children in our media, measured by the percentage of time dedicated to them (for radio and TV programs) and the frequency of child related themes on front pages, as well as the length of texts (for the press) – compared to the percentage of their actual presence in the population – is astoundingly low. With the addition of other indicators of visibility – the rating and scheduling (timing) of radio and TV programs mentioning children, as well as positioning of child related texts on the page, and the function of pictures of children in printed media – the measure of invisibility becomes even greater. All of this becomes even more disturbing when compared with the findings of similar studies in other countries, which themselves found very low visibility of children: in this country, things are even worse.

The presented data are only a bird’s-eye view of our findings. The actual measure of invisibility of children in our media, inspected more closely, is much more dramatic. It can be fully understood only if the following factors are taken into account: extremely rare presence of child related themes in newscast headlines; peripheral timing of TV programs in which children tend to appear more often; insignificant length of newspaper stories related to children; low percentage of child related themes within larger stories mentioning children.

On the rare occasions when child related themes appear in media, they are essentially an opportunity for adults to boast of their good deeds or to complain of the conditions obstructing them, or both. If a child’s picture or statement is accompanying the theme, they are usually there in the function of drawing attention to what adults are doing. This is not to say that it is done on purpose, but rather that it reflects and ‘implicit philosophy of childhood’ equally based on traditional conceptions and the striking ignorance concerning children. This study has shown that the media hardly help adults to really get to know and understand children.
Instead of trying to become, as Gerbner says, an important culturally enriching force, media are mostly limited to sporadic help in putting out fires.

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REZIME

OVLAŠ MAPIRANA TERRA INCOGNITA: SLIKA DETETA U MEDIJSKIM SADRŽAJUMA NAMENJENIM ODRASLIMA*

Nada Korać i Jelena Vranješević

U ovom istraživanju se analizira slika deteta u medijima Srbije, u sadržajima namenjenim odrasloj publici, polazeći od značaja uloge medija u oblikovanju javnog mnjenja o deci, kao i uticaja tako formiranog javnog mnjenja na stavove, odluke i postupke odraslih u vezi s decom. Studija se bavi vidljivošću i predstavom deteta u medijima, s ciljem da odredi u kojoj meri i na koji način su deca predstavljena u njima. Odgovarajući podaci sakupljeni su za tri medija – štampu, radio i televiziju – koji uglavnom pokrivaju celu teritoriju Srbije, tokom dva uzastopna meseca (april i maj 2001). Analiza sadržaja pokazuje da su deca u nažim medijima ne samo veoma slabo prisutna, nego i predstavljena na jednostran i neadekvatan način.

* Umesto opširnijeg rezimea ovog istraživanja na srpskom jeziku, videti prikaz knjige Nevidljivo dete, Ž. Trebješanina (u ovom broju).