

Presentation at the “Youth Protection Roundtable”

May 2008

Skript by Prof. Dr. Helga Theunert and Niels Brügger, M. A.

Presented by Niels Brügger



The System of Youth Protection in the Media as Seen from the Perspective of Adolescents, Parents and Pedagogues

In 2006 two studies were commissioned by the German federal ministry for family, senior citizens, women and youth to evaluate the German system for youth protection in the media. Our part in the evaluation was to identify the problems that it poses for “end users”. This “user”-perspective with the critique of the users might also hold food for thought for discussing issues of youth protection in the media on a transnational level. With this perspective I would like to bring in the results of our study in the discussion in this expert group.

As briefly outlined, our part was to answer the question:

What problems does Youth Protection in the Media (Jugendmedienschutz) pose to the “end users”, that is

- to parents, whose task it is to make a contribution to guarantee it in everyday life,
- to adolescents, whom it is supposed to protect,
- and to teachers as well as youth workers, who on one hand should be able to assist and advise parents, whilst coming into regular contact with Youth Protection in the Media in their own work on the other hand.

Accordingly, the aim of the study was:

- to identify problems on the part of the interviewees, and clarify their backgrounds both on the part of the interviewees and the system for Youth Protection in the Media
- in order to outline the need for optimisation as seen from the perspective of the “end users” on this basis.

In accordance with this aim we chose the qualitative, example approach.

Since in relation to Youth Protection in the Media, in lower and higher social and educational settings, specific problems are likely to occur, we included both milieus equally. Further criteria were the age and sex. Since it is known from other studies that older adolescents use media more independently, and the media use of male adolescents is characterised more by aspects that are relevant to youth protection, more parents of male and older children were included, and amongst the adolescents, boys were more numerous.

We interviewed the following people, using guideline-based in-depth interviews:

- parents of 6 to 17-year-olds from 15 families, and
- independently of this, 18 adolescents aged 12 and upwards.

In addition

- two group discussions were organised with pedagogical experts from schools and non-school related work, in order to garner their perspective,
- and 59 interviews with 11 to 17-year-old adolescents on the convergence-related use of media were re-analysed for aspects that were relevant for the problem within the framework of the study.

Given the time limitation, I will focus in my presentation on the perspectives of the parents and the youth primarily, as on their views the central aspects of the results can be described.

Nonetheless I will bring in the perspectives of the teachers and youth workers when there are additional aspects and time. Of course I'll be happy to answer your questions in the discussion after the presentation.

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Our study confirms anew: Youth Protection in the Media receives a high level of acceptance. Hardly anyone doubts its necessity; neither parents nor people working in educational fields, nor adolescents.

But: Acceptance of the necessity, and acting adequately to ensure youth protection in everyday life are two different things.

Therefore, the chances of guaranteeing Youth Protection in the Media by means of parental supervision or even by virtue of the adolescents themselves sticking to the rules look pretty slim.

- In addition to the laissez-faire attitude amongst parents, which is more common the older the children are, and is more often found amongst the group with the less privileged education (in this group we do also find people who are out of reach of youth protection),
- and besides the general temptation in adolescents to infringe the rules,

we can outline 2 sets of problems for the practical everyday implementation of Youth Protection in the Media that emerge from our results. These sets are linked to the system of Youth Protection in the Media itself and with the development of the media:

The 1st set systemises inconsistencies of Youth Protection in the Media, which parents and adolescents have been struggling with for a while – at least in Germany. Under the conditions of the world of convergent media, in which today’s adolescents feel at home, these problems are intensified and/or expanded. We could give the set this title:

Youth Protection in the Media Collides With the Everyday Media Encounters of Youths and Their Families.

The 2nd set is interwoven with media development, especially with the possibilities that arise from digitalisation and from mobile media use. They are used very differently by adults and youths. The appropriate title for this set would be:

A Generation Rift in the Use of Media Weakens the Supervising Abilities of Parents

In the following, I will explain both sets in terms of main problem areas, and the consequences for Youth Protection in the Media.

(1) Youth Protection in the Media Collides with Media Encounters in Everyday Life

The collisions between Youth Protection in the Media and media use in everyday life concentrate on one central instrument:
the age rating system.

The age ratings, as sensually perceptible regulations, really do offer the best chance of providing orientation for actions in line with youth protection (see JuDig). But this presupposes that

- they are perceived,
- understood, and
- the subjective risk evaluation and expert classification correspond with one another.

These preconditions are given only partially, and thus high theoretical acceptance of the ratings is opposed by low effectiveness in everyday life.

Besides the lack in transparency of the ratings which has long been criticised - above all, 3 problems become evident from our results which hinder the effectiveness of this instrument in everyday life:

1. Discrepancy in Ratings for Different Carrier Media

In the world of convergent media, offers by the media market are made available via different carrier media.

- Parents, as well as adolescents, are confused, if contents that they perceive to be the same are treated differently in different media. If for example a film in the cinema is released for ages 16 and upwards, but is broadcasted on television without warning at 8.15 pm few parents nor adolescents will know that the television is showing an edited version.
- The alleged or real contradictions lead to uncertainty and fuel doubts with regards to the credibility of Youth Protection in the Media. As a consequence, one mother requested that they:

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[quote]“.. standardize if possible, well, so that everywhere, for video games or for films ... the same scale is used.”

2. Unrealistic Basics – Detachment from Everyday Life

Parents and adolescents attach this very fundamental critique to 3 issues:

1. To criteria, of which they suspect were obsolete or oriented towards an outdated understanding of morals.
2. To the lack of differentiation of the ratings (6/12/16/18).
 - The subdivision which was too crude – so parents say – and so hindered an age-appropriate media education. This was because comprehension abilities and the user wishes of e.g. 6 to 11-year-olds could not simply be lumped together.
 - The adolescents on their part feel treated unfairly and think it “normal” to evade restrictions.
3. On the discrepancy of today’s adolescents’ dealings with media, which is seen with regards to old media, and even more so in relation to new media.
 - Parents as well as adolescents thought that e.g. the warning on television aimed at 16 - 18-year-olds was ineffective, since watching television together with parents is less likely to happen the older the children are.
 - Moreover, age ratings are not seen as effective barriers against youth -specific access to media offers such as downloads from the Internet, which are then distributed amongst peer groups.

Inconsistency between the different media, and detachment from everyday life

- encourage misinterpretations,
- affect the will of the parents to supervise,
- and the acceptance of adolescents.

3. Labelling Outside the German Youth Protection in the Media

Against this background, a third problem concerns labels whose origin lie outside the legal Youth Protection in the Media in Germany.

- Parents, especially those who in principle are anxious for protection of children and adolescents, and who are trying to find orientation in the world of media, use age labels in the sense of age recommendations - similar to the ones found for toys and books. In part this is supported by retail labels, as the following example shows: “16+” in the sense of the Youth Protection in the Media does not mean recommended or “suitable for 16+”, as this sticker of a retail chain re-interprets.
- PEGI (Pan European Game Information) was also discussed in this context. In principle, the icons that describe the type of content to be found in the game offer additional information for orientation. But the violence symbol in combination with the “educationally valuable” seal lead to parents being confused. This shows that this information alone will not be sufficient for an evaluation.

This leads directly to the second set of problems:

(2) Generation Rift in Media Use Weakens Parental Supervision

The rift between generations has considerable consequences for ensuring everyday Youth Protection in the Media, since the media used by their children remains out of bounds to the parents,

- because it is – in the true sense of the word – away from their eyes
- or because it includes media offers that parents do not use, are only aware of from hearsay, or do not know at all.

The rift between generations concerns all social backgrounds and has stronger contours, the

- older the adolescents are,
- and the more intensely they use the possibilities of the convergent media world and above all of the digitalisation, since it is exactly these possibilities that many adults do not use and/or do not even know.

In 3 areas the consequences of the generation rift become striking:

1. Computer Games

Computer games are a world of the adolescents.

- They know the games and the ways to get them, by which means they get access to what they really should not be using.
- Many adolescents are more familiar with Youth Protection in the Media concerning computer games than their parents,
- and above all well educated adolescents who are enthusiastic about computer games reclaim expert status over adults and institutions for Youth Protection in the Media.

In such cases, children and adolescents claim powers of jurisdiction over the evaluation of the ratings, as the following quotation of a 13-year-old boy shows: *“Well, now I am getting to that age where I will be allowed to play games for 16+. And my father realises, yes, okay, they are excessively [strictly rated].”*

For the parents, however, the world of games is completely alien. Above all, this holds true for mothers, since some fathers have game experience of their own from their youth. But, predominantly, parents

- can not evaluate games,
- and much less evaluate activities on the Internet that take place for example in online games via chat or TeamSpeak.

2. Dealing with the Internet

The Internet gains more and more weight in the everyday media menu of adolescents.

Many parents are not very familiar with this medium.

- The lower the education level, the more it holds true.
- But also a lot of uncertainty reigns amongst well educated parents. One mother puts her difficulties in supervising the Internet use of her 14-year-old daughter like this: *“For magazines, you can have a look, what does she have? There (the Internet) you cannot look. ... I am not very familiar with this. For example, technically wise, I cannot enter the chats, ... this is why I don't know the risks in there...”* What she is being told by the media is rather disturbing: *“Sometimes they show it on television, that a girl initially spent a lot of time chatting and then she disappeared”.*

The interviewed adolescents share this opinion,

- it was difficult to supervise the Internet, and consequently it offered many possibilities to get into contact with youth protection relevant material, either unwillingly, or deliberately.
- With regards to deliberate contacts, adolescents tend to beat about the bush and fall silent on distributing such material. In spite of this, it becomes evident that distributing within peer groups, mutual references to relevant sources are not unusual.

3. Use of Mobile Media

Adolescents today carry their media around with themselves, not only the mobile phone, but also devices such as laptops or game consoles.

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- What children do with mobile media and what happens to them by these media is out of the sight of the parents. Normally, they hear it when their children themselves report shocking experiences, for example of indecent images on mobile phones with which they have been confronted unwillingly, or of embarrassing photos of their friend at school which have circulated publicly.
- The adolescents themselves report quite frequently unsolicited confrontations with brutal, obscene or embarrassing images via mobile phones. They tend to keep schtum with regard to their own active roles in the peer to peer distribution of such material.

In all 3 areas – computer games, dealing with the Internet, mobile use of media –

- the parents can hardly follow the media use of their children,
- and accordingly are only aware of the snatches that their children share with them, or that they sporadically get to hear of.
- Therefore, in the evaluation of the risks, they either have to trust the arguments of their children, or they orient themselves via public debate, but most of them do not want to associate its extremity or hysteria with their children.

An appropriate supervision of childrens' media behaviour is hardly to be expected under these conditions. A father puts his suggested remedy like this: *“The parents should get practical help which they are able to use. ... and they should receive some assistance and then again learn to assist their children.”*

(3) Food for Thought for Youth Protection in the Media

Parents expect joint responsibility and orientation for the media education of their children from Youth Protection in the Media. This is a rightful request, since it was not they who decided on the offers that the media bring to their children.

In the synopsis, our results outline the need for optimization from the perspective of the end users on 3 levels:

1. If it was about designing a transparent and consistent regulation system for all different media A matter of course, really, but obviously not that easy to implement.
2. It would be beneficial for the practical everyday efficiency, if the system of Youth Protection in the Media was consistently oriented towards the everyday use of media of adolescents and families And – it would be possible to create the empirical fundament. But whether it would be accepted if it were to collide with interests, that are alien to Youth Protection in the Media seems to be more crucial.
3. The efficiency of parental supervision could be significantly increased by orientation-support that facilitates parental supervision and helps parents to assess youth-specific media offers In the light of a media market that gets out of hand, and vehemently ensnares adolescents especially, this is a must. It is plainly not fair,
 - that on the one side children and adolescents are woven tighter and tighter into a media web,
 - and on the other side to request that the parents, who are unable and unwilling to move in this web, and only understand it with a lot of effort, ensure that their children are not harmed by the media world and to not cause any harm themselves either.