Moving Targets: Children and the Media
Full Concept Note
Media Trends 2013

Date: April 22-24, 2013
Venue: Webster University Geneva

Paper, presentation and workshop proposals must be submitted to rosso@webster.ch by October 15, 2012. At this point we only require an abstract or outline of what you would like to present. Completed papers will be requested at a later date.

Without a doubt media shape societal beliefs, behaviors and attitudes. Our personal mindsets, how we view the world, our understanding of how it works and the assumptions that we make about power, success and happiness (to name a few), are highly influenced by what we listen to, watch and read. But what do we really know about the impact of media on society? More importantly, what do we know of the media’s influence on children and youth?

Media Trends 2013 aims to investigate the complex relations between media and children. As influential members of civil society the media can and should use every opportunity to promote children’s issues. Media makers can and should consider the possible consequences of their messages on children and youth. A systematic approach, examining potential influences of media content on these younger populations, would pave the way for more quality content and socially responsible media producers.

Certainly, many communicators attempt to do just that. Which leads me to question why the media environment is filled with so much fluff, rather than substance.

Think of the last film your child watched. Was it violent? Sexual? Full of action, yet lacking meaningful depth? Or was it critical? Enlightening? Original and thought-provoking, with positive messages?

Drama needs conflict to move the plot along, but does the conflict have to be so obviously personal, aggressive and material-based? Exaggerated plots with controversial themes, populated only by beautiful people, often rely on excessive violence, drug abuse, criminal behavior and sex as their mainstays. Youth are naturally attracted to such content. So what are they learning?

Mainstream media content gives youth the idea that: success is measured by the size of your bank account, violence is an acceptable way of achieving one’s goals, taking drugs is a way to
deal with life’s problems, it’s ok to put yourself ahead of others “Because I’m worth it,” having fun is one’s primary purpose in life and, above all, the world is a nasty place. So why bother trying to change it?

Dramatic formulas further the idea that it just isn’t worth getting involved. Closed plot lines, in which all conflicts are resolved, give youth the idea that society is working just fine. Real societal problems are seen as inexistent, they have been solved through mediated dramatic content. The status quo gets constantly reinforced.

What then are the obstacles that media producers face when aiming to create quality content? Giant conglomerates? Unwilling policy makers? Or something else?

Are media producers globally facing similar problems?

Oppositional ideas, alternative ideologies and socially positive messages can all be found in media texts, if one knows where and how to look.

Unfortunately, most young people do not know how to “read” the media. Blind belief in what the media portray is cemented in our youth simply because they lack the critical skills and methods to properly analyze mediated messages.

Obviously, it’s not just young people who lack the skills to “read” media, all types of people from all age groups would benefit from better media literacy skills.

So, when do we start to teach media literacy? Are preschoolers able to learn media skills? Who should be teaching them? What about adolescents? What are the best media literacy practices that parents can share with their children? That educators can use in the classroom? How do these practices change depending on the child’s age?

With a better understanding of how the media function, we will be better equipped to move society to a better place. Such positive change will take everyone’s cooperation and collaboration. Youth, parents, educators, media professionals and corporations, policy makers and a host of other individuals must work together, sharing the common goal of improving society, if we are to see progress.

As children make up a significant percentage of the world’s population, constituting slightly more than a quarter of the world’s population, it is essential that they play a role in constructing their media environments. By their sheer numbers alone, children ought to be impossible for the media to ignore. Yet their issues rarely top political or media agendas.

It seems that some young people today have little faith in their ability to engage with the world in meaningful ways. Increasingly, a sense of agency is missing. Some do not believe that they can change anything or make any difference in society.

Yet there is some hope and good news. If new media are used effectively by young people, then they will be better equipped to shape their lives in positive ways.

The proper use of digital media can help to reinforce good thinking, writing and speaking skills as well as provide opportunities for greater societal participation.

The need to instill and advance these skill sets in young people is urgent. We must invest youth
with these critical skills, so that they can shape their own media environments. At the same time we must protect them from the risks of new media platforms.

So I ask you, what does that future look like to you? We have only to look to media content. Most media content is not produced by philanthropic individuals with lofty aims of improving society. The primary goal of most media fare is to make a profit. Other considerations are secondary. Good ethics are increasingly absent.

Patently missing among many of today’s youth are the basic skills necessary for the challenges of tomorrow. Critical thinking, effective written and oral communication skills have diminished. Educators everywhere lament the lack of these skills. Skills which form the foundation on which problem-solving, analysis and good decision-making is based.

If we now ignore these children, who are in the process of developing psychologically, a process in which their values, beliefs and attitudes are being learned, assimilated and confirmed or denied, then we have lost a golden opportunity to shape our world in a positive progressive manner. Young minds are malleable. It’s time to act.

We need to mentor and guide these young people in ways that will not be interpreted by them as overbearing and controlling, and as such, just not worth the effort.

Much of what youth know has come from the media. The media are clearly agents of socialization, often surpassing the influence of parents and educators.

If we accept this argument, then it would be foolish to continue to neglect the media and its influence on children.

**Questions for consideration and investigation:**

While we have not limited the scope of this conference to a particular age group, we need to be clear on which group we are referring to in our papers, presentations and ultimately our conclusions.

We will investigate 3 age groups: preschoolers (3-6 years old), children (7-12 years old) and adolescents (13-17 years old).

*How can we minimize the negative effects of media on youth, while maximizing the positive effects?*

*How has media changed in the way it relates to children? What are the changes in form, content and messages?*

*What are the changing patterns in children’s exposure to the media?*

*What is the impact of competition and global marketing on children’s media?*

*What constitutes quality content? Can we come to an agreement on its criteria?*

*What are the short and long term effects of messages on youth? Will effects be different
if the content is different? Are violent and sexual messages affecting youth in ways that are different from the effects of quality content?

Are media effects different in developing nations? If so, how?

*What type of media platform works best at promoting socially responsible messages and quality content? Internet? Television? Recordings? What structural and formulaic concepts work best for communicating and advocating change?

*How can we engage youth to participate in the construction of their media environments? Will this then automatically empower youth in those environments?

*How has the media “democratized” knowledge for children worldwide? How has it affected the information divide?

*What is known about the media’s influence on a child’s development? To what extent is a child’s psychological, educational, moral, social and cultural development determined by the media?

Panel Possibilities:

- **Education and Literacy** - “Media and Educating Children: Learning Literacy Skills”
- **Health** - “Children’s Health and Media: Moderating Media Use”
- **Child Exploitation** - “Child Exploitation Exposed: Raising Awareness”
- **Digital Agency** - “Youth, Internet Use and Digital Activism”
- **Ethics** - “Media Ethics and Children: Facing the Facts”
- **Digital Safeguards and Risks** - “Protecting Children in the Digital Age: A New Parental Role”

Workshop Ideas:

- **“Protecting Yourself on the Internet”**
  This workshop will investigate how to protect your privacy online, how to moderate internet use, how to know when a friend isn’t really a friend and other related techniques for effective online communication.

- **“Media Analysis and Your Children”**
  This workshop will give parents some tools so that they can effectively analyse media content. We will view some media content and then use the tools to find the meaning. We will then discuss how to watch TV with your child.

- **“Becoming a Digital Agent”**
  This workshop will demonstrate how children can be empowered and become agents for change through online activity. Participants will learn how to start an online petition, how to establish humanitarian based NGOs and other charitable associations, how to set up a blog, how to respond to online content and other empowering activities.
- “Children Too Can Create”
This workshop is geared toward children from 5 to 10 years old. Children will be given the tools to create their own media content. The children will decide what type of media content they prefer. They will brainstorm to determine what type of messages the media ought to be communicating to them. Based on discussion they will develop ideas for a new children’s programs.

- “Student Journalism - Becoming a Watchdog”
This workshop will instruct the participants in the fundamentals of news writing and reporting. Participants will then report on an issue or event. This can be done by writing a news piece, scripting and recording a news report for radio, or scripting and then filming a piece for television or the internet.

- “Social Media: Making It Work For You, Not Against You”
This workshop will instruct participants on how to use social media to sell themselves and their ideas on line. Participants will learn how to use Facebook, Linkedin, Twitter and YouTube to maximize their selling potential.