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## **Adolescents and Politics – a Match Made in the Media? On the Role of Entertainment-Education for Political Education**

### **Abstract**

The role of politics in the life of adolescents is a topic intensely discussed in different fields of academia – usually claiming a lack of interest in political issues among youth. State-of-the-art research is shifting to assessing the role of entertaining media content in this process reflecting on the changing depictions of the political along the lines of infotainment and political entertainment. This article focuses on the latter and discusses the question, how elements of politics are or could be displayed in entertaining, narrative formats, and how this could affect knowledge, attitudes and behavior. The line of argumentation is based on the conceptualization of Entertainment-Education (EE) as a form of strategic communication. EE describes the intentional design and implementation of a media message into entertaining narrative content based on social cognitive theory and the assumption of vicarious learning by observing role modeled behavior. The article discusses findings from EE interventions outside politics and links them to the issue of youth and politics.

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Media use, political information, infotainment, political entertainment, narratives, entertainment education, cognitive theory, vicarious learning, role model, political self-efficacy, political education

## 1. Politics in the life of adolescents – I don't see you – you don't see me?!

The role of politics in the life of adolescents is a topic intensely discussed in different fields of academia and accompanied by an extensive body of empirical evidence<sup>1</sup>. This academic focus derives from the assessment that adolescence – as the age range between 13 and 18-21 years (Biedermann 2006, 150; Oerter & Dreher 2002) – is crucial in a lifelong learning process of political socialization that is the acquisition of political orientations, norms and behaviors through the interaction with the social environment, and thus deserves special attention (for an in-depth discussion on the notion of political socialization see e.g. Hopf & Hopf 1997, 11f.; Ingrisch 1997, 11). This phase of life is characterized by various politically relevant first time practices, tasks and rights like the right to vote, legal age, participation in official organizations, demonstrations, legal marriage or compulsory military service. On the other hand, adolescence is the time of finding a political identity and one's role as a political citizen as one important aspect within the process of identity development besides other developmental tasks that need to be fulfilled (Hurrelmann 2005, 37)<sup>2</sup>.

The means of coping with this challenging developmental task lies in the cognitive development of adolescents. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development<sup>3</sup>, adolescents reach the highest level of cognitive development (formal-operational) and are therefore capable of taking a relativistic perspective as the perspective of a generalized other or a social system (Biedermann 2006, 159) in many ways comparable to the cognitive set up of an adult (Niemi & Hepburn 1995, 9f.). Reaching this level of cognitive development paves the way for other politically relevant skills like tolerance to ambiguity or conflict management skills that are crucial to fulfill the role as an actively participating citizen (Biedermann 2006, 159; Deichmann 2004, 53).

This normative value of a politically mature young citizen is thwarted by the empirical evidence of a rather ambivalent relationship towards politics characterized by a declining interest in politics and a lack of trust in political institutions and their representatives. Despite their approval of democracy as a form of government, German adolescents, particularly the ones living in difficult circumstances or experiencing limited opportunities, express their discontent with democracy (Schneekloth 2006, 115). This general lack of interest is accompanied by a perception of insufficient knowledge about politics and the attitude that politics is boring or too complicated (Schneekloth 2006, 116). On the other hand, studies like the JIM-Study continuously find that young people are very much interested in socially and politically relevant topics (e.g. environmental protection) or topics they are personally involved in (e.g. education and profession), and that they are willing to actively engage in activities related to their interests (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest 2007, 14; Schneekloth 2006, 123). Access to institutionalized politics or as one might say, the core institutions of the political, is hindered due to various reasons like a low trust in political parties or a lack of reference to young peoples' own lives and opportunities to participate or even the portrayal of politics in the media (Schneekloth 2006). So far, mass media does not adequately meet the political needs of adolescents (Schorb & Theunert 2000b).<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless *the* adolescent does not exist. Young people are a very heterogeneous group characterized by fundamental differences that moderate political knowledge, attitudes and behavior such as socioeconomic status and level of education, gender or age. Adolescents with a higher level of education tend to be more interested in politics and are more likely to

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<sup>1</sup> The following analysis might not entirely hold true for countries other than Germany. When referring to empirical results, this article focuses primarily on German data. Despite the body of findings from other countries (especially USA), results are with regard to this topic hardly comparable due to different media and political systems.

<sup>2</sup> The main developmental tasks of adolescence include a) intellectual and social competence, b) own gender role and negotiation of relationships, c) ability to use the commodity market, d) development of a system of norms and values. When passing over to adulthood, young people develop their professional role, their role as a partner in a relationship or family, their role as part of a culture and as a consumer and their role as a citizen (Hurrelmann 2005, 37).

<sup>3</sup> This capacity is not available at the prior developmental level (concrete-operational) between the age of 6 to 12 years (e.g. Siegler et al. 2005, 197).

engage than adolescents with a lower level of education; boys are more interested in politics than girls and older adolescents who eventually need to partake in their role as a citizen (e.g. employment) show more interest in the matter (Schneekloth 2006).

To adequately deal with the developmental tasks of this phase of life and political socialization being only one of them, young people interact with their environment and various socialization and mediation agents. Sarcinelli asserts that “from experiences with the political reality one can infer that the entire range of societal mediated politics always appears as a conglomerate of the partial functions information, appellation, participation and education” (Sarcinelli 1987, 29f.).

Bruns & Marcinkowski complement with the assumption that specific offerings and their institutions are characterized by stressing specific functions: Educational institutions are specialized in political education; political parties focus on appellation and participation; media’s strength lies in informing its audience (Bruns & Marcinkowski 1997, 26/27). In the complex system of political socialization family and peers play an important role (Hurrelmann 2005, 70). Research highlights the relation of political affinity (interest in politics, engagement, political media use) to the educational level and political affinity of parents, as well as relationships with peers that feature a comparable interest and engagement in politics (Buhl 2003; Hopf & Hopf 1997, 133f.).

Besides the in-depth examination of the role of family, peers and school as primary socialization agents, media’s role, influence and potential in this process is under scrutiny (Ingrisch 1997; Schmid 2004). Schorb & Theunert even consider media powerful enough to override influences of family, neighborhood and environment (Schorb & Theunert 2000a, 23). The traditional mass media (radio, television and newspaper) are assigned an important role as mediators of political information. A vast body of research deals with questions of media’s effects on political knowledge, attitudes and behavior (e.g. participation) depending on the particular political or non-political media use (keywords: information vs. entertainment) and linked to assumptions and results on the depictions of the political in the media (e.g. personalization, negativism, sensationalism see Jarren & Donges 2002, 187f.).

Different from adults, adolescents are characterized by a distinct entertainment-oriented media use focusing heavily on audio-visual media as well as a particular exposure to (political) informational content as portrayed in the following section. The empirical evidence supports a rather reduced but practical classification of adolescent media users as information seekers and information avoiders. Whereas information seekers make use of the existing political information in the media and deal with the impediments, information avoiders tend to shy away from actively engaging with this type of media content due to a lack of interest or maybe even cognitive skill. Since we know that interest in politics predicts use of political information, but usage of politically relevant content might also trigger interest, it appears to be necessary to assess new ways to reach young audience members who for whatever reasons avoid political information in traditional political formats and media (Ingrisch 1997, 31f.).

State-of-the-art research is shifting to assessing the role of entertaining media content in this process reflecting on the changing depictions of the political along the lines of infotainment and political entertainment. This article focuses on the latter and discusses the question, how elements of politics are or could be displayed in entertaining, narrative formats, and how this could affect knowledge, attitudes and behavior (see section 3). The line of argumentation is based on the conceptualization of Entertainment-Education (E-E) as a form of strategic communication. E-E describes the intentional design and implementation of a media message into entertaining narrative content based on social cognitive theory and the assumption of vicarious learning by observing role modeled behavior. The article discusses implications from Entertainment-Education interventions outside the political field, links them

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<sup>4</sup> The Shell-Study on Adolescents is a longitudinal study that traces back to 1953 and is concerned with the state of the youth in Germany. With its in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis on topics such as family, school, politics and religion, it serves as an important basis for social discussion and scientific research. (Shell Deutschland Holding 2006, 11) On a yearly basis since 1998, the JIM-Study provides information on media in the life of German adolescents. Topics are free time activities, media use, content preferences, lately with a special focus on mobile media and computer/internet. The JIM-Study intends to inform decision makers in the educational, cultural and work sector. (<http://www.mpfs.de/index.php?id=11>)

to the issue of youth and politics and thus offers a fruitful means of making politics more visible in the everyday life of young people.

## **2. You have it or you don't: The dowsing rod for political information. Adolescents' media use or on the invisibility of political information in young peoples' media diet**

Political mediation or communication implies that any available political media content is being used and time as well as attention is being attributed to them (Hasebrink 1998, 345). Furthermore, Hasebrink states that it would be desirable if the following objectives are fulfilled: Media should offer numerous, detailed, multifaceted and preferably exhaustive political information. Furthermore, the media user should use this political information often, extensively and with much attention (Hasebrink 1998, 363).

When encountering a need for information, adolescents like adults turn towards newspapers and television as information sources. The internet and to a lesser extent the radio complement the traditional information sources (Reitze & Ridder 2006, 70f.). Asked how they acquire information about e.g. their rights and responsibilities as EU citizens or what they refer to regarding their decision as first time voters, media is considered more important than interpersonal contacts or even school (Europäische Kommission 2007; Oswald & Kuhn 2003, 21).

This (positive) perspective is foiled by the fact that young people in Germany attend very little to political information or to put it bluntly, they even more or less avoid this kind of media content depending on parameters like interest in politics, family background and age. Research on the use of political information by adolescents focuses on the use of so called political information usually comparing television and print media or various formats within one medium like news and infotainment shows, or especially in Germany it asks about differences between public and private news broadcasting. Fewer studies focus on the role of the radio for information (Six & Roters 1997); other studies turn to examining content and usage of new media like the internet and e.g. point out the potentials of the internet as a means of participation (e.g. Egloff 2002; Kamps 1999).

This section summarizes findings concerning the use or non-use of political media content in newspapers and television to extract gaps and factors affecting accessibility and exposure to political information.

### **2.1 Newspapers**

Newspapers are considered the traditional source for information by young people; despite this fact, only about 50% regularly read a newspaper (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest 2007, 12; Reitze & Ridder 2006, 67f.). Reasons are manifold: Adolescents criticize the design or incomprehensible writing as well as the choice of topics that often are irrelevant to them (Rager 2003, 180). When attending to newspapers, young people read less often than adults, spend as much time reading, but read fewer pages and focus on title and back pages of the sections (Mediendaten Südwest 2007a; Mediendaten Südwest 2007b; Rager 2003, 183).

Important reasons for reading a newspaper are socialization factors like the availability of a newspaper at home (the higher a student's educational level, the more likely he/she lives in an household with a newspaper subscription (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest 2007)), role model behavior of parents or peers, but also emotional attitudes towards reading, the importance of feeling informed, a broad interest in various topics or gender (boys read more than girls) (Rager et al. 2004). Furthermore, as being informed becomes more important with age, older adolescents read more than younger ones (Feierabend & Klingler 2002).

Rager suggests changes to content and layout to make newspapers more appealing to young people and encourage a more intense, extensive and even thematically focused

reading. He furthermore discusses newspaper projects to advance interest in reading (Rager 2003, 183f.). Despite these efforts, it is unlikely for newspaper reluctant or even avoiding groups of adolescents to change their information behavior. Both groups dominated by girls and adolescents with a low educational level and a rather unpolitical social network (parents, peers) miss out on attributing any importance to this medium in their everyday lives (keywords: missing newspaper affinity of parents, unimportance as information source, irrelevance of newspaper in the peer group, disinterest in certain topics) (Rager et al. 2004). Newspapers most likely will remain invisible to them.

## 2.2 Television

The obstacles associated with the use of newspapers are less likely to play a role for television use. While newspaper use heavily depends on gender, age, availability or socialization aspects, television is an important companion in the everyday life of the majority of adolescents. 90% of young Germans regardless of age and gender watch daily or several times a week with an average of 135 minutes a day<sup>5</sup> compared to appr. 50% who read a newspaper at this rate<sup>6</sup> (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest 2007, 23; Rager 2003, 180).

Nevertheless, one can argue that the pattern of information user versus avoider holds true for television as well. Young people interested in politics, with a rather broad concept of the political and a drive to participate turn to the public channels with a comprehensive coverage of information compared to private channels with a more entertainment oriented programming structure (Krüger & Zapf-Schramm 2006; Schmidt 1995). A study by Schorb & Theunert shows that adolescents have a different, broader and more functional concept of information. Even though formats like talk shows and infotainment news do not provide sufficient coverage of political issues, adolescents consider them relevant information sources since these formats serve their informational needs concerning topics they consider important to fulfill developmental tasks. The study also reveals that just as with newspapers, traditional information formats do not meet the needs and desires of adolescents. Theunert & Schorb conclude: For adolescents who do not actively attend to political information due to their interest or desire to be informed, getting in contact with this type of information is rather difficult since this information is not broadcasted on channels preferred by adolescents, at preferred times, with the preferred modality (presentation style, topics covered) and in a rather unattractive environment. Especially air time and programming environment are important for adolescents who do not actively attend the news but rather pick them up while watching TV (Theunert & Schorb 2000, 188f.).

Schatz & Götz engross this thought and postulate that adolescents are especially interested in topics that connect well to their life-world. If the topic does not resonate with their interests, the whole segment is dismissed. Adolescents want clearly distinguishable and useful facts that correspond to their standard of knowledge and provide some additional value. They want a differentiated depiction of views and opinions that correspond to their views or contradict them and thus provide room to set up boundaries. The presentation needs to portray some kind of closeness and authenticity. Positively rated are stories or scenes from the everyday life of adolescents (Schatz & Götz 2004). This analysis might theoretically be embedded in the model of everyday rationality by Brosius. It posits that facts are reduced in their complexity to fit into existing cognitive structures (Brosius 1995). And this is exactly what young people demand from informational content – a better fit with existing cognitive structures and needs.

<sup>5</sup> Other studies come up with different numbers partly due to different age grouping. Zubayr & Gerhard find a viewing time of 105 min a day for 14-19 year olds in 2007 (Zubayr & Gerhard 2007, 189).

<sup>6</sup> Besides the quantity of media use, Ingrisich points at the different qualities and advantages of newspaper information compared to information on television with regard to knowledge acquisition (Ingrisich 1997, 34).

### 2.3 If it is not information, maybe it's something else?

Besides trying to attract and draw more young people to television news or newspapers by changing certain parameters, one might consider more innovative ways to communicate politically relevant information outside information or infotainment formats. Integrating political information in the daily television menu that already holds characteristics asked for by the young audience, and thus is attended to on a regular basis may serve this purpose (Großegger 2006).

Adolescents do not only differ from adults in their information use, but also in their compilation and processing of entertainment content. Despite the fact that it is very difficult to compare different studies due to the variant use of content categories, it may be stated that male adolescents prefer cartoons, sitcoms/comedy and more than half of the young people call a daily soap their favorite show, though primarily girls are fans of dailies. Thriller/mystery formats as well as motion pictures are on top of the list which reflects an overall preference for fictional narrative television content (Eimeren & Krist 2004; Götz 2002b; Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest 2007). Götz's study on the meaning of daily soaps in the life of 10-15 year old Germans showed the diverse functions of this genre especially for its female audience. Daily soaps fulfill the need for entertainment and information alike. They are set in the world of young people and provide role models and patterns for the real life for example as in what to wear or how to behave towards the opposite sex. They also focus on content that resonates with the (emotional) needs of young people. Broadcasting on a daily basis and over a long period of time makes the viewing of daily soaps a highly ritualized and habitualized activity. Nevertheless, Götz notes that the soap reality fails to mirror reality, but rather overdramatizes, stereotypes and portrays clichés without providing sufficient support. Beyond the individual exposure to daily soaps, this genre also provides extensive input for follow-up communication with peers – sometimes even resulting in in- and out-grouping along the line of being a fan of a certain daily or not (Götz 2002a; Götz 2002b).

### 3 Entertaining media and the political

Considering the fact that entertaining media content, especially fictional narrative content, holds a relevant position in the media diet of the general audience and the adolescent audience in particular, it appears more than logical that latest research is turning towards assessing its role for political knowledge, attitudes and behavior on the basis of the assumption of a latent political socialization compared to a manifest political socialization by political information agents or school as an educational institution (Hopf & Hopf 1997, 12). While the positive effect of informational content on political interest and competence of young people is postulated, the assumptions concerning the effects of entertaining media content on politically relevant issues are more or less negative.

The videomalaise hypothesis assumes that an intensive exposure to entertaining media content (as opposed to informational content) results in unfavorable political attitudes and subsequently political disenchantment of the audience, and therefore is considered dysfunctional (Norris 2000; Robinson 1976). This apparently direct relationship did not hold empirical scrutiny. Holtz-Bacha for adults and Kuhn especially for adolescents conclude that this relationship is mediated by sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, education and family (Holtz-Bacha 1990, Kuhn 2000). Holtz-Bacha even claims that a predisposition for entertaining media offers is correlated with certain demographic factors and goes along with a general renunciation of politics. Or simply put: the more entertainment is used, the more entertaining politics is portrayed, the bigger the chance of renouncing politics (Holtz-Bacha 1994, 190). Wolling replicated Holtz-Bacha's findings and differentiated her conclusions by stating that exposure to entertaining media content distracts from politics or provides the opportunity to withdraw from politics. Wolling could not replicate the finding that an entertainment oriented media use results in political disenchantment. On the contrary, heavy

users of entertaining media and media content hold a more positive picture of politics (Wolling 1999).

These findings correspond with assumptions and results from cultivation research. Cultivation research is based on the notion that heavy use of television results in the adoption of media reality which people then behave upon (for an overview see Schenk 2002, 537f.)<sup>7</sup>. Recent research on cultivation theory focuses on differentiating the media variable by looking at different formats and genres of television content and their different cultivation effects. Appel for example assumes that fictional narratives portray the world as a just place. His empirical study finds that the frequency of watching fictional narratives is positively related to the belief in a just world, whereas the general amount of television viewing is positively related to mean- and scary world beliefs (Appel 2008). With regard to political socialization, these relationships might also become important in the realm of competency evaluations.

Beyond assessing political attitudes, studies also research the effect of entertainment television on political behavior. Besley summarizes findings from different studies showing a negative relationship between political engagement and science fiction viewing and a smaller positive relationship with social drama viewing. Sitcom viewing had a negative relationship with participation (Besley 2006). Scheufele & Nisbet find a direct negative relationship with entertainment television viewing and engagement, whereas news viewing is indirectly mediated through political conversation positively related to engagement (Scheufele & Nisbet 2002).

Despite this research concerning different effects (knowledge, attitude, behavior) in the context of different entertaining content, only little research has been done on assessing depictions or modalities of integration of the political in entertaining media fare and its processing.

Dörner distinguishes between two dimensions of "politainment": On the one hand entertaining politics that is characterized by political stakeholders exploiting means and stylistic devices of the entertainment culture to meet their goals. Entertaining politics thus serves to gain and maintain political power. On the other hand, political entertainment as the entertainment industry's usage of political figures, topics and events as input for the construction of their fictional worlds in order to make their products more interesting, attractive and authentic and increase success in the mass media market (Dörner 2001, 31/32).<sup>8</sup> Dörner provides an elaborate overview of depictions of the political which e.g. may vary according to cultural preconditions (Dörner 2001, 45f. & 112f.). I will at this point highlight some examples and go into more detail in the next section on Entertainment-Education.

Using a rather broad notion of the political, US-American shows and serials provide a substantial source for political information. The successful *Cosby Show* (80-90s), for example, concentrated on the role of black citizens in the society, serials like *Roseanne* and *Ellen* were dealing with questions of gender equality and gender roles. Numerous police and justice serials portray pivotal institutions of the political and society (Dörner 2001, 48/49). Even in cartoons like the *Simpsons* (as stated above, the favorite cartoon of adolescents) references to politics are made on a regular basis. Serials such as *Spin City* or *West Wing* focus entirely on the political life. Besley also points out that the portrayal of voting and quasi-political strategy in programs such as *Survivor* or *American Idol* might have an impact on viewers' perceptions of traditional electoral processes, views about fellow citizens, or attitudes toward politicians (Besley 2006, 58).<sup>9</sup>

While politics and political engagement is omnipresent in US-productions, and due to the success of many American productions also visible to the German audience, the German

<sup>7</sup> Entertaining media content follows the rules of the medium by preferring certain ways of portrayal. Rössler et al. were able to show that the depiction of nutrition in German television differs from the recommendations for a healthy lifestyle made by the German Nutritional Association (Rössler et al. 2006).

<sup>8</sup> In his book "Politics as Entertainment. On the Change of the Political Public Sphere in the Media Society" Saxer analyses the implications of the entertainization of the political, and thus provides input for theory development in the field of public sphere theories (Saxer 2007, 287f.).

<sup>9</sup> Dörner also mentions movies as an entertaining way to portray political matters (e.g. from a historical perspective – *JFK-John F. Kennedy* (Dörner 2001, 214f.)).

serial agenda often omits the political – and with it the specifically German characteristics of the political. Despite this, Dörner's analysis shows a number of (mostly older or off-air) serials dealing with political issues like *Schwarzwaldlinik* (working mothers), *Lindenstraße* (depictions of family, alternative life styles, political engagement, Neonazism) or *Forsthaus Falkenau* (environment). While most of these shows aim at an older audience, Dörner finds only one example for a show relevant to young people – the daily soap *Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten*. The candidate for Chancellor Gerhard Schröder starred on the show in 1998 to reach his young voters (Dörner 2001, 167).

At this point, with regard to the topic of this article, Dörner's notion of political entertainment as politics being instrumentalized by TV producers to enhance their products needs to be further differentiated. In his analysis, Dörner subsumes examples under the heading political entertainment that were intentionally integrated into an entertaining serial format in order to convey political information and educate the audience as opposed to simply serving as accessories to the format. Apart from instrumentalizing the political to the benefit of the entertaining, the next section discusses the functionalization of entertainment to the benefit of politics as the essence of the Entertainment-Education strategy.

#### 4 The Entertainment-Education strategy – Using entertainment to its full advantage

This section will describe the potential of strategic political communication as conceptualized in the Entertainment-Education strategy and focus on using serial narrative formats to transport the educational message. The analysis will discuss theoretical assumptions as well as practical examples mostly from the field of health communication and extract central notions for the adaptation of Entertainment-Education (E-E) to politics and youth.

Singhal et al. define Entertainment-Education as follows:

“Entertainment-education is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an educational issue, create favourable attitudes, shift social norms, and change overt behaviour.” (Singhal et al. 2004, 5)

This definition makes it clear that EE has to be understood as a form of strategic communication aiming at specific effects (knowledge change, attitude change, behavior change, change of social norms) with regard to a particular target audience by conceptualizing a specific educating message and integrating it in a particular media context. E-E draws on the potential of mass media as “agents of entertainment and persuasion” (Singhal & Rogers 2002, 119) and capitalizes on the popular appeal of entertainment media (Singhal & Rogers 2001, 343).

“Entertainment (...) is the most pervasive media genre; it tells us how to dress, speak, think, and behave. Thus, we are ‘educated’ by the entertainment media, even if unintended by the source and unnoticed by the audience.” (Singhal & Rogers 1999, 7/8)

This unintended effectiveness of entertainment media corresponds to what Dörner with regard to politics called instrumentalization, namely effects that are not intended by the media producer. The E-E strategy overcomes this notion of unintendedness, trying to functionalize entertaining media to meet an educational goal without the audience noticing this educational purpose. This aspect is often considered the dilemma of the strategy that does not want to educate with a wagging finger, but by “sugarcoating” education with entertainment in part to break down individuals' learning defenses to the educational message. The problem lies in the idea that people think they are being entertained while they are actually being educated (Singhal & Rogers 2001, 353). This dilemma cannot be dismissed since other forms of strategic communication (e.g. commercials) employ comparable mechanisms which audience members are usually unaware of. Furthermore, it is a fine line between education and manipulation; and in pursuing the goal to help people, all

necessary precautions need to be taken to responsibly work with the knowledge about these mechanisms. The question about unintended effects, for example, needs to be discussed every time intended effects are considered (Cho & Salmon 2007).

#### 4.1 Background and implementation of Entertainment-Education interventions

The idea of Entertainment-Education without necessarily using the label E-E dates back to the 1940s. The intensive discussion and (scientific) conceptualization took place in the course of Michael Sabido's endeavors to inform and educate through telenovelas and soap operas in Mexico (Poindexter 2004). On the basis of these foundations, numerous E-E interventions were launched in developing countries covering topics like family planning, health education or status of women (Singhal & Rogers 1999). Against this background of society and media characteristics (e.g. high rate of illiterates in many developmental countries) education through the means of entertaining media like television, radio, music and comics proved efficient and successful (Singhal et al. 2004)<sup>10</sup>. Conceptualization and effectiveness of E-E campaigns in developmental countries are well documented and account for a considerable part of the E-E literature. Because of the different preconditions, the transferability of these results onto so called media-saturated countries characterized by different media and cultural characteristics is not easily done and certain parameters of the strategy need to be adjusted<sup>11</sup>. Although most E-E interventions are concerned with educating about health related or social issues, the political may as well be considered a social topic that can be addressed with this strategy.

As mentioned earlier, to develop an effective E-E campaign an intensive cooperation between media producers and experts providing the know-how concerning the educational message is needed. Different variants of cooperative efforts are possible. With regard to the field of health communication, Boumann extracts four types of collaboration that can be generalized to other fields as well: a) production of an E-E media content as an initiative of a health organization, which is sold to e.g. a television station, b) co-production of E-E as a collaboration of health and media experts c) inscript participation where an organization pays for having a health topic integrated in an existing entertaining format and d) lobbying as a form of direct or indirect influence of the media content by health organizations that e.g. promote the abdication of health hazardous depictions (see anti-smoking example below) (Bouman 2002, 226/227, Lampert 2003, 81/82). Especially when media producers and health advocates cooperate intensively, it is important that the media product does not suffer from integrating the educational message (e.g. loss of market share) (Singhal & Rogers 2001, 344, Nariman 1993, 122/123).

On the initiative of the Norman Lear Center (Annenberg School for Communication-University of Southern California) and financially supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Cancer Institute (NCI), the organization *Hollywood, Health & Society* was founded to provide health information to media producers in Hollywood and to conduct research on the depiction and effects of mediated health messages (Lampert 2003, 75). To adequately recognize the efforts of media producers, the CDC for example gives the "Sentinel for Health Award" to model E-E productions. With regard to the youth audience, "The Media Project" as an initiative of "Advocates for Youth" tries to place youth relevant messages on HIV/Aids, contraception or sexually transmitted diseases in shows like *Emergency Room* or *Dawson's Creek* (Kaiser Family Foundation 2004) – both aired successfully in Germany.

A widely known example for a successful E-E campaign developed by the Center for Health Communication at the Harvard School of Public Health is the "Designated Driver Campaign". Young adults are confronted with the problem of drunk driving and offered a solution – one member of a group is selected the designated driver for the night that stays sober to drive the others home safely. Between 1988 and 1992 this educational message was integrated into more than 160 prime-time shows in the US (e.g. *The Cosby Show*, *Cheers*, *L.A. Law*). The

<sup>10</sup> The popularity of video games is utilized in so-called serious games as means of education (Hamann 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Media-saturated countries have a more differentiated media market and a stronger segmentation of audiences. Because of the various media outlets, diverse and sometimes even contradicting messages, the educational message needs to be effective in a complex and tension-filled environment. Educational messages also vary considerably according to the pressing societal problems (Sherry 2002).

way of integrating the message varied from elaborated subplots, to singular scenes and dialogues to half-hour or hour-long episodes. Evaluative research showed that 89% of adults and 97% of young adults knew the concept of a 'Designated Driver' (Kaiser Family Foundation 2004; Winsten & DeJong 2001).

While E-E collaborations, campaigns and their effectiveness are rather well documented for the US, Great Britain and various developmental countries, implementation and documentation of E-E interventions in Germany are rather scarce. The main federal institution focusing on health education and promotion of the general public and children and adolescents in particular is the BZgA, the Federal Centre for Health Education which employed E-E interventions such as the television movie *Unsichtbare Mauern* (1989) to inform about HIV/Aids. Various health messages were integrated in shows like *Sterne des Südens* (1992) oder *Jede Menge Leben* (Schwarz 2004). On their website, the BZgA concedes that these interventions date back many years, but efforts fail because of high expenses that come along with designing, producing and evaluating this kind of educational activity (Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA))<sup>12</sup>. Especially with regard to the youth audience, Germany is backlogging<sup>13</sup>. As a positive example of successful lobbying, the Anti-Smoking-Alliance (Aktionsbündnis Nichtraucher) promoted the intentional omission of depictions of smoking and smoking of identification characters in television shows. The award "Rauchfrei Siegel" (Official Seal Smoke-free) was recently given to the German soap operas *Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten* and *Marienhof* as well as the telenovela *Sturm der Liebe* – all three especially targeted towards adolescents and young adults (Aktionsbündnis Nichtraucher).

The application of E-E in the context of political education in the US or Germany is very little or non-existent. Dörner's extensive analysis of the political in entertainment media fare only mentions *The Cosby Show* as a serial format that was designed to intentionally educate about a political topic (Dörner 2001, 48). Dörner's numerous examples illustrate the depictions of the political in entertainment media, but do not state any educational intent. A data base query of the Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung) as the political equivalent of the BZgA does not reveal any collaboration in the sense of E-E concerning political education. To reach the young audience with informational content collaborations with the television stations Viva TV and NCB Giga are mentioned (Sitzler & Schmid, n.d.).

Generally, the strategy is open for different modes of mediation as long as they are educating and entertaining at the same time. Different entertainment media and media formats are suitable to carry the message though experience and scientific scrutiny highlight the potential of serial narratives to integrate the educational message. As discussed above, young people are drawn to this kind of televised content which almost guarantees reaching the target audience. The potential of serial narrative formats as part of E-E interventions is discussed theoretically and practically in the following sections<sup>14</sup>.

## 4.2 Theoretical foundations of the Entertainment-Education strategy

The E-E strategy builds on a wide background of theories from different fields with its core in the communication studies field encompassing psychological and sociological models and

<sup>12</sup> The BZgA has a strong emphasis on producing educational television or radio spots that include the entertaining momentum and partly characteristics of E-E (Schwarz 2004).

<sup>13</sup> In a recent collaboration with the German children's channel KI.KA, the BZgA together with the Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU-German Environmental Foundation) produced *Die Hollies* to educate children about environmental and health topics. This collaboration compassed a serial of three parts and a movie that were broadcasted in 2003 (Kinderkanal (KI.KA)).

<sup>14</sup> Finding ways to effectively educate and inform does not just play a role for adolescents but starts as early as childhood since for instance health related behavior such as eating and drinking habits are learned and consolidated early in life. In her dissertation, the author assesses the applicability of Entertainment-Education as a communication strategy to reach children with nutritional education by the means of televised entertainment.

theories. The use of theories to design and implement the educational message differ widely and the scope of theories employed was broadened in the past years to ensure and advance effectiveness (Slater 2006; Sood et al. 2004).

In the effects model that serves as the foundation of E-E, social cognitive theory (SCT) is one fundamental theoretical approach. "Social cognitive theory provides an agentic conceptual framework within which to analyze the determinants and psychosocial mechanisms through which symbolic communication influences human thought, affect and action." (Bandura 2001, 265) Learning is conceptualized as a process. Social behavior is learned or altered by observation and imitation of models and the influence of rewards, punishment and social norms. These models can be real people as parents are for reading newspapers, or in the case of young people who intentionally turn away from parents or adults, media characters often serve as models (Bandura 2004). Model learning takes place on a cognitive level, but more importantly on an emotional level. Emotional connections to media content and media characters conceptualized as involvement, parasocial interaction or relationship or identification encourage the adaptation of the message.

For the E-E strategy, Bandura proposes three types of role models that influence the learning process. The positive role model portraying the favored attitudes and behavior that is rewarded (e.g. responsible use of contraception and positive consequences deriving from that), the negative role model portraying the negative attitudes and behavior and is punished for doing so. And third, the transitional character who portrays the transition from negative to positive attitudes and behavior along with obstacles and detriments that derive from this transition (Bandura 2004). Positive and transitional role model serve as important identification models for the target audience, but the transitional role model is conceptualized to closely represent the targeted individuals. The careful design of the characters is very important as the identification with the negative role model may even upvalue undesirable attitudes and enforce negative behaviors – this phenomenon is known as the Archie-Bunker effect. Archie Bunker was the main character of the show *All in the family* and held right-nationalistic views. His portrayal resonated well with parts of the audience that identified with these kinds of views (Brown & Cody 1991; Dörner 2001, 49).

These entertaining as-if-worlds, as Dörner calls them, offer the opportunity to observe and play different roles and perceive different realms of experience. These worlds are characterized by a reduced complexity and therefore very easily navigated.

"This orientation-friendliness makes them important for the political: Depictions of politics, patterns of interpretation and perception guides of the entertainment culture are an important momentum of political culture because they convey plausible material for the perception, interpretation and construction of political reality in a relaxed, burden free situation. You feel comfortable, believe to be in a situation detached from pragmatic restraints of everyday life and political ideology, and thus willingly receive the portrayed patterns of interpretation". (Dörner 2001, 62)

An important momentum of vicarious learning is the mediation of self-efficacy that is an individual's perception of his/her ability to master changes. Self-efficacy perceptions influence the possibility of acting out certain behaviors (Bandura 1997). The distance of adolescents from politics also resonates in their perception of political self-efficacy. Grimm's analysis showed that only about 40% of adolescents find themselves politically competent with a significant difference between girls and boys to the disadvantage of girls. Interestingly, Grimm did not find any differences along the lines of educational level (Grimm 2003, 116; Shell Deutschland Holding 2006). One young boy in Mikos & Töpfer's study expressed his views towards politics: "I need to get the feeling that I can change something." (Mikos & Töpfer 2006, 14). E-E can and should provide exactly that.

#### 4.3 Why series can be effective

Instead of designing and producing a new political E-E series that needs to generate popularity, and market share, using already established successful narrative formats such as

serial shows and daily soaps as carriers of the educational message holds various advantages. With regard to adolescents, series and soaps (especially for girls) are used extensively, ritualized and habitualized, that means on a regular basis, over a longer period of time by a large number of individuals. While it is usually claimed that audiences are segmented, the educational message insufficiently delivered and knowledge gaps due to different media use are produced (see Rössler in this issue), these formats carry the potential to reach a consensus. Serial shows provide the means to portray different characters that do not only follow the conceptualization of role models by Bandura, but also stage the intended behavior in different contexts reflecting the everyday world of adolescents (Mikos & Töpfer 2006, 13/14). Since the political is strongly tied to the societal context and nation state, educational messages could be implemented in the very successful German daily soaps, and if necessary even be fairly up to date due to a continuous production schedules. Consideration of the cultural context is very important as Both found in her comparative effect study on the action series 24. This successful show contained an educational message on the behavior in case of a bioterrorist attack. Analysis revealed differences in effects between the German and American audiences (Both 2006).

#### **4.4 The persuasive power of narratives**

Highlighting the potential of narrative formats as agents of persuasion does not come out of the blue. State-of-the-art research is dealing with the persuasive impact of stories and its applicability for the E-E strategy (Green et al. 2002; Slater 2002). The concept of transportation or absorption through narratives describes an emotional and cognitive involvement of the recipient that results in a pleasant experience during the reception process (Green et al. 2004, 311). The extent of transportation (influenced by the perceived realism of the story<sup>15</sup>, the appeal of the story line, the quality of production and the unobtrusiveness of the persuasive subtext) will mediate or moderate the degree to which narratives will be persuasive (Morgan et al. 2008). Resistance towards an overtly persuasive (thus educational E-E-) message is reduced in different ways. On the one hand, the educational message is concealed by the structure of the narrative (unobtrusiveness of persuasive subtext) and thus the possibility of selective rejection by the recipient is diminished. On the other hand, so called biased processing is eliminated since the recipient does not a priori attribute a persuasive intent but expects entertainment. Biased processing describes a mode of information processing by media users that aims at ignoring messages that contradict ones own opinion, diminishing these arguments or generating counter arguments (Cin et al. 2004, 176). To the recipient, it is a cognitive effort to generate counter arguments to a story since stories cannot be rated right or wrong, but plausible or not plausible. This makes it more difficult to place counterarguments, even more so when identification with characters is strong. And finally, counterarguing disrupts transportation and thus the entertaining experience. "Rational thought seems to be suspended in favor of enjoying vicarious (and often visceral) experience through a media narrative." (Morgan et al. 2008, 8) Therefore, narrative messages are especially applicable for changing strong attitudes with strong resistance to change (Cin et al. 2004, 177f.).

#### **4.5 Beyond television – Follow-up communication**

Linking a rather passive activity like television viewing to the ideal of an active, participating citizen appears questionable at first. Since interpersonal follow-up communication is one important aspect of the E-E strategy, this section discusses the role of fictional worlds for the everyday life of its audience. The mediated worlds and along with them the educational messages serve as a collective world of pictures providing collective topics and reasons for

<sup>15</sup> For the perception of realness and unrealness of fictional stories and its implications for narrative engagement and realism judgements see Busselle & Bilandzic 2008.

communication (Dörner 2001, 98). This goes as far as constituting in- and out-groups along the lines of a certain media content (e.g. daily soaps) and subsequently setting the communication agenda of this group (Götz 2002b). This form of follow-up communication may then in the sense of a multiplication effect even reach individuals that were not directly exposed to the message. Beyond this spontaneous uncontrolled form of follow-up communication, this type of communication can intentionally be encouraged by offering specific options as part of the E-E intervention. Cross media marketing of these shows hold ready existing platforms to distribute information that is linked to the show (so-called fanzines, magazines for fans or websites). Independently from using these platforms, innovative forms, means and ways of distributing information can trigger follow-up communication or even action. Employing the mobile phone as the most important communication device for adolescents might prove effective in delivering the educational message off-air<sup>16</sup>.

## 5. Implications

“Young people found something to make adults panic: Fun-sports, fun-music, fun-consumerism, fun-life. Since politics as it is practiced and presented doesn't have anything to do with fun, to the contrary acts as a total killjoy, young people are in their own self-image and according to a superficial impression 'unpolitical'.” (Beck 1997, 13f.)

This review article elaborated on the role of politics in young people's lives and the mediating function of media in this relationship. Focusing on the functionalization of entertainment media fare, especially fictional narratives television formats, as conceptualized in the Entertainment-Education strategy discloses new possibilities to match up adolescents and politics and thus add *fun-politics* to the list. Nevertheless, scientific research can only serve its part by assisting in the process of designing an E-E intervention and critically evaluating its different effects on knowledge as well as attitude and behavior change also with regard to the persistence of the effects over time. The serial narrative format of E-E interventions holds the potential for long-term sustaining effects on different levels compared to e.g. the effects of a printed information brochure. In the end, the efforts to design and implement a political educational message need to be made by stakeholders in the field of political education that are skilled in the topic and have the essential resources at their hands to make politics visible to young people.

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<sup>16</sup> In order to get young people involved in the elections in Hamburg/Germany this year, the Federal Agency for Civic Education offered a mobile phone quiz on the elections to adolescents covering topics like the new voting law or information on the history of Hamburg (N.N. 2008).

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