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Media Education:
Working Towards Realising The Indian Potential

By

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MEDIA EDUCATION - WORKING TOWARDS REALISING THE INDIAN POTENTIAL

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I'd like to begin this paper by drawing upon the observations of a recent media education workshop which two colleagues and I from had conducted in Bangalore April 1992. The workshop pertained to an evaluation of a media education kit. In essence this was a feedback survey which was commissioned to us i.e., Media Centre by AMIC Singapore. Forty teachers from the Primary and Secondary level, from ICSE, SSLC, AND CEBEC schools attended the workshop. At the end of the five days, the following observations dominated the deliberations:

1. While methodology on suitable methods to be adopted varied there was complete unanimity that media education was not only necessary but vital. All the participants were in complete agreement as far as the need to introduce key aspects and concepts of media education in schools. Underlying this endorsement was a perceptible fascination at the potential of media education and media.

2. Most of the teachers, however, while appreciating the specifics of the UNESCO kit, questioned its relevance to the India context. Many stressed, in this context, the need to indigenise the Video kit and use Indian experiences to drive the messages home. Also, given that Indian pressure points were different from that of Western Countries there was a need for a structural shift in emphasis as far as the different media inputs are concerned.

Quite clearly, the observations affirm that not only is media education vital; it is also a relatively new entrant in the educational curriculum on a primary level.

Secondly, for media education to be effective, we need to build a Indian model, which however eclectic it might be would be rooted in Indian experiences and cultures.

I would now like to dwell briefly on the structure of this paper.

The first part is concerned briefly with definition. I don't wish to get bogged down by its nitty gritty nor the various theories or debates which media education has inspired because that is not purview of this paper. However, a brief overview is given to ensure that we are on the same wave length. This would also, in turn, result in a clarification of who are key players, what their roles are and what their relationships should be.

The second part of the paper comprises a brief background on the state of media in the country. I do not feel it necessary to provide a detailed account of the prevailing conditions for all media in this country, because that again is not the thrust of this paper. What will however be highlighted will again be in the nature of an overview, and will in essence constitute (and I repeat) a background. Its function is to draw our attention to the following crucial aspects of the paper.
1. The urgent need to build a cogent and dynamic media education programme in the Indian context, and to rectify, the skewed relationship within which media education would appear to be currently enmeshed.

2. Actualising the Indian potential. Here I would draw upon some of my work experiences, in particular, the recent media education workshop.

I will not go into details like pedagogy and syllabus of media education programmes as I feel to have as yet to lay much of the ground work post. Secondly these, I am sure, will evolve during the discussion and workshop.

All this will, hopefully result in a few observations:

And so, to begin at the beginning: What is media education? Quite simply a comprehensive and critical understanding of the media. This understanding necessarily calls for a degree of technical and production fluency over the media as well as the ability to critically evaluate. In other words the ability to be able to constantly question & evaluate media texts and inputs.

Which brings us to the next question: Who are the key players? And what are their roles and relationship? At the cost of sounding facetious - all of us. On the one hand, we have media practitioners.

At the other end of the pendulum there are the receivers - students, teachers, the family - society in general.

The rationale for placing the two at different ends of the pendulum is not so much to specify their roles, but to clarify their relationship. Clearly, if media education is to be rooted in terra firma an equal two way relationship between the parties is essential. And this is where the rub lies. Even a cursory survey of the media scene suggests that we are far from arriving at such a stage. The success of media education lies in ensuring an active relationship between the sender and receiver. For various reasons which will be discussed subsequently, the process has been one way so far, tilted in favour of the sender.

Let me be more specific. Most media professionals have the necessary technical fluency in their fields by virtue of practical experience if nothing else. Critical appreciation and maturity however is another matter. A precious minority, and that too by dint of their personnel interest rather than any structured training indulge in media watching or a critical evaluation of the media.

The receivers in the main suffer from a dual handicap of neither having the necessary technical or critical training or exposure.

Accordingly, the first step towards realising the Indian potential would be at levelling this skewed relationship. But more on the ways and means later.
Any study of the Indian media scene over the past decade would indicate that it has been on the fast forward pace as far as vertical growth is concerned. By vertical growth, I'm referring to technological development and the access of more and more Indians to the media hardware. It was only a decade ago that India TV went colour with the commencement of the Asiad. Since then there has been a virtual metamorphosis in terms of Indian television development. As a result of satellite television development the reach of TV has expanded its reach to more than 80 per cent area coverage including remote villages and hamlets. These figures are about a year ago. So the percentage is all to likely to have increased further.

This dramatic increase in terms of TV viewership resulted in a commensurate increase in the production of commercials with advertisers taking a vigorous interest in exploring the market potential of the medium. With New Delhi opening up TV to private agencies, we would appear to be well ensconced in the era of independently produced, commercially sponsored TV serials. In addition to Doordarshan's two tier structure, which is a mix of National network programs from Delhi and Regional Network programs of each state, the 4 metros of New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras have access to two channels: local and national.

Perhaps the most dramatic happening as far as the small screen is concerned has been the recent advent of STAR TV on the Indian scene, with other international cable TVs waiting in the wings, the Indian tele viewer now has access to news, views and sitcom presentations on a scale that he has hitherto never been exposed to. Significantly, very few of these programs are made in this country, although once the imminent Asian Channel becomes a reality the scenario should change drastically. According to an unofficial study undertaken by Doordarshan Bangalore in March 1990, more than 70 per cent of those who have TV sets in Bangalore have STAR TV in their homes. That was 4 months ago further, it would appear that STAR TV cuts across rural urban divides. We have several cases of interior town and villages where enterprising enterpreneurs make a pretty buck by temporarily transforming their homes to mini theatres where the local people swing to the beat of MTV for the price of a few rupees.

TV or rather the small screen is merely the tip of the iceberg. Consider the recent mushrooming of video magazines all over the country. Print journalism has also had its fair share of technological sophistication. About 12 years ago, most newspapers were confined to the letter press. Today virtually all of them have shifted to offset printing. Here again, perceptible increase in circulation figures over the recent past has influenced editorial policies in many newspapers with advertising getting a substantial chunk of the cake in terms of space.

In sharp contrast, traditional and folk media would appear to have taken on a more subdued role along with radio notwithstanding its accessibility to most Indian homes.
So far so good. But has this vertical growth had an equally impressive and active horizontal impact? What programming methodology is pursued in relation to the airing of soaps and TV serials? Is there a realistic code of ethics? What relevance does STAR TV have in the rural context?

In short, what were the media messages being sent out and were these messages critically received by their audience. I do not want to get bogged down by sounding too moralistic. Neither should this paper lead to any catch 22 dilemma of do we get the culture we deserve or do we deserve the culture we get?...There are no badguys or good guys being projected. It is quite simply a matter of information appropriate or relevant. Having got this far let me say there is a paucity of material or surveys which have been undertaken in this sphere. While there is an urgent need to fill this gap, even a brief glance would suggest that by and large the viewership participation has been relatively passive.

So where does this lead us? While the background clearly illustrates the increasing consumerism of the Indian populace with a corresponding increase in terms of access to media hardware, there is a perceptible shortfall in the terms of media critiquing or critical evaluation. If this shortfall has obvious linkages to the absence or training, it also underscores its immediate relevance and pursuit.

Quite clearly, it would not be within the confines of time to undertake a comprehensive account of all the media messages being transmitted. I have, however, taken some random samples from different media processes which I hope will be sufficiently representative.

The first example pertains to children who I feel constitute the starting point for media education. There is, as has been pointed out earlier a relative paucity in terms of empirical data as to the media consumption habits of the India audience. However recent trends would confirm that they constitute the major share of TV viewership. A child survey conducted by Media Search, a division of Marketing and advertising research (MARG) in 1989 among a sample of 5523 children in the age group of 8-15 living in 16 representative cities across the country enforces this opinion. According to the study, at least 75 percent or more watch TV and or Video in most cities. Further, children watch more TV/Video than reading, going to the films or listening to the radio... What is interesting is that their preferences are quite similar to that of the popularity ratings of programmes by adult viewers. While this could also be a result of the paucity of sufficient children TV programme it would appear that children watch, along with adults, whatever is available at prime time. Whether this is desirable or appropriate is a critical question which needs to be asked at this stage. I do not want to get into whose responsibility it is to determine what children should watch and when, but clearly the survey indicates two pointers:
1. A need for more children’s programmes

2. An evaluation of the current programming methodology.

It is hardly surprising that given this background that there should be corresponding increase in commercials featuring children. Unfortunately I do not have any survey complementing this which was taken in the immediate past. But what I do have is a survey undertaken by Prof. Leela Rao, of the Bangalore University which is approximately a year old. According to her report “A week long observation of the commercials telecast during the evening network sponsored programmes provided about 130 commercials, excluding those which were repeated. Of these 56 had children as participants, in varying degrees of prominence. In the majority the child shared centre stage along with the adult in family situations. About 10 of them had children appearing incidentally as in a logo or in the form of a fleeting appearance in a crowd of adults. An equal number had only child performers, sometimes linked to the family through lyrics and sometimes as individuals distanced from the family.

In terms of the physical setting almost all the commercials were located in an urban home location. The life style promoted was elitist. Inevitably the houses have a large private garden, accessories like expensive furniture... a modern well equipped kitchen etc. etc. The appeal to loving, caring, and a protective invariably has a female child, while the appeal for a strong and outgoing child was necessarily a male. All the family members were well groomed and stylish which is beyond the means of an average middle class family. All the families had an office going father and kitchen working mother and so on.

At the cost of sounding moralistic or bringing in ethics it is necessary to question the validity of such advertisements and their impact on the child. Gender bias, stereotypes, alien lifestyles all these advertisements would appear to be vulnerable to these areas. What about their impact on rural children? Lest this sound somewhat trite, let me illustrate this with another example from India today dated July 31st 1992. The articles on Teenage Terror provides conclusive and dramatic empirical evidence of how more and more teenagers from well to do families turning to crime and often, brutal crime. Among other reasons, the media has also been sharply brought in to focus. According to Aroona, Nafday Goswamy an activist lawyer from Pune “trying to be westernised” many parents keep away from their children’s rooms...” and so they have no idea what the children see on their video...” The article points to an overdose of violence in films and cable TV as a factor...” By the time the Indian child is in his teens...”...he has been thousand of brutal acts on TV and video. When Chandan, a Bangalore medical student, strangled his uncle to death in a car for the Rs. 1 lakh he carried he did it the way he had seen it in the God father.

Neither can the press afford to adopt a Pilate like stance. I am not passing value judgements over here, neither am I seeking to paint a tarnished scenario. The country has on the whole an alive and relatively free press. But how responsible is it... Doe
we not need from the function or role of ombudsman on the press who us alive and sensitive to the needs of the public. I would like to briefly describe the findings of the four member women media group from Bombay who were sent to study the role of women in the caste and communal clashes in Ahmedabad city in the first half of 1985. The information here is taken from an article by Ammu Joseph for the Madhyam Magazine: Using empirical evidence she has pointed out that "many papers unquestioningly picked up and repeated accusations typically used to discredit women and justify brutality against them. For example women involved in the Asware incident were dismissed as 'Ladies of easy virtue' while anti reservationists women in Khadia and Raipur were ... described as "traditionally agressive, abusive and rebellious. Further its coverage of the unconfirmed allegations of caste Hindu Women in Gomtipur by policemen contrasted starkly with its total silence on the claims by Muslim women that men taking part in the Rath Yatra procession harassed them with sexual taunts and gestures..."

This incident occured 7 years ago. Its significance lies in the media analysis and evaluation that was done by the WMG team. We need more studies and surveys like this if the relationship between the sender and the receiver is to be levelled and the dynamic media education programme is to emerge.

These are but a few instances which touch upon the need for media education in the country. I have not gone into details related to radio and folk media. Perhaps more examples from these media inputs will emerge in the subsequent discussion. I do, however, intend to briefly touch upon the potential of folk media subsequently.

Having established the relevance of and need for media education let us now turn our attention to how we can tangibly get a viable and constructive media education programme off the ground.

The first area of development is linked to participatory ... involvement of all interest groups involved in decision making and chalking out strategies... Specially, this requires media practitioners and social communication organisation researchers, journalists and academics, educationists, relevant government organisations to formulate a forum for discussion and debate on media issues. This is easier said than done. On a practical level most of these institutions prefer to work separately and point out that it is the other's turn or role to bell the proverbial cat. Several seminars on social issues have generated much sound and fury between members of the advertising fraternity on the one hand and activities on the other but have yielded very little light. Infact, quite often media professionals stay away from such seminars.

I would like to digress briefly and illustrate the point from a seminar I attended sometime ago on advertising and children. Consider the following observations:

I' am quoting from a report which was subsequently published on the proceedings.

....7....
Mr. Ranen Das, a child psychologist who was then a visiting scholar at Harvard University, observed: "Ads aim at deep insecurities. What does this do to a child who is already insecure... or looking for a model?" He gave a disturbing example of a 13-year-old boy who used to cut 90 percent of his classes to see Amitabh Bachchan movies. When the boy was asked what his image of manhood was, he replied, not surprisingly, it was Amitabh Bachchan.

Mr. Chintamani Rao, V.P. of O & M (South) pointed out that if a product was harmful, the public should blame the manufacturers and not the agencies. "Ban the Product, not the advertising."

Mr. Ganesh Eashwar, General Manager HTA, Bangalore argued that what was wrong was society and not advertising. Observing that media and influenced children, he suggested that this debate should be opened to a wider forum.

I could go on with more examples. What did, however, emerge at the end of the day was a polarisation of views along predictable lines. And, as C.K. Meena, who reported the proceedings pointed out it is the public who has to take a stand, one way or another and make their voices heard on the imposition of control, Govt. or self-regulatory, if needed. The ad agencies insist they are only doing their job. The onus is on us. The catch is we have to be informed, rather critically informed, if we can discharge the responsibility constructively.

The point to note is that without more interface and constructive sharing of each other's work such polarisation is bound to occur. The starting point, therefore, would be if media practitioners, educationists, government organisations, etc., etc., would have a greater exposure and knowledge of each other's activities.

This workshop was by no means definitive or exhaustive. What was significant was the response which it evoked from the teachers who saw it as a useful and stimulating orientation programme. While they agreed on the need for more indigenous examples, they felt confident in terms of deconstructing and decoding media messages. A substantial quantum of the teachers voiced the need to have both media skills and a critical appreciation workshop on similar but more in depth lines during the academic year. About once a week incidentally, the centre has organised an education package in response to this which will commence from October.

Apart from training students and teachers there would also be an urgent need to provide orientation programme to those in the helm of affairs to those in charge of programming, journalists, advertising personnel and educationists. It is all very well to prepare critically mature students but what is the point when those at the helm work in the opposite direction.

Apart from the electronic media any dynamic media education programme...
in this country needs to constructively exploit its more traditional forms or aspects like folk media. Not only do we have an old tradition as far as these are concerned, but they are relatively in expensive and are considerably more immediate in their impact. These would also be more appropriate vehicles to use in the rural environment apart from schools, because they are rooted in social and cultural traditions. I'm talking about some of the folk forms popular in the south like Therukoothu-folk theatre in Tamil Nadu which is a blend of music dance and drama. Burra Katha of Andhra Pradesh which conforms to the same combination, Tamashafolk theatre, Bhoota Koola a South Kanara religious folk form which preserves community feeling and unity and puppetry among others. These have been used extremely effectively by developmental organisations in bringing about social and attitudinal change in the rural areas. Perhaps the urban environment needs to follow suit.

Having looked back at what I have written, I find that radio has not been given as due priority. In part this is because of the absence of substantial empirical evidence/examples in this sphere on my part. But I am sure you will agree that while TV may appear to be a more dominant partner in the urban context, AIR's out reach and consequent potential as a vehicle of social change in the rural sector and in overall terms is enormous.

So where do we go from here? It is all very well to suggest that an effective Media education programme needs to draw from indigenous examples and experiences but these can only be brought into focus if strong infrastructural supports emerge.

The fact that media exerts a powerful impact on our lives ethics behaviour patterns is quite apparent. What we need to do is activate further research, documentation and empirical data on specific areas of influence and the extent of their impact.

When advertisers or media practitioners conduct studies on the effectiveness of their marketing strategies, the audience response to their approaches could be documented.

Doordarshan and AIR could play an equally active role in documenting information which is not only pertinent to their programming, but also the commercials which they broadcast. Likewise newspapers need to consider more aggressively the relevance of ombudsmans.

Finally Doordarshan AIR and the Advertising Standards Council could review their existing codes. These codes should be given more publicity so that the individual/receiver is aware of his or her right to prevent the possibility of unethical practises like subliminal advertising. Doordarshan and AIR could also perhaps open up to consumer forums. These are but a few support areas which could facilitate the process of media education in the country. I am sure there are others which will emerge in the discussion.