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Media Education In Secondary Schools In Bombay

By

Feruzi Anjirbag
MEDIA EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BOMBAY

Exploring high school teachers' attitudes to the media:
report on a two-day workshop held in Bombay, July 1992

Paper presented by Feruzi Anjirbag at the conference on Media
Education in South Asia, New Delhi, 4-8 August '92

Prepared by the AXIS collective, Xavier Institute of
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Once upon a time there were the mass media, and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives, for those who were not prisoners of the mass media.

Well, it's all over. We have to start from the beginning, asking one another what's going on.

- Umberto Eco

Travels in hyperreality: Essays (1986)
This paper attempts to focus on some aspects of school teachers' perceptions of the media. It provides a "thick description" of a two-day workshop held at the Xavier Institute of Communications, Bombay, in July 1992, in which 22 high school teachers from English medium schools in Bombay city and suburbs participated.

The workshop was organized primarily to initiate a dialogue with the teachers as a prelude to developing resource material on the media for use in high schools. It was designed as a participatory, experiential exercise, and deliberately avoided a skill/information-oriented approach. Key issues and elements of the mass media were taken up for discussion and analysis through non-formal methods.

The workshop provided valuable insights into the school teachers' role as active media users, their relationship with the media environment, their understanding of the need for creating awareness about media among children and the need for a non-formal methodology for media education.

In addition to documenting the workshop experience in detail, the paper integrates observations which are relevant for working towards introducing media education in secondary schools. The annexure proposes a detailed framework of a media workbook that could be used as a comprehensive resource book by the school teacher.
THE XAVIER INSTITUTE OF COMMUNICATIONS

The Xavier Institute of Communications is a professional media centre which offers a variety of services in training and production.

We attempt to provide an introduction to the media world which emphasizes professionalism and social values relevant to our own unique socio-cultural context.

In addition to training the media professional, our aim is to reach out to two significant groups of "non-professional" media users: (a) voluntary agencies, development organizations and community workers, (b) school teachers and children.

Over the years, MEDIAWORLD, our educational programme for high schools, attempted to develop critical and creative skills related to the media among school teachers and children.

This year we have designed a series of workshops -- Self-awareness, Personal Growth and Creativity for Teachers, Media Awareness and the School Teacher, and a Media Mela for school children.

Another key project this year involves evolving a Media Workbook for School Teachers.
THE MEDIA WORKBOOK FOR SCHOOL TEACHERS

We have been commissioned by the World Association for Christian Communication to produce a 150-page Media Workbook which will serve as a resource book on the media for teachers.

The objective of this Workbook is

* to enable teachers to gain a critical awareness of the media which in turn will
* help teachers develop a media perspective in their students.

Ideally, it would be useful in all English medium schools in urban and semi-urban areas where the impact of the media is the maximum.

The Media Context

The communications revolution is making its impact felt all over the country. While it is unrealistic to believe that it has left any part of India untouched, its impact is phenomenal in a metropolis like Bombay.


* Advertisers increasingly target their ads at children and youth.

* The last two years have seen the steady growth of at least four new eveningers in English and local languages — for the city commuter, reading an afternoon paper in the bus or train has become as much a habit as reading a daily with the morning cup of tea.
* Practically every street corner in Bombay boasts a video library; more and more housing societies subscribe to cable and STAR TV.

We are all media users and we have all established a "relationship" with the media— even those of us who are not media producers. Everyone has an ‘position’ vis-a-vis the media; everyone has a point of view— the sternest critic as much as the most avid enthusiast. But what exactly is the nature of the audience engagement with the media? How are the tastes, opinions, lifestyles, attitudes, values of millions of people shaped by the media? And to what extent do these people affect the way media operate, what they say and how they say it?

These are questions that are not easy to answer. And they acquire an even more complex dimension when we relate them to a child’s experience of the media. It would not require a formal survey to establish that children and young people form a significant part of the media audience. Constant exposure to the media has made today’s youngster a captive target for mediated messages; advertisements, TV programmes, new books and comic strips— an increasing number of these are aimed at children. Children’s perceptions of themselves and of the world around them are overwhelmingly influenced by the attitudes and values that the dominant media messages perpetuate. This is becoming a cause for greater and greater concern among parents and teachers.

In this context, we believe that it would not be useful to simply decry the influence of the media. That the media exist and that
their messages are bound to shape our worldview, are truths that we recognize. It is not possible to wish the media away. Even if it were, would we want to?

We believe that the time has come to act on the fact that the reality our children experience today is a mediated reality. Our role as media animators, as we see it, is to awaken a critical awareness of the media among children, help them to understand the layers of meaning in media messages, and work with them to use the media effectively and creatively.

One effective way of reaching out to children is through the school teacher. She is in constant and close touch with children and is aware of their views, attitudes, beliefs. The teacher herself plays a crucial role in shaping the child’s worldview, through the study of a variety of subjects including history-civics, geography, general science, value education. She can therefore weave the media experience into the classroom situation to not only enhance the study of the formal subjects but also help children to view and analyze media messages with discernment.

Recognizing this crucial role of the teacher in media education, we have begun the process of initiating a dialogue with teachers to find out their perceptions of the media. As part of this process we had organized a workshop for secondary school teachers in Bombay on 23/24 July 1992.
THE WORKSHOP FOR SCHOOL TEACHERS

The objective of this workshop was to help us to gather impressions about the levels of media awareness among teachers, their attitudes and responses to the media, their understanding of the media impact on their students; and, together, to work out a strategy to reach out to students.

The workshop was designed to be participative - a forum where teachers from different schools could get together and share their experiences relating to the media with us. It was not intended to be a 'training programme' for teachers. We were not interested in delivering lectures to the teachers about media theory. It was also not our intention to make this a workshop on media skills --- two hours on poster-making, two hours on feature writing and so on. What we wanted to create was an environment, a series of "exercises" through which the teachers would tell us their media stories.

The Participants

We had contacted teachers in different parts of the city - from south and central Bombay to schools in the distant suburbs. Given the participative, interactive, experiential methodology, we were constrained to restrict the number of participants to twenty-five. Schools were contacted through the Social Service Syllabus Cell of the Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work, and school principals were requested to send two high school teachers to participate in the workshop. The invitation included a simple questionnaire to enable us to have an idea of the teachers'
reading / viewing habits. Twenty-two teachers from over twelve schools participated in the two-day workshop held at the XIC Mini-Theatre.

The Programme

The workshop programme had been planned in such a way that each session would enable us to meet a specific objective in terms of understanding the teachers' point of view about the media. While we had worked out a plan and designed exercises and collected the necessary resource material, we had built in a certain amount of flexibility in the two-day programme.

Day One : Session One

The introductory exercise had a two-fold purpose. It was intended not only to be an ice-breaker but also to give us an idea of the kind of AV media programmes popular among teachers.

Posters were put up in different parts of the room, each announcing one of the following: The World This Week (a news magazine programme); Hamara Bajaj / Lehar Pepsi (TV ads); Talaash / Hamrahi (TV serials); Pretty Woman / The Silence of the Lambs; Sholay.

Teachers were asked to group together under any poster, depending on the media product they enjoyed most. Surprisingly, the TV serials did not attract a single participant, while the TV ads and The World This Week attracted a large number of participants. Each group was then asked to introduce its members to the larger group 'creatively', i.e. using a poster, or a song or through a skit. The teachers participated enthusiastically in this
exercise, and seemed to enjoy themselves thoroughly. Without our asking them to do so, each group used the elements of its favourite programme in its presentation. For example, the teachers who enjoyed Sholay introduced themselves through a skit featuring Gabbar Singh and other dacoits, the popular characters in the film.

The presentations were extremely lively as the teachers not only got into the spirit of the exercise but also demonstrated their intimate acquaintance with the popular media texts.

We then initiated a discussion on the elements of form and their role in creating audience engagement. We did this through an analysis of the presentation of The World This Week -- a programme whose popularity has as much to do with its form as with its content. The technical excellence, the use of music, the persona of the presenter, the encapsulating of news into simplified and slickly edited segments -- all these were instrumental in creating the appeal of the programme. Further, the example of The World This Week also helped to make the point about form being part of the 'message' or content of the programme, quite dramatically.

The analysis of the Lehar Pepsi ad presentation revealed the concept of the media as 'construct'. The fact that the participants had retained some of the elements of the ad, and substituted other elements, brought home the point that the original ad too had been a deliberate creation in which colour, music, humour, personalities, fast-paced editing had been
carefully combined to generate maximum viewer interest. In other words, the use of these elements was not accidental -- each had a contribution to make in serving the advertiser’s purpose. This gave rise to several questions: What is this purpose? What is being done to achieve it? Are we being manipulated?

One of the teachers raised a point about a particular advertisement reflecting a bias for fair complexions. She strongly felt that such ads perpetuate 'wrong' values. But the question was: do the media create our values or do they merely reflect and perpetuate society's values? While many teachers argued that the ad was only a reflection of our own preferences for a fair skin, others felt wondered where these preferences had emerged from in the first place. Another point made was that since media messages overlap, each message reinforces the other. For example, the bias towards a fair skin is seen not only in other ads, but in matrimonial columns of newspapers, comic strips and so on.

Interestingly, the teachers themselves used terms like 'manipulating', 'reinforcing', 'perpetuating values' as well as 'creative', 'audience enjoyment', 'choice', while discussing the complex relationship between the AV media and society.

Day One: Session Two

The post-lunch session was devoted mainly to answering the questions raised about advertising as a system. We looked at a series of TV ads - for sarees, a brand of batteries, cars and accessories. In interpreting one saree ad, one participant used
the phrase 'dream world' to describe the mood created by the ad. Other participants pointed out that other ads too, create unreal worlds -- the perfect world, a world in which everything and everybody is beautiful, glamorous, rich, successful, happy, and where stress and strain, ugliness and dirt do not exist.

There was an admission of enjoyment and pleasure in simply looking at the ads. Participants pointed out that in terms of creativity or imaginative ideas, ads were improving all the time. While admitting this, an attempt was made to steer the discussion towards other 'messages' being communicated through this dream world. The projection of elitist, western-oriented lifestyles, the selling of false promises, the constant celebration of consumerism, the use of stereotypes -- these were some of the points that came up during the discussion.

It was obvious that participants were familiar with a large number of ads, their messages and their jingles. Also, they did not seem to take them at face value -- as one participant pointed out, "Who believes that filmstars who endorse a brand of soap actually use it?" Similarly, others talked about how they use their judgement while buying a product -- therefore, even if they were taken in by an ad and bought the product once, they would not buy it again if they were not satisfied.

Thus, we found that the teachers were well aware of what individual ads were doing, and were able to view them critically as specific texts. Our role was to take the discussion a level higher, to point out how advertising operates as a system, how
ads taken as a whole sell not just this brand or that product, but a set of values; how they create needs and aspirations that often cannot be fulfilled; how their messages work at different levels and transmit different layers of meaning about culture, gender, class.

We then referred to some readings that pointed out that every ad confirms and enhances every other, that ads refer to the past and make promises for the future, that they manufacture glamour in the process of attempting to make us transform our lives by buying something more.

Day One : Session Three

In the post-tea session we invited feedback on how the participants would like to spend the next hour and a half. One participant insisted that all this talk about advertising and the media was valid but her concern was how to transfer what they had learnt during the day to their students. In keeping with the participatory methodology of the workshop, we devised an exercise on the spot. This was a group exercise in which we asked the teachers to pick any media related theme/topic/issue and brainstorm on how they would go about conducting a school lesson incorporating the topic.

Within twenty minutes the groups were ready for their presentations.

Through a medley of jingles, the first group brought to mind half a dozen popular TV commercials. The next step was to examine
whether the value promoted by a product was in accordance with
the value which should be associated with the product, for
example, nutrition with food. The discrepancy was most
dramatically revealed in the two-minute noodle ad. In a cigarette
ad the teachers juxtaposed the highly visible and bold headline
"I get what I want", (the value promoted by the product) with
the almost invisible, easy to miss statutory warning (the value
which should be associated with the product).
The next group had planned a micro-analysis of the same cigarette
ad. They had worked out a series of questions which called
attention not only to the choice of words in the ad, but also to
its formal elements -- use of colour, space, picture, setting.
They then wanted the children to figure out the rationale for the
use of each of the elements. For example, why was the headline--
"I get what I want" -- so bold and set against a background of a
particular colour; were the computer, the plush office included
in the photograph to signify a successful professional at work,
and so on. In this way, the group's objective was to call
attention to the ad as a construct and thus strip away the
apparent transparency/innocence of ad messages.

The third group's lesson plan centred around stereotypes. The
group wanted to explore the stereotypical image of the mother in
Hindi cinema. However, they were unable to come up with an
interesting methodology to carry out the lesson. So we steered
the discussion to the need for innovative teaching methods and
resource material to enable the students to discover the process
of mediation for themselves. The teachers came up with the following suggestions on methodology to facilitate the discussion on stereotypes:

* students could write an short essay on their mothers; this could be followed by a discussion on the extent to which each representation differed and what most representations had in common.

* students could bring a photograph of their mother to class; a collage of these images would reveal differences even at the level of physical appearance.

* another suggestion was the broadening of the discussion from stereotypical images of a mother, to stereotypical representation of communities and discussing the inherent "danger" of such representations.

Day Two: Sessions One and Two

The focus of these sessions was on the print media. Having a separate session on newspaper analysis was, in a sense, contrary to our perspective of understanding media issues across media rather than by a medium by medium analysis. However, we felt that working on and discussing newspapers -- the most immediate print medium -- would help to clarify certain aspects of all media, print and non-print.

The second day began with the participants working in three groups to put together a four-page daily paper, an afternoon paper and a Sunday paper. An assortment of clippings from different sections of newspapers and magazines were given to each
Group. Groups were encouraged to use their own news captions and headlines and also design a masthead for their newspapers.

Our objective was to gauge participants' awareness of the "newsworthiness" of different elements of a newspaper, and their "visual" perceptions relating to layout, size of headlines; to give participants a chance to play at being editor and thus experience for themselves the "power" of deciding what makes news.

The first group put together "Worldwatch", an international newspaper; the second group brought out an eveninger, "The Headliner" and the third group a "Sundae" paper. The groups had unconsciously used traditional news values in creating their newspapers: the selection of the items, the placement of certain kinds of news items in prominent positions, the conspicuous presence of various advertisements, the emphasis on "serious" news in the daily and "filmi" gossip in the Sunday paper -- all were clear evidence of the teachers' familiarity with the medium.

The discussion following the group presentations focused on the theme of what "makes" news -- the criteria usually followed are conflict, timeliness, unusualness, proximity, prominence. This led to the question: are the news values compatible with our own individual human values? Participants were asked to grade three happenings in terms of their news value. Everyone agreed that in these terms, the election of a Vice-President would be more important than the death of a prominent industrialist's son which
in turn would receive greater news coverage than a house collapse in which several people had been killed. Yet, it was obvious that at the individual level, death, particularly a tragic death, would affect us more than an election. This demonstrated the dichotomy between our "human" perceptions of importance of events and the "news" perception of the same.

Certain kinds of people, certain countries, the dominant and the powerful, receive much more attention from newspapers than the poor and the marginalized. For example, just as rich and famous people are the subject of newspaper attention so is greater coverage given to the more "advanced" and powerful countries.

Taking this point up, one participant pointed out that after the Soviet Union collapsed from its powerful position the newspapers have more or less lost interest in it. In addition to the amount of coverage, what is said about certain people and certain countries is also worth taking note of. The participants were asked, what would be picked up by the World Press -- a natural or man-made calamity in the so-called Third World or a major breakthrough in science and technology? Similarly, we hear of the atrocities against tribals and other marginalized groups more often than we hear positive stories about their leaders, their culture and so on.

So the question is: to what extent do newspapers project the "truth"? Almost all participants agreed that newspapers provide information about the world -- and since it is impossible to talk about every little thing that goes on, the newspaper editor has to make a selection. They felt that this selection would
obviously not always reflect an individual's scales of what is important. But this does not mean that we should question the newspaper's selection.

The facilitator steered the discussion to the objectivity and impartiality of news reporting. Participants were aware that often, different newspapers report the same news items differently -- the language used in such reporting, the prominence given to the news, varies according to the "ideology" of the paper. Therefore, to what extent does the newspaper function simply as a purveyor of information? And what is the relationship between fact, information, knowledge and truth? If only some facts and some information "make" news, then how can a newspaper be said to be giving us a "true" picture of events and things around us?

This led to another significant area of analysis namely, the power of the person who decides what items will make it to the newspaper and what is not newsworthy. Ownership and control of newspapers by powerful individuals and business groups would therefore constitute one barrier to complete objectivity of the paper. In other words, the "slant" given to the news would reflect the paper's ownership pattern.

We then talked about the critical relationship between advertisers and newspapers. Participants themselves pointed out that advertisements affected the space and importance given to news items. However, they were unwilling to accept that it was
the ads that received first priority and that news items were made to fit into space left over after ads had been included, and not the other way around.

While it was obvious that advertisements contributed a significant amount to the cost of bringing out a paper, it was a revelation to hear that newspapers by and large function as a vehicle for advertisers. Subscriptions contribute to a very minor percentage of the newspaper's revenue -- in fact the facilitator pointed out that papers could function perfectly well even if they were distributed free of cost to the readers. A major reason for pricing, however, is to give the advertiser an idea of the newspaper's circulation and readership profile.

Participants, however, argued that this did not explain the prices of newspapers which have steadily risen in the last few years. Therefore, they felt that the price of a copy does contribute however marginally to meeting the expenses incurred in producing the paper.

The facilitator also pointed out that quite often ads transmit a message that completely contradicts what has been said in an editorial. For example, matrimonial ads for a fair complexioned bride of a particular sub-caste may appear next to an item denouncing racist and casteist attitudes.

What these sessions demonstrated to us was that the teachers share the general belief that what is put down in black-and white, what is printed, is generally the truth. This was in contrast to their readiness to question and be critical about the
messages of the AV media. The level of critical awareness was significantly lower with regard to the newspapers operating as a system. Of course, the participants were conscious that the newspaper or even other news media could be used as a vehicle for political propaganda—the more subtle dynamics were less evident to them. This could perhaps be explained by the general attitude that the print media are the "serious" media and that even though the AV media could be used to communicate serious messages, there is something slightly "frivolous" about them, and they lack the aura of authenticity that is practically taken for granted with the print media.

Day Two: Session Three

The concluding session of the workshop was devoted to an attempt to develop a curriculum for media education which could be tried out by the teachers over the next three months. The methodology was considered as important as the content of the curriculum.

One difficulty expressed was that not all schools could be sure of devoting even one period a week exclusively to media education. An interesting methodological point emerged from this: that some aspects of media education could be integrated with the formal school syllabus, that issues and concerns relating to the media could be brought up during lessons in science, geography, language, literature, history.

We felt that this method was, of course, certainly worthy of being tried out by all teachers. However, this would mean that all teachers—regardless of the subjects they teach—would
need some orientation to media analysis.
On the other hand, if there could be a specific media education class, or if any of the co-curricular classes (like value education, social service) could concentrate on the media from time to time, it would be easier to inculcate the habit of critically evaluating media messages. It was for such classes that we collectively tried to create a "syllabus" for media education.

While developing the curriculum we emphasized that our approach to the media would be issue-based — i.e., our analysis would not be media-wise, but would take up a particular issue such as stereotyping, and analyze it across different media. The following is a list of themes suggested by the participants and elaborated by us.

1. Media personalities -- who creates them; how they become role models; the persona vs the person; their influence on our behaviour.
2. Stereotypes -- analysis through role play, word association, picture association; examination of use of language; portrayal of certain groups -- women, children, certain communities and racial groups.
3. The world of the media -- mediated world vs the real world; experiencing the world second-hand through the media; media values in relation to human values; "truth" in the media.
4. The media as constructs -- how form contributes to audience engagement; relationship of form and content; media as the message; media as the massage.
5. Ad-ucation

6. Role of media -- information? entertainment? education?

7. Using the media for positive purposes -- spreading awareness about health, ecology, law, literacy and other social issues.

These issues could be brought up in class in a variety of ways:

* Discussion of a particular programme /item familiar to students: hoardings, commercials, current events, films, TV serials
* Debates on media issues
* Role plays followed by discussion
* Micro-analysis of the formal elements of various media
* Group assignments, projects, creative use of the media -- making posters, collages, creating songs, jingles
* Field trips to media centres - studios, newspaper offices, advertising agencies, communications centres
* Using quotations, lines from a song, a news item, to generate discussion and debate
* Keeping a media diary

The methodology followed in the workshop, the teachers pointed out, was a useful one: combining practical exercises with discussion and weaving media theory and critique into the discussion.

CONCLUSION

What the workshop reaffirmed for us was our conviction that teachers are our collaborators in this task of media education. Teachers (at least the ones we interacted with) seemed to share
our belief that "school walls are crumbling" and that the time has come to address the "alternate education" students are getting through the media.

Another positive feedback was that the teachers recognized that the media are worthy of study -- not only because they surround us and influence us but also because of their tremendous capacity to engage us through their infinite variety and vibrancy. At the same time, there was a strong consensus of opinion that we can no longer be passive recipients of media messages -- we are part of the media experience, and therefore there is every need for us to constantly question, criticize, analyze, understand the "values" of the media.

We are aware that introducing media education into the formal school system would call for some modification in the teaching methods. To put it simplistically, the teacher would have to be a facilitator/ animator rather than an instructor. The teacher would need the ability

* to stimulate a discussion
* to analyze the elements of the media
* to develop a critical attitude to the media
* to understand that media messages may mean different things to different people
* to see students as active participants, both in the media experience and in its re-creation in the classroom.

The workshop was a tremendous learning experience for us. Every stage of the workshop -- planning the sessions, designing
exercises, preparing reading material, conducting the discussions -- gave us an opportunity to reflect on and review our own relationship with the media. The fact that we are as much part of the media environment as the school teachers and their students made the workshop an experience of "media sharing" rather than "media training". In learning about what the media are, we sharpened our perceptions as much about our mediated reality as about ourselves.
ANNEXURE

THE MEDIA WORKBOOK : Content and Methodology

Areas in mass media and popular culture

Radio/Television, with particular emphasis on TV serials and 'soaps'/Hindi cinema (i.e. the 'mainstream' or 'popular' cinema)/ Documentary films/'Cable' Television/ The Press/ Magazines and Comics/ Fiction, particularly 'pop' or 'pulp' fiction/ Advertising.

The issues

Media as construct -- to emphasize what the media "are" rather than what the media "do". The media may have a certain bias with regard to race, colour, gender, lifestyle and ideology.

Process of meaning-making -- that media images carry a multiplicity of meanings that are capable of being interpreted at various levels.

Media economics -- power structure, ownership and control of the media by a certain class/institution/individual, and how this influences the message; state ownership of the media; 'freedom' and 'censorship', both private and state.

Media technology -- sociological consequences of technological developments in the media.

"Role" of the media -- Information? Education? Entertainment?

Media ethics -- 'Objectivity', 'Truth' in the media, propaganda; copyright and problem of piracy.

Aesthetics -- Does the media cater to the so-called lowest common denominator? Media as propagators of pop culture, 'kitsch'.

The workbook will constantly emphasize that:

* media texts are not neutral and value-free
* that we need to learn to 'read' media messages with discernment.
The approach and the treatment of our workbook will be informed by the multi-faceted nature of the media, and the open-endedness of the mediation process.

Our attempt is to present information in a mosaic fashion which juxtaposes different media and shows how they simultaneously influence and are influenced by one another. *gives the reader room to choose the information, and allows playfulness in choosing it.*

The AXIS Collective
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