

## UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM. RHETORIC OF DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

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### Abstract

The term 'audience' in media studies and communication research draws from a wide range of theoretical orientations and can be understood as the product of the inter-pollination of the role of media with the play of culture, society and politics in any milieu. In this paper, I wish to delineate the major transitions in audience studies and tease out the dilemma presented by the discussion about the activity and passivity of the audience. Audiences are positioned as a group of individuals who are negotiating with the process of influence and 'conscientization' simultaneously. I argue that audiences are both active and passive at the same time and that the dialectics of (in)action makes it possible to understand how the role of media education can be conceptualized in the age of religious extremism. Here, media education is the platform where the active and passive nature of individuals gives way to a dynamic conceptualization of the 'politicized media audiences' and acts as a site for both appropriation and resistance. Media education can offer the required competencies, skills and affordances to the audiences, so as to enable them to appropriate the mediascape. Also, a critical understanding of the media narratives and inter-textuality will help the audience understand the politics of religious nuances in media discourse and its implications on public interest. It is in this context that I propose to use 'master's tools to dismantle master's house', as media's influence is contingent to its effective use if to encode the content then also to decode it.

**Keywords:** *media education, audiences, critical media pedagogy, religious extremism, Indian politics.*

### AUDIENCE AS A SUGGESTIVE TEXT

"Just as people as audiences cannot be separated from personal, social and cultural continuity, so texts cannot be isolated from their broader cultural significance, or from the history of that significance. The audience-text relation is a chimera, which can only ever be apprehended partially. We think we are seeing reality when what we see is more like a holographic reflection,

changing as our own point of reference changes, and dependent on our ability to see - on the quality of our vision. Audience is a shifty concept." (Nightingale, 1996, p. 148)

The term 'audience' in media studies and communication research draws from a wide range of theoretical orientations and can be understood as the product of the inter-pollination of the role of media with the play of culture, society and politics in any milieu. I hold myself from using words such as 'media influence' and 'media effects' because the central argument of this paper is predicated on identifying the ways in which the audience, as an ephemeral entity, is inflected by the interactions between audience activities and the textual character. Through this narrative I wish to explain how the audiences are both active and passive at the same time and how their interaction with the society operates within the simultaneities of the dialectics of 'agency', *i.e.* the required autonomy, skills and competencies, to understand the polysemic nature of the media texts<sup>1</sup>. Audiences are heavily influenced by the forces in the milieu in which they are placed and their interpretation of media texts is based on the realities of their unique experiences. However, '*The Structuration Theory*' also focuses on the role of reflexivity, the ability of social agents to change their place in the social structures (Cohen, 1989). The idea that space is a domain which takes shape as the person interacts with it is followed by a realization that the changes are embedded in human actions based on thoughts within a dialogical premise. 'Individuals must consider the possibility of new makings of reality, the new possibilities for being that emerge from new makings and become

committed to shaping a new enabling and regenerative history' (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Thus, within the Freirian pedagogy, audiences appear as a group of 'thinking individuals' who can be initiated into a critical thinking process to ensure that the influence of media, as manifested in the interpretation of texts, can be reduced.

In the sections to follow I wish to delineate the major transitions in audience studies and tease out the dilemma presented by the discussion about the activity and passivity of the audience. I wish to position the audience as a group of individuals who are negotiating with the process of influence and conscientization simultaneously. I argue that audiences are both active and passive at the same time and the dialectics of (in)action makes it possible to understand how the role of media education can be conceptualized in the age of religious pluralism. Should we think about the audience as actively interpreting, co-creating and distributing messages on religious pluralism? Or should we define media audience as being influenced by the dominant discourses in the mediascape?

I wish to place media education within the theoretical contours of 'hybridity'; this idea was introduced by Homi Bhabha (1994) in an attempt at challenging the celebration of cultural diversity. Multiculturalism often revels in the idea of the coexistence of different cultures, each maintaining its unique identity; similarly, extremism can be seen as closely related to "some form of imagined purity" (Davies, 2009). Hybridity, on the other hand, is not just the co-existence of multiple identities but their amalgamation, to give rise to new sets of cultural experiences. Here, media education is the site where the active and passive nature of individuals gives way to a dynamic conceptualization of the 'politicized media audiences' and acts as a site of both appropriation and resistance (Bhabha, p. 111). Media education will offer the required competencies, skills and affordances to the audiences so as to enable them to appropriate the mediascape. Also, a critical understanding of the media narratives and inter-textuality<sup>2</sup> will help the audience understand the politics of religious nuances in media discourse and its implications on public interest. Media education can help the

audiences understand the media environment in India, which is fraught with ideas about religious extremism, verging to the collapse of the secular credentials of the country. It is in this context that I propose to use 'master's tools to dismantle master's house' as media's influence is contingent to its effective use if to encode the content then also to decode it!

### **THE RELIGIOUSLY-POLITICIZED SELF!**

In the essay "Patterns of ethnic separatism", Horowitz (1981) explains that ethnic separatism can be understood as the reasons which encourage "discrete ethnic groups to leave the states of which they are a part, whereas other groups, also regionally concentrated, make no such attempts". For instance, after the polarization of Muslims during the riots in Gujarat, in 1992 and later on in 2001, Juhapura in Ahmedabad has emerged as a site that witnesses the increased "ghettoisation" of the Muslims (Berman, 2003). The fear of violence in the central parts of the city forced the marginal community to search for a safe habitat on the periphery of the city; religious separatism thus seems to be the over arching aspiration of this urban settlement (Roy, 2016). Such cases call for an explanation of the discrimination predicated on a comparison not across time but across space. To elaborate this further, let us take the example given by Horowitz, "An Ibo may be ... an Owerri Ibo or an Onitsha Ibo in what was the eastern region of Nigeria. In Lagos, he is simply an Ibo. In London, he is a Nigerian. In New York, he is an African." In an era where local affiliations are shadowed by transnational identities, religion plays a very important role in strengthening a sense of belongingness across regions to create a commitment towards a united civilization (Huntington, 1993). The discussion about religion becomes crucial in the context of its contribution in identify formation amongst individuals (Hall & Jackson, 2007). For instance, in a study conducted in Australia, Aly (2012) found out that the members of Muslim community relied on the online platforms more for their daily media consumption because they were dissatisfied with the prejudice towards the Muslim community

that was evident in the mainstream media narratives. This refers to the “development of a shared identity of victimhood” amongst the members of a marginalized community, a religious identity which transcends other cultural boundaries (Romano, 2002).

In the wake of the revival of religion, the governance policies will no longer be based on ideologies, instead the government will increasingly address the citizens as religious monoliths with no other aspirations that need to be taken into cognizance. A very peculiar quality of discourse of secularism in Indian political sphere is the irony manifested in the way in which the word ‘secular’ is comprehended. The basic premise of the term ‘secular’ comes to be questioned in circumstances where the word is now used to evoke ‘communal feelings’. The basic interpretation of ‘secularism’ implies equal respect for all religions, *i.e.* ‘Sarvadharmasamabhava’, however, in the current political rhetoric the term has acquired contradictory implications and has often been employed to categorize the minority groups, especially the Muslims, as separate monolith with only religious aspirations. This denominational secularism emphasizes that people can be convinced only through appeals to their religious sentiments. When this discourse is analyzed, it is clear that the term secularism was used as a disguised nomenclature to signify the communal inclinations inbuilt in the political discourse (Bhatia, 2014).

In the Indian context of mass-mediated political realities, the public sphere and political discourse generated therein cannot be explored in isolation of the various religious elements that define their existence. Let us examine the current political landscape of the country. The BJP, as the party in power, concentrates on the ‘development’ agenda, while its subsidiary alliances/parties, such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and some others illustrate their inclination towards the Hindu community through the political discourse that gives a voice to the ideology that BJP believes in. A closer analysis reveals that this strategy is a counter-action to the strategy of appeasing the religious minorities, followed by most of the other left-wing parties. Such narratives build on the idea of creating collective identities

strengthened by cultivating hatred for the ‘other’ (Apple, 2001). “It is through the creation of collective identities that ethnic... movements gain their force...they mobilize culture, traditions, religion ...to evoke a sense of unity” (Cockburn, 1998, p. 10).

Some recent events reinforce this understanding of the religiously-politicized self. For instance, after BJP came to power, VHP started a movement called ‘Ghar Vapsi’, *i.e.* Home Coming, with the aim to reconvert non-Hindu families back into the Hindu fold. Abhishek Ranjan, leader of Bajrang Dal (a subsidiary of BJP) claimed in his speech that if people are not proselytized back to Hinduism, the Hindu community will become extinct<sup>3</sup>. On the same lines, various other subsidiaries started a campaign against ‘Love Jihad’, in which they banned Muslim youths from celebrating various festivals with the Hindu community on the pretext that allowing Hindu-Muslims to intermingle will lead to the ruine of Hindu culture; an environment conducive to the growth of inter-faith relationships may lead to the development of matrimonial alliances between different communities<sup>4</sup>.

Sen (2006) describes this as the ‘miniaturization’ of individuals, as they are reduced to religious monoliths with loyalties only for their community. Embracing a single religion is acceptable until the point where the unflinching love for one’s community gets translated into a hatred for the other! The self is often understood in relationship with the other, and this leads to the creation of ‘Manichaeism’, dividing the world into binaries such as good/evil, ethical/unethical and so on. “When the prospects of good relations among different human beings are seen primarily in terms of ‘amity among civilization’ or ‘dialogue between religious groups’ (ignoring the great many different ways in which people relate to one another), a serious miniaturization of human beings precedes the devised programs for peace” (2006). The media often reinforces these community/collective identities by converting the culture into packaged commodities and its subsequent portrayal. Media creates a common cultural archive from which individuals draw as they engage in the process of making sense to the world (Coudry, 2003). Is it, therefore, dicey to describe the influencer-influenced relationship

between media, religion and audiences? In an attempt to provide a cogent analysis of the interactions which arise due to the dialectics of (in)action, I have tried to understand audience as a religiously-politicized self in the mediascape and created scope for the use of media education as a means to counteract the dreadful consequences of harping for too long on a too pure construct such as religious identity. In the interests of a new object of inquiry in the academic field of media education, I wish to position the role of media education in countering the forces of extremism as pivotal and yet indefinable; in this uncertainty of possibilities and challenges lies the scope to coalesce the praxis of the social reality with theoretical underpinnings.

### **INTERPRETING THE INTERPRETER: REIMAGINING MEDIA AUDIENCE**

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We begin our analysis of the 'audience' with the assumption that they are influenced by media. According to Ruddock (2007), thinking that media has no influence on the audience is like saying that cars have not become faster with the advancement of technology. However, though the individuals have always been influenced by media texts, it is important to understand that meaning is not contained within cultural works, but it is disseminated through them as "the discursive work of the interpretive community" (Fish, 1980). The theory of interpretive communities reflects on the possibility of identifying religion and culture as the basis of the formation of communities which share a set of interpretive strategies to write and understand the world around them. Thus, primacy is taken away from the reader, as well as the text. Audiences are neither conceptualized as passive who submit to the media effects nor are entirely active as they function within and not outside the system!

Even if audiences are to be considered as active in the sense of having the 'critical consciousness' to interpret the media texts and the religious nuances embedded in them, it is also important to acknowledge that not all of them are empowered, skilled and aware of their latent ability to question their interactions with the media and look for

alternatives to substantiate what the media portrays as the truth. The young minds, for instance, can be easily influenced into embracing a notion of reality constructed to feed them with a sense of hatred for the other by reinforcing their allegiance to their religious communities. The reality is distorted and they are left with no alternative to interact and know 'the other'. According to Said (Said, 1978), the process of knowledge creation and the discursive practices involved therein must be evaluated in order to form the perspective of 'the other', who is being essentialized through the various literary text created. The term 'essentialize' here follows a reductionist technique in which 'generalizations' help in creating a straight jacketed, uni-dimensional version of the reality as it is perceived by the self. The force of such texts lays in the way in which they play with the "politics of truth" of a particular community. According to Foucault, "Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Rabinow, 1991). Controlling the politics of truth leads to control of the social meaning making process and gives rise to an imagined realism in which the power to create the other for the community rests in the hands of few. A lot of efforts are being invested by the right wing political parties in India to 'saffronize' the Indian education system. Proposals are being tabled to change the school curriculum to include Hindu religious texts<sup>5</sup>. According to the Indian Constitution, no government organization is legally entitled to propagate any particular religion, and the initiatives to change the curriculum stand against the secular credentials of the country. Rewriting the history to give precedence to a single culture, by introducing the students to a single dominant worldview and defining the self at the behest of destroying the other will lead to the creation of a society where individuals are nothing but religious identities striving to rise to live in an isolated tower built on the ruins of other realities. What will be the

repercussions of having raised a generation of young minds into believing that the world is single dimensional, that a Hindu is nothing more than an individual who participates in the 'Ram Janambhoomi movement', that a Muslim is the one who celebrates the victory of another nation against India, that a Christian simply lives to proselytize others and that differences signal the dawn of a fight to establish supremacy.

I think it was very important to introduce a counter-narrative which can at least provide a space for contesting the dominant political discourse. I see the introduction of media education as a way to create awareness amongst young citizens, the "citizens-in-making", about the need to question what is considered to be the only truth. If they are guided by a parochial understanding of the reality, this will be reflected in the way they think, interact and make sense of the 'Other'. It is an attempt, very bold I must say, to introduce the young to the political structures reinforced around the discursive space through media by people in power.

## **AN EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE**

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According to Henry Jenkins, "Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences" (2006, p. 15). Media and society share a reciprocal relationship which thrives on the convergence occurring between socio-cultural and political practices in the society (Considine, 2003; Gutiérrez, 2003; Luke, 2007). The study of media and audiences will have to coalesce with the idea of the increasing interaction between the media and the society. There are three major approaches to study this interaction. First, *the protectionist approach* derived from the study by Neil Postman (1985), in which the media controls the educational system as it accrues the attention, time and interests of the young people. Thus, media is considered to be all powerful, which stands at loggerheads with my faith in the potential of empowerment through critical pedagogy. Critics of this approach explain that taking such a hard lined view about the role of media will either train the young people into repeating the

already available "politically correct" responses to critique, or dismiss the possibilities afforded by media literacy altogether (Bunckingham, 1994). The aim is not to create an aversion for critically analyzing the media by defining the audience as helplessly passive recipients, but to reinvigorate a strand of critical inquiry in the minds of young people. The second approach, called *media arts education*, trains students to use media for self expression. This approach is flawed in the sense that it focuses on teaching the students about the technical skills required to reproduce 'the existing hegemonic representations in the media'. Though skills development can ensure that the voiceless are given a chance to raise their concerns through competency building, many feminist critics suggest that claiming voices must not take place in isolation of critically analyzing the structures of oppression reinforced through media texts (Collins, 2004; Harding, 2004). If we apply this approach to the next level and introduce the element of transformative critical pedagogy to it, we can make space for analyzing media texts and the knowledge produced therein as a political process. Media literacy devoid of critical analysis consists of simply engaging with the textual, overt content of the narratives, without making an attempt to understand the historical, intellectual and analytical base - which renders the media literacy exercises mechanical, glib and superficial (Ferguson, 1998).

As media stands at the crossroads of power, ideology and domination, there is a never ending struggle between dominant readings, oppositional readings and negotiated readings (Hall S., 1980). According to the Freirian pedagogy, I position this critical media literacy approach as a political process for promoting democratic values, such as equality, social justice and human rights/dignity. No pedagogical manoeuvre is 'ahistorical', it must take into account the past events which inform on the experiences of the individuals in the present. The world of being is marked by traces of human actions and cannot be studied isolated from the human conscience; accepting the transformational character of human history ensures that dialogue can be initiated with an aim to temporalize space and act upon it.

“What I have been proposing is a profound respect for the cultural identity of students - a cultural identity that implies respect for the language of the other, the color of the other, the gender of the other, the class of the other, the sexual orientation of the other and the intellectual capacity of the other...But these things take place in social and historical context and not in thin air. These things take place in history and I, Paulo Freire, am not the owner of history” (A Response, 1997).

This approach takes the agency from the teacher and places it with the students who have the required competencies to critically interact with the media discourse. It dismantles the hierarchical student-teacher relationship and champions for a dialectic space where the students and teachers can negotiate their ideas, learn and respect the multiple perspectives that merge in the discussions. The sole purpose is to instill the value of *critical autonomy* (Masterman, 2001) amongst students so that they may always feel the need to question the media texts and not accept things first hand. Moreover, students must also learn *critical solidarity*, because the information is a political construct; it is informed by and informs the power relations (Ferguson, 1998). There is no standard model for critical media pedagogy; just as the texts are polysemic, the audiences diverse and the power centers constantly in flux, so should the media pedagogy be multimodal and interdisciplinary. I wish to borrow theoretical forces from disciplines which will help students challenge the influences of primary socialization<sup>6</sup>. The family, the society and the community play a very important role in indoctrinating young children with ideas that will strengthen their sense of belonging to the community and lead to enactment of practices which will be acknowledged and even appreciated by the community members. The only way to counteract this is to make students realize that this is a space beyond the dichotomies of fandom and censorship.

If media can be used to create divides, a sound understanding of the very same media texts can be used to overcome prejudices and

see the same ‘other’ from a new perspective. In India, a lot needs to be done in the area of media education and translation of theoretical knowledge into practical steps taken by teachers and students alike. My contribution in this field is to try and understand the role of media education in the age of religious pluralism within three broader areas:

To encourage students to practice critical autonomy and engage with the media texts at the level of the meta narratives of power, ideology and domination

Instead of reading the texts as sacrosanct representation of reality I wish to encourage the young to *read into* the reality of the media discourses. Reality itself is a construct which can be understood only when students realize that each phenomenon has a history attached to it - a history which delineates the reasons for the emergence of a particular phenomenon, its sustenance and sometimes its suppression.

To encourage them to unveil the myths and create alternative narratives; an anti-thesis for the ever so rigid representations of the ‘other’ as demonic, evil and perpetrator of violence.

I, as a researcher, continuously learn from the everyday idiosyncrasies of life and enjoy the play of the volatile forces arising from the differences intrinsic to the existence of a human being. An individual is all the colors of the rainbow and the myriad shades of white and black. To capture the essence of human beings within watertight compartments of their affiliations to religion is to steal from the beauty of existence. The world is not a factory and we, as individuals, are not the homogenized products of the industrial processes that overlook the importance of diversity at play. As Amartya Sen (2006) explains, “The hope of harmony in the contemporary world lies to great extent in a clearer understanding of the plurality of human identity and in the appreciation that identities intersect with each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable division.”

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### Endnotes

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1. Here, I have drawn from the conceptualization of agency given by Anthony Giddens in his book 'The constitution of society'. The social practice of interpreting a media text is recursive in that it reinforces the dominant structures as it draws from it. Though Giddens talks about the potential of 'critical consciousness' amongst individuals in a society, he also doesn't dismiss the fact that social actions are nothing but "tacitly enacted practices which become institutions" and in the enactment of these practices these social forms are reproduced (Giddens, 1986).
2. Inter-textuality is a discursive phenomenon that explains how each text can be understood only against the backdrop of other narratives and events in the milieu in which the text is created and read (Lemke, 1992). Thus, the text must be contextualized under a broad meta-narrative that defines the state of events in that society at any given time. Media education provides the audiences with the necessary skills to perform this task of subjective interpretation and critical thinking.
3. For more details, read the article 'Law of unintended consequences: Ghar Wapsi a secret plan to radically liberalize Hinduism?' by Deepanjana Pal. (<http://m.firstpost.com/living/law-unintended-consequences-ghar-wapsi-secret-plan-radically-liberalise-hinduism-1855767.html>)
4. For more details, read the article 'After demands for ban on Muslim participations in Navratri, ID cards made must for garba in Ujjain, Indore' by DNA Web Team. (<http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-after-demands-for-ban-on-muslim-participations-in-navratri-id-cards-made-must-for-garba-in-ujjain-indore-2020161>)
5. For more details read the articles:
  1. BJP government in Haryana to introduce Gita in curriculum ([http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2015-01-08/news/57838388\\_1\\_bjp-government-school-curriculum-islamic-seminary-darul-uloom](http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2015-01-08/news/57838388_1_bjp-government-school-curriculum-islamic-seminary-darul-uloom))
  2. Gujarat textbooks never far from controversy (<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/gujarat-textbooks-never-far-from-controversy/article6261520.ece>)
6. The concept of primary and secondary socialization has been borrowed from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman's work 'The Social Construction of Reality' (1966).