



CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY BY THE MEDIA

¹Achla Pritam Tandon

¹Associate Professor

¹Department of Sociology,

¹Hindu College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India.

Abstract : The press and other forms of media are engaged in the production, reproduction and distribution of knowledge in the widest sense of symbolically meaningful experiences in the social world. Construction of reality have become the forte of the media and meanings and interpretation of reality are socially constructed in such a way that images and words purveyed by the media get picked up for general usage by the consumers of such knowledge and images. It is becoming clear that we are increasingly experiencing a mediated world rather than reality itself. There is need to exercise discretion while reading and viewing what the media manufactures for us.

IndexTerms – communication, social reality, mediated representations, faking, selective reportage, filtered knowledge

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication maintains and animates life. It is also the motor and expression of social activity and civilization; it leads people from instinct to inspiration, through variegated processes and systems of enquiry, command and control; it creates a common pool of ideas, strengthens the feeling of togetherness through exchange of messages and translates thought into action, reflecting every emotion and need from the humblest tasks of human survival to supreme manifestations of creativity - or destruction (UNESCO,1982).A Communication system can be used to manipulate people if the system is under the control of people who wish to use it that way. Where the channels of information are varied and broad based (Newspapers, Radio, social media etc), the changes resulting from economic, social or political ideas creeping into the community are smooth. However, where the channels of information are narrow and controlled by the few, changes are difficult to bring about and often lead to a formation of factions. The kind of change most developing countries are seeking today aims at a voluntary development which is participatory in nature and the better informed will assist the less. Within the universe of cut throat competitions and one upmanship, the communication media appear to be endowed with autonomy, and a will and mind of their own.

A piece of news is simply raw material from which it creates collective representation, images and stereotypes. For some 'It is both fact and image. A fact is simply a pretext for presenting to the reader not only the ethic web of an ideology, but also the ruling classes seditious intentions' (Mattelart, 1980). Through sensationalism, the face and events which make news and sell the products are made to appear isolated. They are cut off from the multitude of other face and events which have brought them about, and separated from the mass of people involved in them. Separated from the future and the past, the information in a news item is reduced to being no more than the expression of an anecdotal present. The daily newspaper is a world closed within itself, collection of items of information, stories and incidents which will be out of date by the following day. In the next issue there may be new events, other items of news, novelties, besides some continuation of the previous days 'lead' stories, all intended to grab the reader's momentary attention. And so it goes on throughout the year. Once consumed, the newspaper can be thrown away. For the lay reader a given day's issue and the subsequent one, do not necessarily have a continuity of meaning; it has no place in any organized process of the accumulation of knowledge and consciousness, where various elements play their part in this sensationalized universe of fragmented everyday reality. The principle of senselization is concerned strictly with the immediate, with the event which is interesting because it creates a sensation for a moment.

II. SOCIAL REALITY AND CONSTRUCTIONS

Individuals externalize their own selves into the society outside which in turn they internalize as an objective reality. That is 'to be in society is to participate in its dialectic' (Berger and Luckmann, 1985). According to the authors, social reality is 'filtered' through the double selective process of negotiating individual idiosyncrasies as well as their respective social locations. So, by that logic social reality may be even reduced to a daily gossip mongering or a fragmentation of the universe of social reality where selective, irrational and sensationalized representations may be the most recommended thing as per cut throat competition in 'breaking' news. The authors recognise the everyday world as the paramount reality and how they explore the impact of social institutions and processes upon individuals and their definition, in turn of social fact they have analysed the world into which we are born as being not only given, but handed down to us by our predecessors. This is the world which we shape in our organisation of daily interactions and invocations of relevance. They have also stressed how institutions objectify social meanings. They suggest that the social meanings are constituted in social interactions and transformed into institutional and organisational rules and procedures that may be invoked as resources to justify. The Immediacy factor in a sensationalized version of news is so clear that many if not most journalists may think nothing of the compromised ethics behind such unfair choices. The principle is followed through a selection of important facts in a non- systematic manner. one school of thought feels that the bourgeoisie profits from the anarchy of information, because it enables them to purvey information in accordance with their own interests. A so-called objective piece of news is always located within an organizing framework which, for the receiver, remains implicit. It would need to be decoded by reference to meanings and varied interpretations of social realities which are controlled and work as per universalized norms. As a public media phenomenon this must be of special sociological interest too. Implicated in this trend, is the increasing tendency of establishing rather cheap and stirring emotional effects (example in reportage of sex and crime) where the "the medium is the message" and electric technology is reshaping patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of social and personal lives (McLuhan, 1958). The present condition of journalism, with its alarming tokens of crises and danger of promoting disinformation rather than information, may still be a situation pregnant with coming innovations as to the ways of taking care of our most vital needs of consciousness and knowledge of life and reality. For many a journalist the idea that news is manufactured is entirely alien. In fact for many people the idea is foreign to popular conceptions of news. Many have the tendency to accept it just as it is. Questions have been-raised regarding the production rather construction of news, though there have been constant denials that news is structured or socially patterned. Those who proclaim such a theory, argue that the fact that no charter is proclaimed, no rule book issued to guide the production of news, is no proof that it lacks consistent pattern. News production is no more an indeterminate anarchy than other social processes. Many journalists see sociology as an academic word game, characterized by intelligent jargon or intellectual arrogance based on ignorance of real life situations. On the other hand, many sociologists still use the term "journalistic" for those essays by colleagues they judge to be superficial, tendentious, ever-hasty and over written. To many, in both camps the two pursuits are indeed alternative methods of investigating and explaining the social life of the world. Invariably, Journalists are concerned with the short-term and deliberate manipulation of news and with its immediate and direct effect on readers. The sociologists tend to have a difference in perspective, being concerned rather more with the long term, routine and non-deliberate manufacture of news and by corollary with the long term and cumulative influence on readers.

III. MEDIATED REPRESENTATIONS

Gaye Tuchman (1978) has attempted to capture the categories employed by journalism in coping with the reality they have to report. Judgements about news, she suggest, become absorbed into the 'common-sense' knowledge of everyday journalism. These, in turn become organized into typification which in turn determine the organization of work. Few outsiders who have etched news reporting over any extended period of time doubt that anonymous quotes are occasionally cooked up or rewritten but it is one of the most difficult offences to prove since it involves the logical impossibility of proving a nonevent. According to Defluer (1989), there are ample grounds for predicting that we do indeed construct conventionalized meanings for reality on the basis of what media present. Scholars and researchers who study of the process and effects of mass communication have developed several formulations that are founded on the principle that meanings and interpretation of reality are socially constructed. It is becoming clear that we are increasingly experiencing a mediated world rather than reality itself. One of the major features of our current transition into the age of mass communications is that increasingly we are in contact with mediated representations of a complex physical and social world rather than only with the objective features of our narrow personal surroundings. Lippman (1922) surmised that people act more on the basis of what they think is the real situation obtained from depictions provided to them by the press-meanings and interpretations that often have only a limited correspondence to what has happened (Herbst, 1999). This he says can bring about inappropriate actions and behaviors that do not have much relationship to the actual reality of the world outside. The importance of Lippman's theory lies in the fact that it happens to be one of the earliest statements made on the role of mass communications in the construction of meanings that provides a basis for a human action. One must realize also that it was basically concerned with the news media that existed in Lippman's time that is it is a theory restricted to the press in a traditional meaning of the term. In the 1960s, in his study of cultivation effects, George Gerbner (1968) and his associates have been concerned in particular with how violence shown on Television exaggerates the fears of people have about crime in their neighborhood. This analysis has proved to be a promising attempt to understand the age old question of how we gain knowledge and how that knowledge serves to guide our conduct. May be, such assessments of people's beliefs will help to show how mediated reality influences our meanings for the objective world. Another effort to understand the implications of mediated reality has been from the point of view of the agenda setting function of the press. Here, the basic premise is that there is a close connection between the manners in which the news media present issues during a political campaign and the order of importance assigned to those issues by those exposed to the news. Some feel that the media establish new words with associated

meanings and affect the usage of words. Examples of the same can be seen in use of words like Love Jihad, Urban Naxals, Hindutva, Beauty, Secularism etc. Readers and viewers may get familiarized by the stereotypical meanings of these terms, much more than any rational interpretation of same.

IV. FAKING NEWS

Ideologies for some may serve to mobilise social movement within publics through the mediation of newspapers and other media. News may even generate ideology-centred social identities which in turn, may be media constructed and defined. Some Marxists would relate the value judgement of the news producing systems to interest and especially to economic or property interest and particularly to the interests of those in control of the news producing system. That is, the impact of property system on construction of news has to be contended with Ideologies, for according to such a perspective, are a 'background' to the news and are a special form of information- integrating social theory, grounded in news reportage and tested in terms of public knowledge of that news. Gouldner (1976) mentions the concept of "newspaper sociology" - a sociology oriented to newspapers reports, which allows the sociologist to participate in the public sphere, to receive recognition in the public sphere and thus play a role as a public person. Gouldner's account of ideology views it as a historical phenomenon which emerged with the Enlightenment and which is interconnected with the technology of communication (Mattelart, 1980). Morally oriented people who do not comprehend what faking in the newspaper world signifies may perhaps be relieved to know that it does not exactly mean telling lies. This is a difference that only newspaper correspondents would fully understand. The reading public on the other hand may not be so quick and discerning to read between the lines. If the story is an ordinary one, the "faking" may be inconsiderable. If it is a romance, or a sensation, the chances are that the correspondent has yielded to temptation and the tendency of the time, and that a good part of the charm of his narrative is due to the brilliancy of his imagination and to his skill in making the most of face which he may possess.

One particular instance of faking needs some elaboration to make us realize the extent to which news maker's integrity can be compromised with. "Jimmy is 8 years old and a third-generation heroin addict, a precocious little boy with sandy hair velvety brown eyes and needle marks freckling the baby smooth skin of his thin brown arms... he has been an addict since the age of 5". So began an article by Janet Cooke on the front page of The Washington Post on Sunday, 28 September 1980. In a particularly vivid simile near the close of the 2,400-word piece, Ron, the lover of Jimmy's mother, grabs the boy's left arm, and "The needle slides into the boy's soft skin like a straw pushed into the centre of a freshly baked cake. The reaction of the article was very strong. So much so that admiring editors promoted Cooke from a weekly suburban section to the more prestigious metropolitan section. The story even won the Pulitzer Prize for its poignant portrayal of the social reality of a young drug addict. Not only had she cooked up her educational background credentials but the entire story had also been fabricated. The question of journalistic objectivity becomes very pertinent at this point. For many, objectivity means factual reporting, straightforward descriptive presentation. Even if they want to be impartial and completely honest in their reporting, they may simply be unable to be so. There is no denying the fact, this school of thought believes, that every journalist-reporter as well as editorial writer- subjectivists his journalism. Speaking of the general nature of any kind of communication Merrill (1968) surmises that news is always judgmental, value loaded, incomplete and distorted in relation to reality, i.e., "the whole business of journalism is really subjective from beginning to end." The factors leading to distorted reporting or departures from objectivity, could be the particular reporter's commitments to the commercial interests of his employers, his desire to what is the appetite of the mob for scandal, his indifference to his social obligations, the correspondence of his political partisanship with that of his employers, or simply directives from his employer.

Even Photographs can be as ideologically or culturally constructed as can print though there is also the question of technical accomplishment to contend with. For instance, the kind of emotions that a demolished Golden Temple or the mosque at Ayodhya can evoke is concretized to the visual impact of photographs. Taking it a little further, newspapers or magazines can ensure their sales to be like the proverbial hot cakes, if they have any movie star or beauty pageant winner on the front page. The glamour of these personalities or the curiosity to know more may be slightly undermined if it were not for the visual "display" - literally - they make of themselves, or, the press makes of them. The readers are happy in the welcome change from straining to read through the columns and the publisher or editors happy to have touched the right chord in their appropriate selection or projection of photographic evidence. Needless to add, this is not to deny the positive contribution that photographs make, especially for those who may not have the time or inclination to read the details.

V. SELECTIVE REPORTAGE AND CHALLENGES OF OBJECTIVITY

Giving the experience of Journalists who had been sent on to the war front during the Falklands conflict in 1982, journalists and troops were faced by unfamiliar conditions. So what was necessitated was the construction of a new reality with which they would comprehend their new experiences not only with reference to the physical circumstances evolving around them but also in terms of giving meaning to newly acquired emotions. Whereas military men, when they are physically transferred, also carry

along all the established meanings of their world, the journalists leave behind their world of civilian news values considering that news as a social construction has to be understood from the point of view of general news values i.e., collections of occupational understandings as to what could interest the reading public it would also basically be a civilian (as against military in Morrison and Tumber's study (1988) interpretation. For the reporter, in a war like situation the sighs and experiences of shooting deaths etc. , not only become expected but even taken for granted "they were accepted as part of the nature of things, and it is this acceptance which helps explain the non-reporting of the killings". Taking a parallel closer home, the non-reportage of state or police terrorism sometimes euphemistically rationalized as killing "in defence", may also be linked to the fact that journalism may have had their own interests or links (political, administrative or purely monetary) to establish or simply the fact that the state could not afford to sully its fast improving (or declining) image. All this is besides the aspect of non-reportage of events by journalism due to the sheer having got-used-to-it phenomenon where in a terrorist attack, a kidnapping, a criminal or a corrupt act by a minister or a similar such thing by a chief minister's kith and kin may be news worthy only for or till the time the newspaper owners and constructors may feel fit. In contrast, the photographic and representational 'overkill' of sorts one has experienced in the case of an estranged member of the British royal family, to the point of almost orchestrating her death, besides her life after marriage, is another case in point. The absurdity of construction becomes evident with the fact that the death of another globally known Indian social worker, whose stature was as fairly deglamorized, and whose fifty years of service for the poor, destitute and dying got her the Nobel Prize, was compared to the former, 'queen of hearts' who was instantly as if, upgraded to being the 'princess of the people'. The fact that the news of Mother Teresa's death could actually be given the same or even less space compared to the former's news of death, by some newspapers, even Indian, is the sign of our constructed-times.

Distinguishing between objectivity and impartiality, Morrison and Tumber felt that 'If, as most individuals do, one confuses objectivity with complete accuracy, then the problem of knowing does not go away. The circle is merely squared. Is something objective because it is accurate or accurate because it is objective?' In practice, judgement about relevance usually comes down to guess work about what will actually interest the readers and these are then concretized into generally accepted ideas as to what would be news values. According to this notion, impartiality is achieved through a synchronization of balance between opposing or similar point of view in presentation. Objectivity by and large remains more an ought-to-be-achieved goal than an actually realised idea and, in fact it may not even sometimes be desirable or really sought after. Morrison and Tumber have also expressed the role of a participatory journalist who may find it most difficult to maintain the objectivity goal. They opine that the worth of any story is judged in terms of news values, but those values do not come from nowhere. They are human judgements, accredited estimations about what is or is not news, and that judgement is one which is learnt over time in the process of going about being a journalist. It is an occupational, and hence shared, understanding of what will and will not make news. The occupational consensus means that the news values have an 'inherited' component and consequently they are not made and remade on the spot, or fashioned by the situation, but involve the journalist in examining events in terms of recognizable characteristics, and the more such characteristics there are, the greater the likelihood of it 'officially' becoming news. Thus the participant who dismisses a story due to his personal values rather than on grounds of news worthiness is indicating that the accepted story is his own "property" rather than an occupational "product" so the problem for the participant journalist who is caught in the trap of the events surrounding him, is how to respond to events or phenomena which force him to choose between his professional commitment and his participatory loyalties. Just as our values control our most important daily decisions, even reporters values determine 'what to put in and what to leave out.'

The press and other electronic media as we can see are engaged in the production reproduction and distribution of knowledge in the widest sense of symbolically meaningful experiences in the social world. This knowledge in turn helps us to contribute to the existing store of knowledge of the past and enables us to participate in the continuity of current understandings. Thus the symbolic environment (of information, ideas etc..) surrounding us is not only held in common but is bound to have a gradual impact on our general perception of reality which is mediated by institutions like the press, T.V. , Radio, etc.

One can also discern that the mass media have a mediating role between objective social reality and personal experience. They are in some ways channels for establishing linkages. They do provide the information for us to formulate opinions, ideas about other groups, organizations and events. So many a times our perception of "other" groups (based on caste, class, ethnic, religious, gender, political lines) is to quite an extent shaped by mass media. McQuail (1983) has captured the variations of communication images which express different aspect of the way in which the media connect us to "reality". The media are alternatively, a window on experience, which extends our vision, enables us to see what is going on for ourselves, without interference or bias.

VI. FILTERED KNOWLEDGE

We could apply some of the variations of mediated realities to understand the role of the press in a society where filtered knowledge can sometimes have very grievous ramifications. If one has to contend with any link in research involving media content one has to try and understand the question of the relationship between what is represented and some external standard of reality. There are a number of conventions to which the reality content can be recognised and judged. The highest expectations of

this reality claim are associated with news and information. Wherever media content may actually lie on the dimensions of reality expectation it is likely to deviate away from reality as conventionally understood or as open to measurement. Some of the main evidences as summarized by Dennis McQuail are theoretically significant. There is a consistent over-representation of the social 'top' as 'sources' of news. Governments, heads of state, official spokespersons provide views, versions of reality and 'make news' much more than 'lower level' participants.

The 'object' of news reporting is also more likely such elites. In Western media at least, 'there is no proportional reflection of the society in any statistical sense. Something replicated in our media too. Despite the need for wide-ranged representation of people and issues, actors, economic, cultural and social borders the newspapers, besides even the electronic media; concentrate on the trivialities of higher-ups in society. Events are more likely to figure in the news if they have a large-scale, dramatic, sudden and violent character. The more events are 'true to normal reality', the less newsworthy they become.

Themes of reporting are likely to show a bias towards dominant (or consensual) social and community values. Numerous studies have shown a bias in international reporting towards news concerning countries which are culturally, economically and politically similar. The nationalistic or ethnocentric bias of news can show up not only in quantitative, but also in qualitative, terms and in the use of language which influences the portrayal of reality. Xenocentric bias takes the shape of our own newspapers and electronic plus social media platforms which would rather print and present the escapades of a royal family member on its front page than any socially useful work being done by conscientious people here in India. The electronic media does no better. In fact, they are even more reckless in their selective as well as voyeuristic representations of reality, whether it be natural disasters, murders suicides or rapes. The collective social response which the media at times seem to promote in response to 'deviance', by minorities may amount to a form of paranoia, offsetting sometimes boomerang effects of the riotous kinds. Ethnic minorities have been shown frequently to have a disproportionately low status or dubious role in society, even when the reality may belie the fictionalized account. Even in the case of fictional representation: generally, there is an over-representation of those in higher status occupations. The pattern of inequality of women in fiction may not necessarily correspond with the pattern of inequality in society.

Perception of violence may be more a determination of exposure to violence on T.V. or through media, than the perception based on reality. For example, the 'TV answer' (based on the incidence of violence in TV fiction) to the question 'what are your chances of being involved in some kind of violence?' in any week is 10 percent, while the 'right answer' (based on crime statistics) is 1 percent. Through her examination of news, Gaye Tuchman has emphasized the impact of the social organization of time and space upon news work with the sword of deadlines hanging over them. News organisations and news workers, according to her, develop the art of transforming an-occurrence into an event. However the achievement of this ability often prevents them from seeing some occurrences as potential news. As it is, news is more likely to be available for the propagation of some social movements, interest groups or politically relevant individuals. So those who would be holding relatively powerful positions would have more access to the media as against others. In our own case, with reference to the relatively more objective or "free press we may for the purpose of our study draw parallels with reference to problems like Ayodhya, Punjab, Pakistan, Bhopal Gas Tragedy, etc., where personality or cult figures rhetorical statements become more significant or news worthy than analysing the genesis of these or similar other social political environmental problems. Many researchers are of the view that instead of simply representing a democratic idea by making information available through competitive journalism, news workers see themselves as arbiters of social reality, just as scientist discover facts by using established norms of objectivity and scientific methods. Similarly news makers use their own professionally honed methods to reveal social reality to their consumers i.e., the readers. Some social scientists have pointed out that American news workers are middle class as is professionalism itself, and hence the attitudes implicit in the news are inevitably those of middle-class Americans. Similarly we could, for the purpose of our own study, hypothesize the middle class, upper middle class, upper class or caste or region-wise background of our own newspapers that is newsmakers. Tuchman questions Manheim's position who had claimed that the intelligentsia was capable of distinguishing between truth and ideology so were more objective. Tuchman is of the opinion that this group may be merely different but not necessarily objective. The very attachment of the intelligentsia to some ideas may make them incapable of seeing that those ideas are invalid. Secondly Tuchman also feels that the professionalization of this group as sociologists, doctors, lawyers and journalism implies that they have their own particular (middle) class interests, perceptions of knowledge which is bound to be situationally determined. So, Tuchman argues, that if all knowledge is situationally determined, it would not be possible for any individual to remain objective or identify with non-ideological truths. One popular view has been that, socialized to their professional attitudes and norms, news makers cover, select, and dissemination stories about items identified as either interesting or important in fulfilling this function. The news which they construct, reflects society so news present to a society a mirror of its concerns and interest so, for a society's definition of news to change it would mean that the structure-of society and in institution must first change.

Berger and Luckmann (1985) recognise the everyday world as the paramount reality and how they explore the impact of social institutions and processes upon individuals and their definition, in turn of social fact they have analysed the world into

which we are born as being not only given, but handed down to us by our predecessors. This is the world which we shape in our organisation of daily interactions and invocations of relevance. They have also stressed how institutions objectify social meanings. They suggest that the social meanings are constituted in social interactions and transformed into institutional and organisational rules and procedures that may be invoked as resources to justify Luckman. According to Edward Said (2012), 'The images and the prints were controlled by government and the major American media copied one another and were in turn copied or shown (like CNN) all over the world.' Juxtaposing the same, we could look at the coverage of some events in our own country (Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, militancy in some states, Indo-Pak relations coverage, etc.) and their inadequate or convoluted reportage because of various pressures from different political or simply bureaucratic quavers. It is obvious therefore that the production and circulation of symbolic forms in modern societies is inseparable. The activities of the news making industries the role of such news disseminators is very significant and their projections, images, symbols are so pervasively characteristic of everyday life that it may be difficult to imagine our modern kind of existence without access to knowledge or information from books, newspapers, radio, television or the many other recently upcoming media.

VII. CONCLUSION

Day by day, week by week newspapers, radio and television present us with a steady flow of words and images, information and ideas, concerning events which take place beyond our immediate social milieu. We can occasionally show how aspects of media productions are formulated explicitly to affect a specific ideological slant. Readers and viewers, including those on social media platforms need to exercise discretion and rationality to make sense of the images, words and symbolic language that is used by those who make claims to presenting reality. What we need to be aware of are the varied possibilities of constructions overshadowing actual reality.

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