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Contents

1. Portrayal of Women: An Empirical Study of Advertising Content in India from 1991-2019 03
Jaishri Jethwaney
2. Mental Health and Media: A Study Exploring How Stigma is Promoted and Challenged Within National Newspaper Reporting on Neurodivergence in Australia 29
Damian Mellifont
3. Sound and Fury: Petit Récit and the Postmodern News Media 53
Mirosh Thomas, and Mridula Burai
4. Challenges of Fake News: Mis-information, Dis-information, Mal-information in an Increasingly-Networked Human World 71
Abhijit Bora, and Sunil Kanta Behera
5. Book Reviews 87
- Submission guidelines for authors* 92



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Portrayal of Women: An Empirical Study of Advertising Content in India from 1991-2019

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Abstract

The present study is aimed at examining gender stereotyping and inappropriate portrayal of women in Indian advertisements over a period of three decades. The study also looks at patterns, if any, of stereotyping and inappropriate portrayal in various brand categories and sub-categories across media and over time. The content analysis is based on the theoretical construct of Erving Goffman's classic study "Gender Advertisements". (1979). Keeping in view the social and cultural milieu of the Indian society, two more indicators, viz., patriarchy and objectification of the female form were added in the deconstruction of the sample advertisements. The content analysis was preceded by a field survey of the advertising industry that included focus group discussions with creative teams to understand the creative process on gender with regard to narrative.

Keywords: Woman, Portrayal, Objectification, Stereotyping, Patriarchy, Advertising

Introduction

Advertising (ad) is criticised for many things including the inappropriate portrayal of women. Advertisements often appear in between television programmes and news stories in the newspapers. In such a situation, it is possible that the ads may not attract the attention of the discerning media consumer. In order to make the advertisements stand out in the clutter, advertisers use many strategies, among which provocative female imagery to attract the male gaze is commonly employed. The role of consumer insights

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is another factor often claimed by creative teams when defending provocative imagery. Many empirical studies suggest that Indian advertising is replete with stereotypes of women, about their roles, attire, behaviour and body language. If a woman is shown in the office setting, invariably she would be wearing a formal official suit, though the reality is that a majority of Indian women go to work wearing the traditional Indian attire. If a woman is shown applying makeup in the car, she would not be the traditional looking woman, because of the perception that it is only the uninhibited ones who would do such a thing outside of their home. Just to cite an example, cine actor Vidya Balan, the quintessential Indian woman who is often seen in a saree, when playing the protagonist in a tyre ad that reflected the discomfort of the woman applying lipstick when the car was jerky with a bad tyre, was made to wear a business suit!

Where do such images come from? Who are the people behind creating gender insensitive content? Which milieu do the creative people come from? What could be the possible reasons behind portraying women in an objectionable manner? These were some of the questions, when as a part of the research trajectory, focus group discussions (FDGs) were held in various Indian cities, (ten in all) to understand what goes into the making of ad campaigns.

Advertising is a glamorous profession that in general, attracts youngsters with a modern outlook and good communication skills. A field visit to some Indian and global agencies in October 2018 reflected a large number of such men and women working in the creative departments. Most of these youngsters, both men and women came from metros and mini metros (prominent towns, such as Pune, Chandigarh, Coimbatore etc.) with a background in mass communication or liberal arts. What then explains the fact that most of the city bred and educated ad content creators project women so deplorably in the ad narrative? The answer is not far to seek. India may have progressed in many fields, but patriarchy remains ingrained in the thinking of an average Indian man and woman coming from both the urban and the rural milieu. These creative writers, visualizers, photographers and art directors who create the content for advertisements come from the same social milieu as the rest of the Indians and they absorb behaviour and ideas from the same environment, be it social, political, economic or cultural. They also are influenced by what they see, read and experience, as is anyone else. Therefore, their writing and projection of women is usually not different from what they learn and assimilate in their day-to-day life.

The primary research found that the content creators justify stereotypical ads with the argument that campaigns are invariably based on consumer insights. Before finalizing any campaign, agencies often do some formative research to 'get into the skin of the target audience'. Some also said that although they may know that what they show might be inappropriate and not gender sensitive, but they continue to do so because that is what sells for a brand. Another stark reality of the advertising industry is the ubiquitous role

played by the client in having the last word on what the ad would look like. The client has his own perception of what would work for the brand. None of the respondents in the ten FGDs knew about the existence of the law on Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition), 1986. Their engagement with the codes of professional ethics propounded by the self-regulatory bodies also seemed very inconsequential.

Looking at the ads in general some of which formed the sample population for the current study, one gets the feeling that a woman's biggest role is to gratify and delight a man. The content analysis for this ICSSR study reveals blatant insensitivity across brand categories and across media over three decades of ad analysis. While one finds some sensitivity towards reflecting the woman of today in some brands, it is only getting regressive in other cases, especially in lifestyle ads, as the findings later in the paper would reflect. There are tens of thousands of ads that exhibit stereotyping and objectification of the female form. Some of the examples of such ads include, a black and white ad in 1995 that had super models Milind Soman and Madhu Sapre posing nude, wrapped only by a python and wearing a pair of Tuff shoes (Pinto, 2013, para. 4). Both the models were booked under the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 and the case went on for years in a court of law. Indian television actor and model Sana Khan was featured in a racy commercial wherein she was shown washing a man's underwear while making sexual innuendos (para. 5). At the instance of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the ad was withdrawn. A series of Fastrack ads for bags and accessories saw superstar cricketer Virat Kohli and cine actor Genelia D'Souza being inappropriately flirty; Switzerland-based company Calida's innerwear ad had cine stars Bipasha Basu and Dino Morea in the ad in which Morea was seen pulling off Basu's underwear with his teeth. The ad was eventually banned after several women's organizations raised their voice against it (para. 8).

In recent times, the Ford Motor Company was forced to apologize for an ad that was tag-lined, "Leave your worries behind with Figo's extra-large boot," featuring a caricature of three women tied in the rear of a vehicle driven by Silvio Berlusconi, the former Italian prime minister. The Indian arm of the global advertising giant J. Walter Thomson had created the ad. The Canadian adult film star Sunny Leone's condom ads in India have invariably drawn sharp criticism and uproar for being sexually provocative and sensual. Her ad for Manforce condoms was reoriented after public outrage. The digital version however, continues to be steamy and long in duration. Another advertisement featuring Leone that was released before a Hindu festival also fuelled public fury for its slogan "Play with love this Navratri". Indian authorities as reported by the media pulled out many billboards carrying the ad. The ad thereafter was withdrawn from the media (Deccan Herald, 2017, para. 3).

Deodorant ads in general have shown women in a bad light. Ads for Set Wet, Zatak, and Wild Stone brands are some examples. Media reported that the Ministry

of Information and Broadcasting issued statements, warning television channels, not to run some such ads in 2011. The statement referred to various explicit deodorant ads as, “brim with messages aimed at tickling the libidinous male instincts and portrayal of women as lustily hankering after men under the influence of such deodorants,” quoted the media form the statement (Nelson, 2011, para. 4).

Levi’s ad ‘Live unbuttoned’ and later the ramp walk that had cine actor Akshay Kumar as the protagonist has a case pending in the court on charges of obscenity. In a special supplement on automobiles in *The Indian Express*, the ad for a Mahindra Convertible had the copy: ‘Admit it. You have always been crazy about topless models’. The Jack and Jones campaign enacted by cine actor Ranveer Singh received a lot of opposition. The billboard ad, had a woman flung over Singh’s shoulders with the caption ‘Don’t hold back. Take your work home’. One of the Mahindra XUV 500 ads ‘I am hungry’ had half a dozen scantily clad women running after a hapless macho man is yet another example of inappropriate imagery, playing on a man’s fantasy.

In recent ads, cine actor, Deepika Padukone was seen selling Nescafe coffee by belly-dancing and Katrina Kaif in ‘Aamsutra’ Slice ad singing “*Rasiyaa aja hole raas barasaja...*”. “Mangoes as sex aids and deodorants turning women into nymphomaniacs – Indian advertising seems unable to think beyond Sex to Sell”, commented ad critic Amrita Rajan (2011, para. 1). There are then examples of other ads that may look innocuous, but are sexist and voyeuristic inviting the male gaze, nonetheless. For instance, the Lux beauty soap has celebrities from tinsel town shown in bathtubs with rose petals floating around them or the Nivea body lotion with actor Anushka Sharma showing her skin .

On the flip side, there are some ads that break the monotony and reflect the social shift. For instance, the second marriage ad by Tanishq jewellery, the Myntra ad reflecting same sex relationships, the Nirma ad depicting women helping to drag out a vehicle stuck in mud, while the men looked on, and the Ariel, ‘Share the load’ ad. Others of the ilk include, Dabur Vatika’s ‘Brave and Beautiful’ campaign focused on the struggle of cancer survivors, especially women who lose their hair during chemotherapy, and the social negation they face in the process. Celebrating the woman who is ‘modern, progressive, confident and passionate’, Titan Raga’s ad reflects the confidence of a young woman who bumps in to her old flame. He tells her only if she had given up her job, they could have been together, to which her response was obvious- that she had made her choice. Then there is the Havells fan ad *Hawa Badlegi*’ (winds of change) that shows a man replacing his surname with that of his wife’s at a marriage registrar’s office.

Efforts such as these hopefully stem from a realization and belief among the advertisers on the need of reflecting the social change and not to be just politically correct.

There is this dichotomy between woman empowerment and the public's sense of morality. Showing a modern woman who wishes to live life on her terms by making her choices about how she dresses, how she socialises etc., would be perceived as an empowering narrative, but the guardians of public morality in a patriarchal set up would see it as blasphemy of sorts and violation of social norms. On the other side, if a girl turns away her groom on her marriage day because his family demanded dowry (Ponds dream flower ad), she would not be seen as a rebel, an empowered woman, but a compassionate daughter that fits in well with the patriarchal norm. The debate on what is in good or bad taste thus would continue.

Well known ad expert Prasoon Joshi, CEO of McCann World Group, also chair of the Film Censor Board, a government body under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, said,

Advertising has travelled some distance in this aspect. There are serious discussions about stereotyping, objectification and the lack of women at CEO and creative director, and board positions. There is an earnest note being taken of the fact that while the industry recruitment starts out with an equal split of men and women, it tapers off at the top. Of course, there is a lot that needs to change in the advertising industry and these are not being swept under the carpet. There is a growing realization that talk of tokenism is to be shunned, and a sincere approach to affect the fundamentals is afoot. Each one of us should step up to speed up this change (Joshi, 2016, para. 13 & 14).

Review of literature on stereotyping and objectification of women

The empirical data from select countries bring out some interesting findings: Erving Goffman, arguably the most influential American sociologist during the 20th century, analyzed 500 print ads to enquire into the stereotypical portrayal of women in American ads. His study *Gender Advertisements* (1979), recognized as a classic, has been used by scores of scholars all over the world in their research on advertising content. Goffman used six indicators viz. Relative size, Function ranking, Feminine touch, Family scene, Ritualization of subordination, and Licensed withdrawal to deconstruct women's role in advertisements.

Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) did a content analysis of over 700 ads across seven magazines in the US that appealed to the general audience. Among many interesting findings and insights, the study found that while 33% women worked in the US, in the various ads only 12% women were shown as working professionals. The researchers concluded that men and women advertised for different products. Women made independent choices only when shopping for cosmetics, food, or cleaning products. When the ad was for a higher-value product like a home appliance, the woman could be

in the frame, but along with a man. The ads seemed to reflect, said the researchers, as if “a woman’s place was in the home” and “women do not make important decisions or do important things” (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971).

A more detailed analysis by Sexton and Haberman (1974) covered ads over three decades viz. 1950–51, 1960–61 and 1970–71, covering product categories like cigarettes, beverages, automobiles, home appliances, office equipment, and airlines. The researchers evaluated the ads on 11 dimensions, which covered the number of persons and types of role portrayals in the ads, their relationship with one another and with the product, and the setting of the ad. This study also revealed that portrayals were changing with more women being shown as professionals and less in family situations.

In the 1980s, Courtney and Whipple found that women were represented in home settings. Men, in contrast appeared in business settings, although the difference was less than those found in the studies of the 1970s commercials (Courtney & Whipple, 2006). McArthur and Resko (1975) observed that the percentage of males used in television ads was higher even for situations where they were not the primary users of a product or service, reflecting who the decision maker was. Venkatesan and Losco (1975), in a study of advertisements on the role and portrayal of women from 1959 to 1971, once again confirmed the existence of stereotypical portrayals of women as sex objects, physical beautiful, and dependents.

Sarkar (2014) in her study argues that gender-based promotions of products are the most common strategies practiced by advertisers to establish a strong connection with a brand. As an offshoot of such stereotyping in the virtual and visual world, the cultural predicament becomes more dominating on how a woman should present herself even in reality. Constant distortion imposes and induces a belief that women not only have to suit “themselves”, but also conform to a certain level that is set by the cultural standard and popular perception.

Malik (2014) in her paper “Women Objectification by Consumer Culture” critically examines how celebrities working for mass media are objectified by being presented as “sex objects” for global consumption. Her paper draws attention to American writer Brian D’Amato’s critique of women’s objectification by consumer culture.

Lakshmi and Selvam’s (2016) paper examines the concept of stereotyping of gender roles and representation of minorities. They approach it from a critical perspective through discourse analysis of select Indian television advertisements telecast countrywide and uploaded on YouTube Ad Leader boards, which captures ads that receive the maximum views, shares, and love from audiences across the country¹. The study analyses ads that conform to stereotyping as well as ones that attempt to challenge it through their

portrayal of unconventional portrayals. The study highlights changes among the urban middle class due to financial independence of women and the influence of the Internet, showing how advertising that caters to them has reflected these changes (Lakshmi & Selvam, 2016).

Maitrayee Chaudhuri (2017) in her insightful book ‘Fashioning India: Gender, Media and a Transformed Public Discourse’ argues that Indian advertisements depict both the new trends and accelerate them. In the post liberalization era, men thought that looking good was not a woman’s prerogative alone (Chaudhary 2017). Male body baring became a common feature in many ads. Thus one saw the arrival of the quintessential metrosexual man in advertising and entertainment media².

Jean Kilbourne, a pioneering researcher and an activist, has been deconstructing advertisements since the 1970s. Her research and analysis reflect an overwhelming evidence of not just sexualisation of the female body but also the presentation of unreal images of women, which can be hard for real women, particularly teenage girls and young women to live up to. Her documentary ‘Killing Us Softly’ talking on the same issue has been serialized four times, with each new version updating the developments that followed after the documentary was broadcast. In the fourth instalment of the documentary, she informs that over the period, female sexualisation in advertisements has actually become worse. At the end, however, she does mention a few small victories such as models in US fighting against the use of Photoshop and airbrushing that provide unrealistic images of the female body, leading to many publications in the industry having agreed not to airbrush models anymore. However, a key point that she makes in every instalment of the documentary is that most people believe that they do not pay much attention to the ads, while it was interesting to note that a major publication had found that “Only 8 per cent of an ad’s message is received by the conscious mind. The rest is worked and reworked deep within the recesses of the brain (Kilbourne, 1987, n.p.)”. This statistic significantly demonstrates how imagery in ads not only reinforces but also enhances existing stereotypes, particularly about women.

Kilbourne (1987) in conjunction with the facts states that such sexist and indecent advertisements “surround us with unhealthy images and constantly sacrifices our health and well-being for the sake of profit (n.p.)”. What is interesting to note is that she points at how advertising many a times reduce a woman to just parts of her body in order to sell products, which ends up dehumanizing her. In this regard, she also tells us how the use of sexualisation of the female body is not necessarily to sell the product but simply to attract the attention of male buyers. Over the period, owing to increasing financial independence and purchasing power, the buyers are now overwhelmingly female. However, the marketing ploy has more or less remained the same³.

Research methodology

Content analysis of the advertisements is a common research technique to deconstruct them on various pre-determined indicators. The content analysis for the present study is based on the theoretical construct of Erving Goffman's classic study *Gender Advertisements* (1979). Keeping in view the social and cultural milieu of the Indian society, two more indicators, viz., *patriarchy* and *objectification* of the female form have been added in Goffman's six indicators, viz. *relative size, function ranking, feminine touch, family scene, ritualization of subordination and licensed withdrawal*.

The following table details the various brand categories and within the five brand categories the various sub-categories that have been analysed for content.

Table 1: Sample Size

SN.	Categories	No. of Sub-categories	No. of Brands	No. of Ads			Total
				*TVCs	Print	Internet	
1.	FMCGs	10	55	211	107	54	372
2.	Lifestyle	10	59	147	182	127	457
3.	Automobile	3	14	67	32	38	137
4.	BFSI	3	18	46	33	38	117
5.	Travel	5	18	37	18	30	85
Total		31	164	508	372	287	1167

**TVC=Television Commercials; FMCGs= Fast-moving consumer goods; BFSI: Banking, financial services and insurance*

In other words, 1167 ads across 5 brand categories, 31 sub categories and 164 brands across three decades and 3 media, viz. print, television and digital comprised the sample population⁴. With an all-pervasive digital media, the thin line segregating media has evaporated, because whatever appears in the electronic and print media invariably also finds place on the social media. For this study, for digital media the advertisements were accessed via the social media platform of Facebook (accessed through Ad Index, an agency that systematically catalogues ads).

Table 2: Category-wise Breakup of Ads

SN.	Medium	Categories	Number of Sub-Categories	Number of Total Ads
1.	All three	FMCGs	Beauty Products	67
			Toiletries	47
			Detergent	47
			Aerated Drinks	56
			Snacks	61
			Beverages	44
			Stationary	32
			Medicines	6
			Electrical Appliance	4
			Cooking Oil	8
2.	All three	Lifestyle	Apparel	99
			Contraceptive	60
			Accessories	33
			Shoes	37
			Jewellery	34
			Alcohol	50
			Tobacco	38
			Deodorant	34
			Furnishing/Sanitary	26
			Telecom	45
3.	All three	Auto	Cars	54
			Two-Wheelers	55
			Tyres	28
4.	All three	BFSI	Banks	48
			Insurance	40
			Mutual Funds	29
5.	All three	Travel	Hotels	25
			Accessories	30
			Airlines	15
			Travel Sites	6
			Apps	9
Total				1167

Process of Ad Selection

Five phases in the selection of advertisements

- a. Sample of 1167 ads across 5 brand categories, as reflected in the table above, across three decades, i.e. from 1991 until 2019.
- b. Unit of analysis: Print, Television and Digital advertisements.
- c. Research technique: Content analysis based on Irving Goffman's theoretical construct.
- d. Sampling: Stratified random sampling method has been employed to select the ads across brand categories. Stratification process in this case meant, dividing the members of the population into homogeneous subgroups, called strata before sampling various brand categories.
- e. Inclusion criterion: Only those ads were shortlisted under various brands and sub-categories that had women as protagonists or at least when one was in the frame.

We also kept in mind the following caveats. It was not possible to maintain symmetry in terms of advertisements per category and medium for the following reasons:

- a. FMCG and Lifestyle are large brand categories with a huge array of brands qualifying under these categories, hence more ads. In comparison the remaining three categories, Travel, Automobile and BFSI are homogeneous categories.
- b. Television is a more powerful medium and attracts more ads⁵, so more ads were drawn from this medium. Digital media is of recent origin, so the ad sample is from 2011 onwards.

Aim of the research study

The research using content analysis methodology was undertaken with the following objectives:

- o The extent of stereotyping and objectification of women by negative weight age based on content analyses indicators
- o To enquire if there are any typical brand categories that encourage stereotyping or inappropriate portrayal of woman's role in ads.
- o To find out if there are any patterns across brand categories, media and timelines.

Research Hypotheses

- (1) Gender stereotypes, identified from Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* including two additional indicators are prevalent in ads across various brand categories

- and media genres in India.
- (2) The provisions of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 are ambiguous and are not followed by the Indian ad sector, in general.
 - (3) Advertising during the economic liberalization in the 1990s began the new trend of projecting bold and provocative imagery of women in its narrative, thus objectifying the female form.

Research universe, sample population and method

The research universe encompassed advertisements relating to five brand categories, viz., FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods), Lifestyle, Travel and tourism, BFSI (Banking, Finance and Insurance) and Automobile (four-wheelers, two wheelers and tyres). The timeline covered ads from 1991 - until the year 2019. The ads have been selected across three media, viz., print, electronic (TV) and digital. Stratified Purposive Sampling Technique was used to select ads, based on the following criteria:

1. Inclusion of those brand categories and sub-categories, which are large advertisers.
2. Selection of only those ads within these brand categories that have either a woman protagonist or at least one woman in the frame.
3. Taking the sample of ads of post liberalization era in India (1990s onwards).

Understanding Erving Goffman's construct

In his classic study *Gender Advertisements*, (1978) Goffman systematically deconstructed 500 print ads to enquire how the images of gender were represented in the American advertisements of the 1960 and 1970s. Goffman, a sociologist by profession categorized gender stereotypes into six main groups viz.

- i. Relative size
- ii. Feminine touch
- iii. Function ranking
- iv. The family situation
- v. The ritualization of subordination
- vi. Licensed withdrawal

In the chapter *Pictures Frames*, Goffman divides pictures into two categories, viz., private and public. Goffman argues that private pictures are not faked but public pictures can be, for a reason. In the 'public', he places commercial advertisements that in his view are, "designed to catch a wider audience, an anonymous aggregate of individuals unconnected to one another by social relationship and social interaction although falling within the same market or the same political jurisdiction, the same outreaches of appeal"

(p.10). The visuals in commercial ads are designed in a manner to convey something to the reader/viewer.

While Goffman's theory is relevant across societies and timelines, in the context of the current research, it was considered prudent to add two additional indicators, viz., *Patriarchy* and *Objectification* of the female form, keeping in view the way Indian advertising has been changing over the last few decades and the socio-cultural milieu of the Indian society.

Table 3: Irving Goffman's theoretical construct on gender portrayal in advertisements with additional indicators of Patriarchy and Objectification

SN.	Analysis indicator	What it conveys
1	Relative size	Men are often shown taller than women in ads to convey their authority and power through size difference. The size at times also is manipulated through photo technique. It is assumed that size difference will correlate with difference in social weight.
2	Feminine touch	Women, more than men, are pictured using their hands and fingers to trace the outlines of an object or to cradle it, or caress its surface or to effect a "just barely touching".
3	Function ranking	In the social context, when a man and a woman interact face to face, often a man is shown in an executive position, in other words in a functional posture and the women in a passive posture, with nothing much to contribute to the narrative.
4	The family situation	A young boy and girl in a nuclear set up complete an ideal frame, with the man often doing and initiating activities. The man as a father is shown at a distance to denote he is the protector of the family. Woman is often in the frame but not an initiator of activity
5	The ritualization of subordination	A classic stereotype of deference is that of lowering oneself physically in some form or other of prostration. In contrast holding the head high is stereotypically a mark of superiority and disdain. The configuration of lower postures can be read as an acceptance of subordination, an expression of ingratiation, submissiveness, and appeasement, often left for women.
6	Licensed withdrawal	Women more than men are pictured engaged in involvements which remove them psychologically from the social situation at large, leaving them disoriented in it and to it, and dependent on the protectiveness of others who are present. Turning one's gaze away from another can be seen as the consequence of withdrawing from the thrust of communication.
7.	Patriarchy *	Patriarchy posits the domination of men over women. It also defines the relationship among women as well. Traditional societies including the Indian society are rigorously patriarchal with well-defined power hierarchies within families and outside. <i>*(Patriarchy and Objectification were added after a review of the research study by the review committee of ICSSR, which suggested to including indicators keeping in view the Indian social milieu. Patriarchy in the Indian context was looked at from the perspective of male dominance in moral authority, special privilege and control of the wealth and household affairs.)</i>

SN.	Analysis indicator	What it conveys
8.	Objectification*	<p>Objectification broadly means treating a person as a commodity or an object without regard to their personality or dignity. Women often are presented as sex objects in advertisements to attract the attention of the potential consumers.</p> <p><i>* (Objectification was analysed from the context of comparing a women with an object (ex. a tyre ad with a women next to it show the curves; body display, when women's body is displayed and not the functionality of the product , using women as a mannequin etc.)</i></p>

Goffman argued that the gender roles portrayed in ads are likely to be seen as the norm and a slice of life that was constructed in the ads meant to provide cues to viewers on what an ideal life or situation was like. He cited the example of an ideal family on a vacation that might take its cues on what “having a good time” is from external sources and might, in fact, contrive to look and act like the idealized family-on-vacation in a Coca-Cola ad.

Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986

The Act that came in to existence in India in 1986 was the result of a long and protracted struggle by women advocacy groups for decades. The substantive part of the act includes, “No person shall publish, or cause to be published, or arrange or take part in the publication or exhibition of, any advertisement, which contains indecent representation of women in any form”.

Section 2(C): “indecent representation of women” means the depiction in any manner of the figure of a woman, her form or body or any part thereof in such a way as to have the effect of being indecent, or derogatory to, or denigrating women, or is likely to deprave, corrupt or injure the public morality or morals”.

The law does not define what is ‘indecent’. Its interpretation has been left to those who take the matter to the court and the wisdom of the jury. In 2012, an amendment was introduced to the law, which was expected to make the existing law applicable to all forms of existing media particularly that which had emerged with the new technology.

In 2018, the Ministry of Women and Child Development proposed establishing a centralized authority that could be authorized to receive complaints regarding media content encompassing print and broadcast media including advertisements to investigate and examine all matters relating to the indecent representation of women. In addition, the ministry proposed to widen its scope to cover social media channels as well as the internet at large. The ministry also expanded the original definition of indecent representation of women to “depiction of women as a sexual object, which appeals to the prurient interest”⁶.

Key amendments proposed included the following:

- Broaden the scope of the law to cover the audio-visual media and material in electronic form.
- Penalties to be enhanced to a maximum of three years of imprisonment and fine of between Rs. 50,000 and Rs.1,00,000 for first conviction, and imprisonment of not less than two years, but which may extend to seven years, and a fine between Rs.1,00,000 and Rs.5,00,000 for second conviction.
- Police officers not below the rank of Inspectors authorized to carry out search and seizure, in addition to State and Central Government officers authorized by the State or Central Government.
- These amendments seek to ensure stronger protection against indecent representation of women by covering newer forms of communication like internet, multimedia messaging etc., beyond the print and audio-visual media. This would aid in addressing the problem of increased objectification of women thereby ensuring dignity of women (National Legal Research Desk, 2012).

The bill lapsed twice, once in 2012 and again in 2019, i.e., during the 15th and 16th Lok Sabha terms and is still pending. It is hoped that the current Parliament (17th Lok Sabha) shall take this on as a priority.

Professional codes of conduct

Other than the above-mentioned law, there are also some industry self-regulatory bodies that have created basic guidelines for advertisers, aimed at self-regulation. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) representing the ad industry, clients and civil society is the country's apex self-regulatory body for advertising content⁷. The ASCI code (Chapter II) originally did not specifically talk about the portrayal of women for long. It simply reflected that ads should not contain anything 'vulgar or repulsive'. While it has not expanded on this part, in 2014 the ASCI added an advisory on the skin lightening and fairness improvement products. This ostensibly was done after public outrage against the narrative in a fairness cream advertisement (which posited that for achieving success, fair skin was necessary), cases in the Consumer Courts and intervention from the Information and Broadcasting Ministry at the Centre.

The professional code of the Broadcasters Content Complaints Council (BCCC) does not mention the word 'advertising' even once when it talks about 'non-news' content. It can be inferred that the code includes all narratives including advertising. In the BCCC council, unsurprisingly, there is no representation from the ad industry.

Lastly, the public broadcaster, Doordarshan's code for advertisers treats indecent portrayal as an infringement of fundamental rights. The code, besides warning against painting a 'derogatory image' about women, stresses that women must not be depicted in a manner that emphasises "passive and submissive qualities and encourages them to play a submissive role in society". It can be argued that Doordarshan's code for advertisers is more progressive, at least in letter when compared with the ASCI's code.

Major findings of ad content analysis

There is both good and bad news when we look at the findings of the content analysis over a period of three decades. What comes out unambiguously is the blatant stereotyping and inappropriate portrayal of women in the ad narrative per se with negative weightage as high as 90% to 100 % on some indicators for some brands. The good news is that overall in the current decade since 2011 better sensitivity, even if it is a few percentage points on some indicators, in general can be seen.

Of the eight indicators, viz., Relative size, Feminine touch, Functional ranking, Family Scene, Ritualization of Subordination, Licence Withdrawal, Patriarchy and Objectification, the two dominant indicators across the entire ad spectrum are the Ritualization of subordination and Patriarchy in a majority of ads at over 80% and 70% ads across brand categories and sub-categories, respectively.

The following table provides cumulative score across all the five brand categories across the media, TV, Print and Digital over three decades (1991-2019).

Table 4 : Parametric Weightages for All Media Across 3 Decades

Column 1	Relative size	Feminine touch	Functional ranking	Family scene	Ritualization of subordination	Licensed withdrawal	Patriarchy	Objectification
TV (1991-2019)	53.15	66.14	69.49	13.58	91.93	54.92	77.76	28.35
Print ads (1991-2019)	25.54	36.02	33.6	2.69	90.32	53.23	78.49	31.45
Digital ads (2011-2019)	19.86	49.83	19.86	4.88	85.71	38.33	63.41	25.44

The aggregate data as detailed in the above table reflects that among all the three media, TV is the worst across all the three categories in being the least sensitive to gender across all the eight indicators. On the indicator of objectification, though the negative score is over 28%, but when we look at the micro data, some brands have a very

high negative score on some indicators as would be seen later in the paper.

In order to examine how the television and print media ads had performed over the last three decades, the patterns were mapped. Since data on digital media was available only from 2011 onward, hence it is not included in the pattern analysis.

Table 5 : Parametric Weightages Across 3 Decades In TVCs

Categories	Relative size	Fem- inine touch	Function ranking	Family Scene	Ritualization of Subordination	Licensed With- drawal	Patriar- chy	Objectifi- cation
1990-2000	56.1	71.95	74.39	17.07	96.34	68.29	87.8	45.12
2001-2010	55.49	68.68	78.02	11.54	92.31	57.14	89.56	29.12
2011-later	49.59	63.41	56.91	13.47	93.9	54.88	80.49	26.42

Table 6 : Parametric Weightages Across 3 Decades In Print Ads

Categories	Relative size	Feminine touch	Function ranking	Family Scene	Ritualization of Subordination	Licensed With- drawal	Patriar- chy	Objectifi- cation
1990-2000	30.59	31.76	49.41	2.35	87.06	63.53	85.88	31.76
2001-2010	24.49	42.86	25.51	2.04	88.78	52.04	75.51	37.76
2011-later	22.46	35.83	26.74	1.6	85.56	49.2	78.61	30.48

Mapping patterns over three decades

We can see interesting patterns in the data of three decades.

TV: One finds that there is overall better gender sensitivity in the current decade, even if only by a few notches. A lot, however still needs to be done to improve it as the figures though an improvement over the last decades, are still dismal at about 94% on subordination and over 80% on patriarchy. On objectification of women, there is a drop of 19% in the current decade for all the ads put together on television, which is a significant improvement.

Print: In print there is no substantive change in objectification of the female form in the last three decades. Negative weight age at 89% on subordination and 76% on patriarchy, though a slight improvement from earlier decades is still a poor score.

Dominant indicators

Figure 1(a) and 1(b): Reflecting negative weightage across three media, TV, Print and digital on the dominant indicators

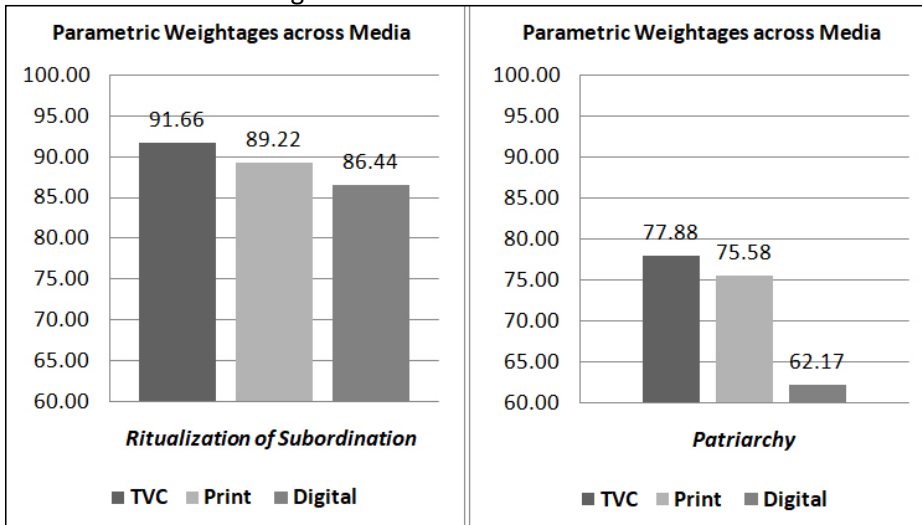


Figure 1(a)

Figure1(b)

Television has the highest negative weightage at about 92% against the indicator of subordination and about 78% against the indicator of Patriarchy, followed by print and digital respectively as the two figures above reflect.

Figure 2(a) and 2(b): Comparative weightage across categories on dominant indicators in TV Ads Subordination and Patriarchy

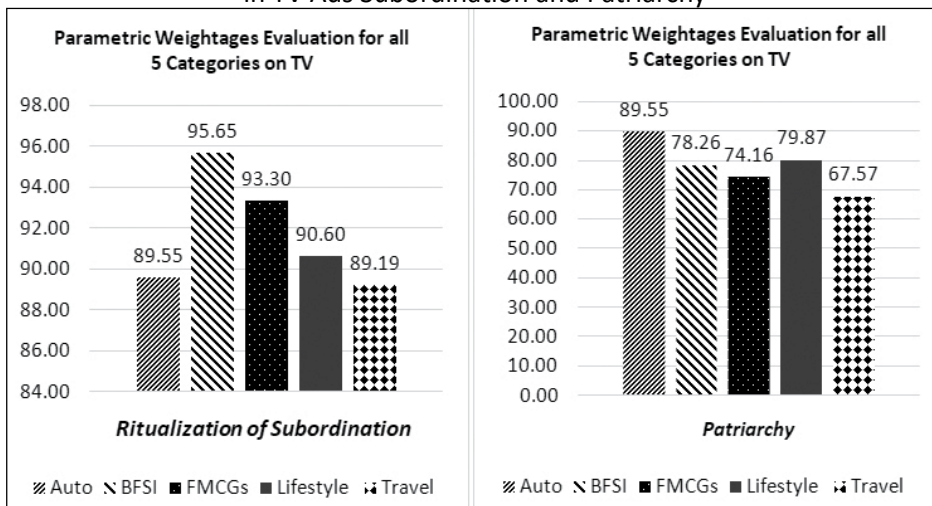


Figure 2(a)

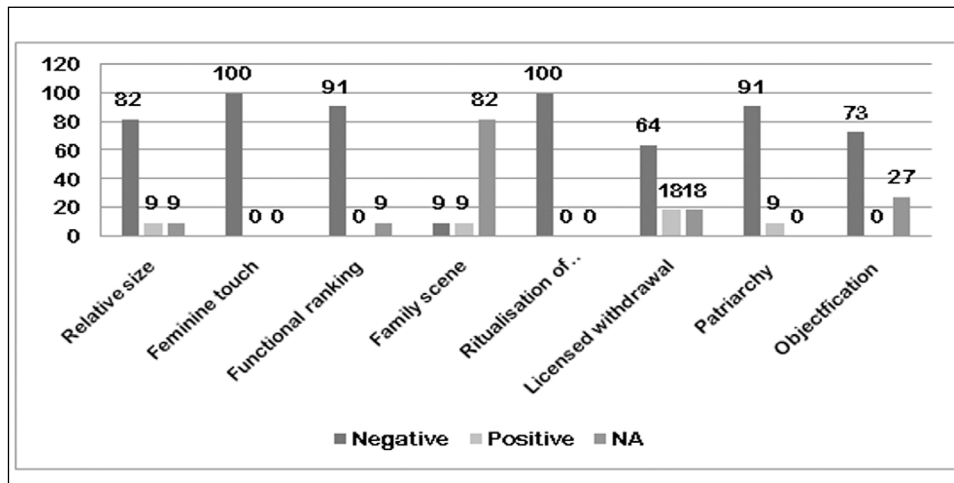
Figure2(b)

The data overall is worrisome as a large majority of ads across brand categories contain the patriarchal narrative and women in subordinate roles as reflected in the graphs above. The Automobile sector has about 90% ads with a patriarchal narrative, the highest among the five brand categories. Banking and financial service ads are the worst offenders on the indicator of subordination in almost 96% ads and over 78% on patriarchal narrative. It can be argued that this stems from the mentality that it is the man who is the earner for the family. The BFSI ads have failed to register the social shift, when more and more women at least in the cities are earning members, but the ads do not recognise them as their constituency. The Stock-market ads also ignore women as potential buyers of financial products, as there were hardly any ads that cast women.

As the FMCG and Lifestyle categories have a larger category of products, the absolute data may be a bit misleading. Within these brand categories, we shall look at the micro data of some lifestyle and beauty products in the TVCs as reflected in the graphs below to see how they stand on various indicators.

Sixty (60) contraceptive ads of various brands were analysed on the eight indicators. The findings do not come as a surprise.

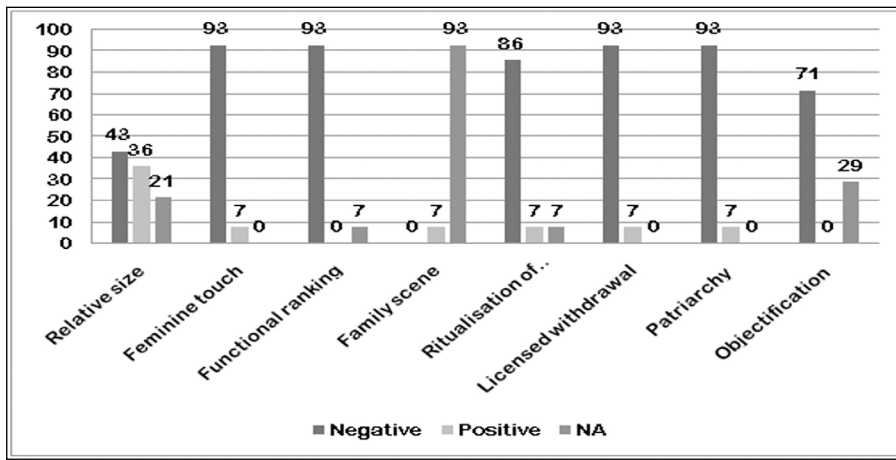
Figure 3: Parametric Evaluation For Contraceptive (Lifestyle) on TV:1991-2019



The negative weightage on contraceptive ads is from the least at 73% to the highest at 100% on the various indicators that reflect both objectification, indecency as prescribed in law and blatant stereotyping of women across all indicators

In the category of deodorants, 34 ads were analysed. The negative weightage across eight indicators ranges from 43% to 93%.

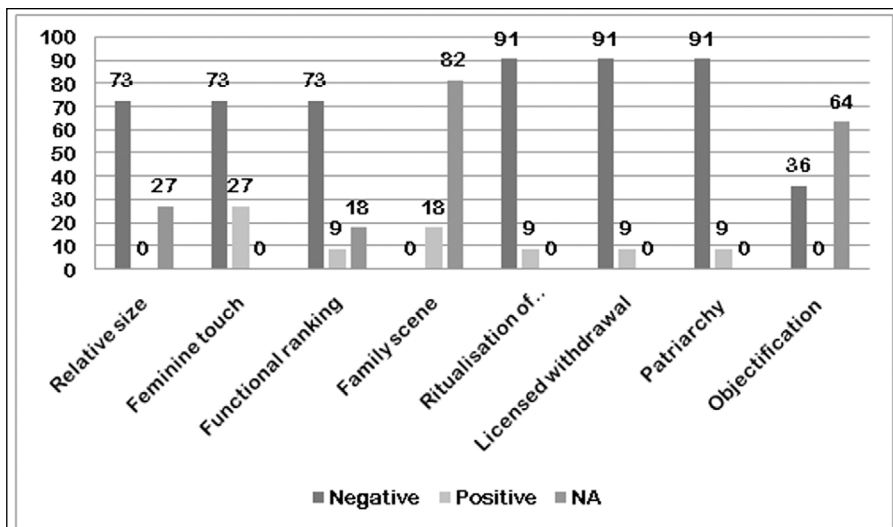
Figure 4: Parametric Evaluation For Deodorant (Lifestyle) On TV:1991-2019



Parametric Weightages for Deodorants in Lifestyle Category TV

In the tobacco ads that take the surrogate route, 38 ads were analysed including 11 TVCs (television commercials). The stereotyping of women in this category is quite blatant. However, most of the tobacco-based products have men in masculine roles.

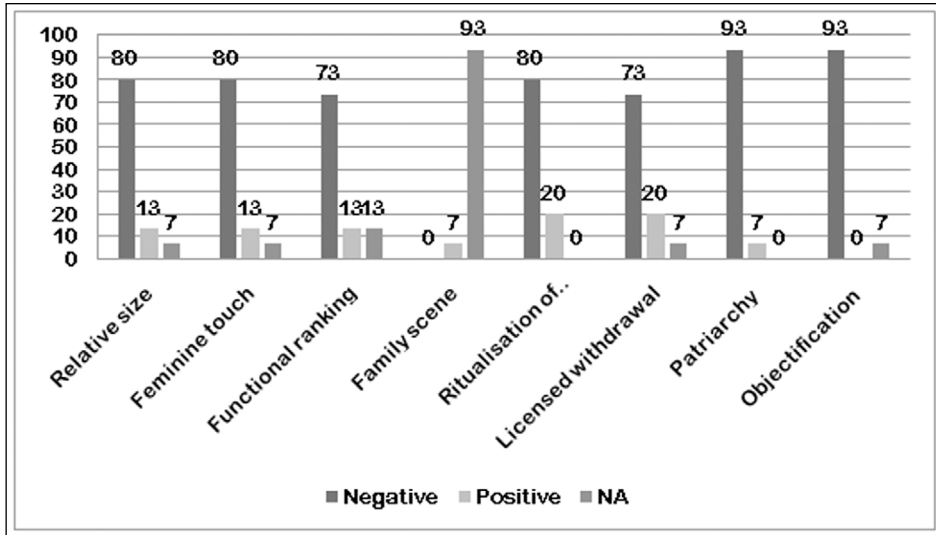
Figure 5: Parametric Evaluation For Tobacco (Lifestyle) on TV: 1991-2019



Alcohol is yet another surrogate category that objectifies and stereotypes women with a high weightage as reflected in the graph below with 73% at the lowest and 93%

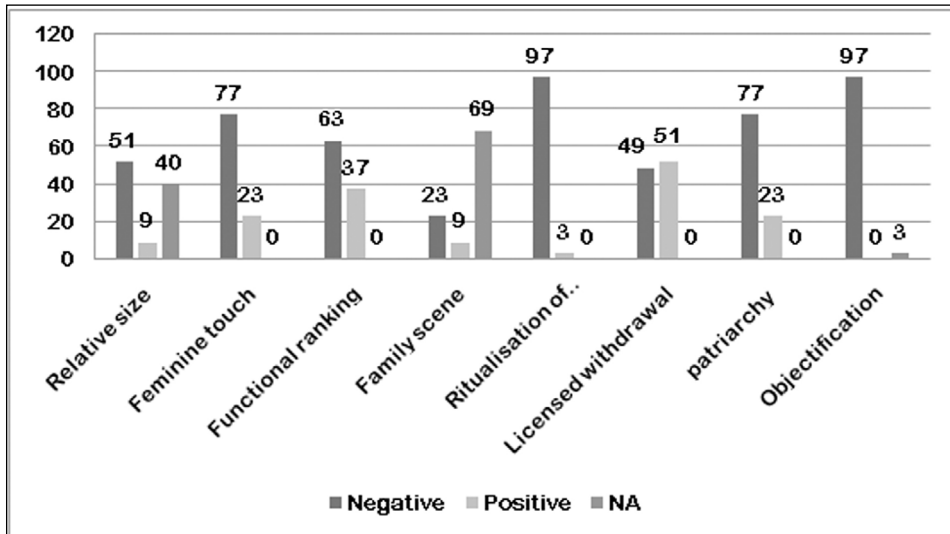
at the highest score.

Figure 6: Parametric Evaluation For Alcohol (Lifestyle) on TV: 1991-2019



In the beauty segment under the FMCG sector, 67 ads pertaining to face creams and soaps have been included for analysis.

Figure 7: Parametric Evaluation For Beauty Products (FMCG) on TV: 1991-2019



The negative weightage across indicators in beauty products is 49% at the lowest and 97% at the highest. In this category, there is over 97% negative weightage on objectification, and subordination and over 77% on patriarchy, which in a way posits that despite being women-oriented, there is a strong undercurrent of patriarchal narrative in this segment also.

The following table provides the data on negative weightage of serial offenders in Lifestyle and FMCG brands at a glance.

Table 7 : Parametric Weightages Across 3 Decades In Five Sub categories

Categories	Sub-categories	Ritualization of Subordination	Objectification	Patriarchy
Life style	Contraceptive	100	72.73	90.91
	Alcohol	80	93.33	93.33
	Deodorant	85.71	71.43	92.86
	Tobacco	90.91	18.18	90.91
FMCGs	Beauty Products	97.14	97.14	77.14

The research hypothesis stands vindicated on all counts. Indian ads on most of the indicators of analysis have performed poorly, with different negative weightage, though some positive change is perceptible in the current decade. The content creators in the ad industry as per our primary research revealed that they had no idea about the existence of any law against 'indecent' portrayal; therefore, it can be posited that the law is not the reference point in the creative process. The data underscores the hypothesis that bold imagery and objectification of women has come in large measure after the globalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s. The bigger problem in the ad narrative across brands and time line is the stereotyping of woman's roles and the patriarchal narrative.

Discussion

Advertising has always received extreme responses, depending on where the argument is coming from. There is however, no denying that a very large body of empirical data across the globe suggests stereotyping of a woman's role and objectification of her body in ads cutting across both developed and developing markets. The ad narrative in traditional societies is often patriarchal. The advocacy by women groups and the long struggle on their part has seen some laws and policies in place against the inappropriate projection of women, in many countries, including India. Technological changes and the emergence of social media however, has necessitated that laws and policies are addressed continuously by both the industry and the government.

Advertising is a huge source of income for the various media vehicles; therefore, one has rarely seen any critical analysis of insensitive advertising in the mainstream news media. The empirical work done by academics and scholars over the years, now available on the internet, thanks to the digital revolution has brought the issue centre stage.

With increasing voices against media projecting, reinforcing, and creating newer stereotypes about women who comprise half the human race, organizations are feeling the pressure to address the issue of gender inequality in the brand narrative. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media in partnership with J. Walter Thompson, one of the largest global ad agencies, conducted “The Truth About Gender Bias in Ads in 2017”⁸ using machine learning to analyse gender representation, screen time, and speaking time across more than 2,000 English-language ads between 2006 and 2016. Nothing seems to have changed in the last one decade or for that matter in so many decades. Men still got more space, time, and voice on screen vis-à-vis women.

In an initiative from the White House in 2016, the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) and Alliance for Family Entertainment (AFE) have begun a major movement to improve gender-roles as reflected in advertising and media programming, aimed at reducing stereotyping and sexism. The movement known as #SeeHer, called on national marketers to “portray women and girls more accurately” in their marketing and advertising messages. Specifically, the goal of this initiative was “to improve the accurate portrayal of women and girls in advertising and programming by 20 percent by 2020, the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote in the U.S” (Wolfe, 2017, para. 2 & 3).

Closer home, a research study conducted in three metros—Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai—by the India Chapter of the International Advertising Association (IAA) supported by ASCI and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to assess the status of gender stereotypes among ad professionals and marketers, provided some insights. A majority of the professionals (out of a sample of 100) felt that advertising in India did not seem to be in sync with the actual status of women in the Indian society, but there had been a change in the way women are being portrayed in recent times. With financial independence and decision-making power, women are now being shown as independent and living on their own terms. Almost 90% of the professionals were of the view that the change has been positive and they liked the change. Some of the factors that have driven change in the portrayal of women, according to the study, include women’s education, financial independence, self-realization among women about their rights, their role from looking after the family to being the bread earner, and the emergence of women leaders as role models (International Advertising Association and Hansa, 2014).

The sustainability of this change as analysed by researchers rests on the fact that

marketers now look at women as a potential segment which would facilitate growth, thereby making it important to tap the potential of this target audience which is now experiencing independence on the financial as well as the decision-making fronts. It is indeed disheartening however, to know that marketers in India may not necessarily be resorting to change because that is what is required in the interest of gender sensitivity, but because women are seen as an important “segment” in a consumerist economy and they see it as an opportunity waiting to be tapped.

The ad content analysis has revealed that with the exception of some Lifestyle and FMCG brands that encompass beauty products, deodorants, apparel, condoms, alcohol and tobacco, which are sexist and blatantly objectify the woman body, the bigger issue in the ad narrative across the brand spectrum is the stereotyping and subordination of women in a patriarchal narrative. This cuts across all brand categories, media and timelines. If, however, we were to compare the decade wise weightage on dominant indicators; there is some positive change in the current decade.

Family once believed to be the cornerstone of the Indian ethos and culture is fast fading out from the ad narrative, except in some categories, like insurance and finance. Further, even in those few ads that portray a family situation, the nature of the family has changed. The narrative has now moved on from the ideal joint family to that of a nuclear family, but the gender roles in the nuclear families also continues to remain the same. It is only some of the more recent ads that have tried to question those normative roles and among these, there are some that have captured the changing nature of family in India aptly, while some others have missed the mark. Take for instance the Ariel ad campaign, “Why is laundry a mother/woman’s job?” The series of ads has raised a fundamental question about the disparate gender roles in the families today. The ads show working women when back home still have to do the housework while the husbands are idle. Such ads comment on the deep-rooted assumption about housework as the responsibility of women, which is unfair in a situation where both the husband and the wife are working. This is a scenario which is becoming much more commonplace in contemporary India, but is not adequately reflected in the media.

The quintessential middle class, compassionate and caring woman depicted in the Indian popular culture for long, continues to be the average woman portrayed in the ad narrative. However, one also finds the emergence of the contemporary woman with a modern outlook, who does not mind taking the first step in a relationship, who gets attracted to a man, who is sensuous, one who wishes to live life on her own terms, a reflection effectively projected by film maker Homi Adjanian in his ad, “My Choice” made for the Vogue magazine, the role essayed by cine star Deepika Padukone. The video features 98 other women, including Adjanian’s wife, film critic Anupama Chopra, actor Nimrat Kaur and director Zoya Akhtar. One finds the modern woman reflected in some others ads also, including the popular brand Lux, which is a far cry from its

earlier ads that had film stars from Lila Chitnis in the 1940s to Juhi Chawla in 1980s in a demure imagery. It can be argued that there is a discernible change in projecting the woman's sexuality and desires, against gender perspective in some brands, including Lux. In other words, if on the one hand there is a traditionalist/stereotypical approach to advertising, there is also an effort to project the modern uninhibited woman in ads, who is a 'rebel', a 'new confident woman, on the other. Therefore, the argument is, whether both kinds of projections, the stereotypical one in a larger measure and the modern one, just being presented; reflect the transition in the ad narrative per se—only time will tell.

In summation, it can be said that the small positive change in the ad content that is witnessed in the current decades is spreading to more and more brands. The government may consider including 'Stereotyping' also in the proposed amendments to the bill on Indecent representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 and the various professional codes, include gender sensitivity indicators. This would be possible when the ad industry, the regulatory bodies, both in government and the advertising industry and media work in tandem towards achieving a gendered and inclusive advertising space in India.

Directions for future research

The research has an advocacy component. The team has come out with a Multi-Media Toolkit and a demo of the Gender Sensitivity Test, which the creative teams can use to gauge the gender sensitivity of the ads before sending to the media for commercial release. The Team made a presentation of research findings and insights to various stakeholders, facilitated by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry in early November 2019. The Institute of Studies in Industrial Development (ISID) is coming out with a Policy Brief for the Government and the industry. Some of the recommendations include the following:

- a. Inclusion of gender content in mass communication courses (MHRD and UGC)
- b. Include provision against 'stereotyping of women roles' in the proposed amendment in the Representation of women (Prohibition) Act 1986 (MWCD and MIB).
- c. Industry to agree on a certain minimum gender sensitivity norms in advertising.
- d. Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) to consider adding Gender Sensitivity Indicators in its Online App on lodging complaints by public to gauge public opinion on Indian ads.

Notes

- 1 See <https://brandequity.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/digital/youtube-ads-leaderboard-2019/72431957#:~:text=Kia%20Motors'%20digital%20ad%20topped,Ads%20Leaderboard%202019%20in%20India.&text=The%20YouTube%20Ads%20Leaderboard%20captures,from%20audiences%20across%20the%20country>.

- 2 *Metrosexual*, coined in 1994 by Mark Simpson in the UK national newspaper *The Independent* (15/11/1994) was the first appearance of the word 'metrosexual' in print, describing a man (especially one living in an urban, post industrial, capitalist culture) who is especially meticulous about his grooming and appearance, typically spending a significant amount of time and money on shopping as part of this.
- 3 See <https://www.jeankilbourne.com/lectures/> accessed on 14.2.2019. Jean Kilbourne is internationally recognized for her groundbreaking work on the image of women in advertising and for her critical studies of alcohol and tobacco advertising.
- 4 The study has not looked at specific media vehicles that carried the ads within the media, i.e., specific newspapers and magazines, television channels and digital platforms, as the purpose of the present study was to content analyse the ads and not necessarily define through which media vehicles these ads appeared, which can be an area of a future study to match the media vis-à-vis target audience.
- 5 See <https://www.thinkbox.tv/news-and-opinion/newsroom/why-tv-remains-the-worlds-most-effective-advertising/>
- 6 The new amendments in the law against "Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986" will cover social media platform such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram. See <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/soon-a-law-against-women-s-indecent-depiction-to-cover-whatsapp-snapchat-instagram-government/story-ZvoelLZsYLLJAF5ZYU7wM.html>
- 7 www.ascionline.org, established in 1985, is a self-regulatory organization of the advertising industry in India. It is a non-Government body which is committed to the cause of self-regulation in advertising and ensuring the protection of the interest of consumers.
- 8 Research for this report was led by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and J. Walter Thompson, and conducted by Dr. Shri Narayanan, Krishna Somadepalli, and the team of Engineers at the University of Southern California's Signal Analysis and Interpretation Laboratory (SAIL), in collaboration with Dr. Caroline Heldman and the team of researchers at the Geena Davis Institute. (See <https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/gender-bias-in-advertising.pdf>)

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Mental Health and Media: A Study Exploring How Stigma is Promoted and Challenged Within National Newspaper Reporting on Neurodivergence in Australia

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Abstract

Society is challenged to move beyond current understandings about mental ill health. The media has an important role to play in supporting this shift in public perception. While progress is being made, in Australia, the stigmatising influence of the biomedical model in the media reporting of mental health topics remains strong. This influence is far from harmless, as it promotes negative attitudes and behaviours towards neurodivergent persons. It is therefore a timely research exercise to: a) identify ways in which mental stigma is promoted and challenged within national (i.e. Australian) newspaper content; b) examine whether news text informed themes are supported more broadly within the scholarly literature; and c) on the basis of research findings, develop an anti-mental stigma journalism guide. Enabling such exploration, this study has applied document analysis to a purposive sample of 48 news articles obtained from the Australian newspaper and 24 scholarly articles obtained from a Google Scholar search. The study concludes that a commitment to ethical and inclusive principles in media reporting has a vital role to play in advancing the prideful message that neurodivergence is a natural part of our evolving humanity.

Keywords: Mental health, stigma, media, journalism education, neurodiversity, Australia

Introduction

The perils of stigmatising the mentally diverse

Culturally, we should retreat from our present interpretation of mental ill health (Rocco, 2017). Perceived traditionally, the medical model denotes medical doctors and

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their colleagues as authorities who should lead decisions regarding mental treatment (Corrigan, Roe & Tsang, 2011). Opposing this biomedical ideological perspective is the concept of neurodiversity. In this context, Batt (2018, p.12) states, “the term ‘neurodiversity’ neutralizes the stigma that has traditionally been accorded to autism, ADHD, and other neurodevelopmental conditions, and it presents an alternative view: all these conditions are normal variations within a wide spectrum of human neuro-development.” According to Murphy (2018), the concept of neurodiversity discards the medicalisation of mental ill health. By challenging a biomedical focus on illness, difference and deficiency, prideful messages as promoted under a banner of neurodivergence exist in stark contrast to those that serve to stigmatise. Thornicroft, Rose, Kassam and Sartorius (2007, p.192) define stigma as, “an overarching term that contains three elements: problems of knowledge (ignorance), problems of attitudes (prejudice), and problems of behaviour (discrimination).” Neurodivergent persons can be confronted by a variety of negative stereotypes. As Kosyluk et al. (2018) explain, commonplace stereotypes of people with mental ill health include these individuals being: erratic and aggressive; responsible for their illness; and incompetent (i.e. not capable of work or independent living). The impacts of stigma on the daily lives of neurodivergent citizens should be explicitly acknowledged. Stigma holds harmful social outcomes by encouraging injustice, spreading fear about joining a stigmatised populace, and robbing society of the offerings that stigmatised persons might make should they not be isolated (Corrigan & Kleinlein, 2005 cited in Demmer, 2015). Williams (2014) too suggests it is commonly recognised that stigma brings about bias, discrimination and seclusion. Critically, it is speculated that stigma is an element that contributes to suicidality (Rüsch, Zlati, Black & Thornicroft, 2014). Following on, the stigmatising of neurodivergent citizens is a troubling issue that warrants strong policy attention.

The news media and mental stigma

The capacity of the mass media to contribute to the stigmatising of neurodivergent citizens should not be treated lightly. News media, including newspapers, remain as the key informational source for the populace (Ma, 2017). Furthermore, Kurchina-Tyson (2017) recognises that news stories are feasibly the most important in terms of informing widespread perceptions about mental ill health owing to their accepted social legitimacy. However, Smith (2015) cautions that the majority of persons are incapable of critically assessing the information that they have obtained via the media. Concerns also exist about media representations playing a considerable part in spreading stigma in the direction of persons who are experiencing severe mental illness (Ross, Morgan, Jorm & Reavley, 2019). Whitley and Wang (2017) advise that media depictions of mental ill health have a tendency to orbit around undesirable features including those of crime, risk and aggression. And while the media frequently links mentally ill persons with unlawful activity, by and large, people with mental ill health

are less prone to perform illegal acts (Babic, Babić, Vasilj & Avdibegović, 2017). The media can also construct and promote texts that are dismissive of the neurodiverse. Reed (2017) notes that mental ill health is used as a continual joke in the media. Aragonès, López-Muntaner, Ceruelo and Basora (2014) warn of an enduring under representation of news pieces where people with mental ill health are portrayed as talented, industrious and valuable. Nonetheless, the stigmatising of persons with lived experience by the mass media is not the full picture. Dzokoto, Barnett, Osei-Tutu and Briggs (2018) recognise the media as an instrument that helps to form the views of individuals about mental illness. Importantly, the reporting of mental ill health can sway public attitudes in positive or negative ways (Rhydderch et al., 2016).

Improvements in the ethical coverage of mental illness have been identified at a national level. According to Whitley and Wang (2017, p.284), Canadian news reporting of mental ill health has substantially improved over the past ten years. Moreover, a study examining adjustments in newspaper treatment of mental ill health in England from 2008 to 2016 reports a rise within the proportion of pieces that show mental ill health in an anti-stigmatising way (Anderson, Robinson, Krooupa & Henderson, 2018). Despite these reported advancements, national challenges do persist in the news reporting of neurodivergence. A study of mental ill health portrayal within four Malaysian newspapers over a period of five weeks in 2015 advises of undesirable viewpoints being overrepresented (Razali, Sanip & Sa'ad, 2018). A pilot study undertaken by Shrivastava, Kalra and Ajinkya (2015) and involving two newspapers from Mumbai, India reports that the majority of articles about depression were connected with stories of suicide. Research conducted by Tang and Bie (2016) analysing the reporting of autism across five prominent Chinese newspapers between the years 2003 and 2012 reveals an infantilization of autistic persons. In Australia, the stigmatising influence of the biomedical model upon the reporting of mental ill health remains strong. Based on a study informed by nine Australian journalists, Holland (2018, p.1781) states, "the current study found that journalists are reluctant to use people with lived experiences as sources if they do not come via a mental health organisation." Under biased media coverage, the voices of persons who do not seek to be 'cured' of their neurodivergence are at risk of being downplayed or dismissed. Recognising progress as well as continuing issues in the news reporting of mental ill health, this study aims to: a) identify ways in which mental stigma is promoted and challenged within national (i.e. The Australian) newspaper content; b) examine whether news text informed themes are supported more broadly within the scholarly literature; and c) on the basis of research findings, develop an anti-mental stigma journalism guide.

Method

The Australian newspaper was purposefully chosen as a source of news articles in

its capacity as a national newstext. Pro Quest Newsstream International databases were accessed and the search term of “mental illness” was applied. Articles were then assessed for relevancy by applying the inclusion criteria of: PUBID (42763) (i.e. The Australian newspaper) AND document type = ‘article’ AND Source type = newspapers AND Language = English AND date range = 2000 to 2019 AND (news text promotes mental stigma AND/OR news text challenges mental stigma) AND no duplicates AND text is accessible.

Next, relevant texts (i.e. texts meeting the inclusion criteria) were assessed using the document analysis technique. According to Bowen (2009), this iterative approach involves: a) reading the text and highlighting relevant data (i.e. news article quotes promoting and/or challenging mental stigma, and b) re-reading the highlighted data with the aim of identifying themes and corresponding codes. Steps a) and b) were repeated for each relevant newspaper article in the purposive sample until a point of data saturation was reached. In order to determine whether themes derived from the Australian newspaper articles are reflected in scholarly texts concerning the media coverage of mental ill health, the document analysis technique was also applied to a purposive sample of journal articles. These articles were retrieved from a supplementary Google Scholar Search using the search term of: “newspaper reporting” AND “stigma” AND “mental illness”. Following on, article relevancy was determined by the inclusion criteria of: document type = journal article; AND language = English; AND date range = 2015 to 2019; AND scholarly article about the media reporting of mental ill health includes of one or more of the themes as derived from the newspaper texts; AND no duplicates; AND scholarly article is accessible. To promote data transparency and reliability, themes, their coding rules and supporting quotes were all recorded in analytical tables.

Results

Of the 76 possibly relevant newspaper articles, 48 were deemed relevant after applying the inclusion criteria. News text informed themes, coding rules and supporting quotes depicting texts promoting and resisting mental stigma are shown in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. Themes supporting mental stigma are comprised of dysfunction, alarm and suffering, whereas themes challenging mental stigma were identified as reassurance, natural and abilities. Of the 180 possibly relevant scholarly articles retrieved from Google Scholar, 24 were identified as relevant. Evidence from the scholarly literature reflecting. The Australian newspaper informed themes is provided in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 1 (a, b & c) : News text informed themes promoting mental stigma

Table 1(a): Theme - dysfunction

Coding rule	Text implies that neurodiversity necessarily negatively impacts on function
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Professor Hickie said because many executives had good physical health, mental health could become a separating characteristic between a good executive and a great executive.” (Mental illness an executive worry, 26 Jul 2001, 23). • “Mental illness will have lost its stigma completely as society realises our most complex organ, the brain, is prone to dysfunction like any other part of the body” (20 predictions for Australia in 2026, 21 Oct 2006, M04). • “The move should lead to a much wider range of psychological treatment options being open to people with common problems such as anxiety, depression, and alcohol and substance abuse” (Hickie, 6 Apr 2006, 10). • “For a start there is the common male mental illness-- domestic blindness” (Matchett, 9 Mar 2006, 11). • “I can’t help it. For the best part of six months, I’ve been caught in an obsession. I realise I’m late to the party on this one, but at age 36, I was introduced to Dylan, and the effect on our home has been profound. I’ve lived with my husband for 17 years and this is not the first time I’ve developed a sudden and overwhelming interest in something that then invades the house, driving all within it crazy” (Overington, 24 Apr 2007, 13). • “Every medical professional I have spoken to says the same thing: that depression and politics is not a good mix” (Barns, 18 Jan 2006, 12).

Table 1(b): Theme - alarm

Coding rule	Neurodiversity is juxta positioned alongside menacing texts
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Every year she would go into a mental institution and my grandmother would take me along, hoping I would make mother snap out of it,’ the singer says” (Cairns, 7 July 2006, 17). • “But, increasingly, Americans are hearing that the system is trying to kill those whose level of responsibility is at best uncertain: the mentally ill and the mentally retarded” (Eccleston, 16 Apr 2001, 11). • “Maybe this is the response of a man whose illness has left him with extremely limited social skills” (Edwards, 18 Jun 2004, 18). • “This non-political initiative is designed to boost public awareness and responsiveness to the social curse of mental illness, particularly depression” (Gray, 5 May 2006, 16). • “When bad things happen within the Amish community- mental illness, drug abuse or incest, allegations of which were recently publicised- their approach is to keep it quiet, protect their own and deal with it themselves” (Leve, 19 Feb 2005, 22). • “According to Craig Raeside, one of South Australia’s senior forensic psychiatrists, if drug use is reduced substantially, so too will mental illness and crime” (Xenophon, 4 Nov 2005, 14). • ““These children are likely to be the next generation of drug users, juvenile delinquents and people with mental illness.”” (Lunn, 21 May 2007, 12).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Schools are being used as ‘the first line of intervention’ when intensive clinical intervention is needed to deal with a group of children on the extreme margins of the community, with problems he suspects are fuelled by family breakdown, violence, neglect, sexual abuse, drug and alcohol problems, mental illness, poverty, unemployment and inter-generational dysfunction” (Rintoul, 8 Dec 2005, 16). • “It is a concept album, a song cycle that in titles such as Breathe, Us and Them, Money and Brain Damage dissects the human experience from birth through to greed, conflict, mental illness and death. Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep it is not” (Shedden, 19 Jan 2007, 12). • ““This is of significant concern not only in respect of the harm users do to themselves but the increased risk that they will pose a danger to the community when under the influence of a drug that has the potential to induce episodes akin to psychosis,’ Hyde says” (Stapleton, 13 May 2002, 9). • “TOBIN’S MURDER UNDERSCORES growing concern about inadequacies within public sector mental health” (Wilson, 30 Apr 2005, 26). • “Unemployment, bankruptcy, litigation, divorce, mental illness and suicide are common outcomes of the act of whistle blowing” (Faunce & Boslin, 19 Dec 2003, 11). • “the statistics on early school leaving, unemployment, mental illness, domestic violence and admissions to prison- that the area is regularly put under the microscope by academics and journalists” (Wynhausen, 20 May 2006a, 24). • ““The officers don’t recognise mental illness,’ he says. ‘They see you as being a troublemaker...’” (Wynhausen, 28 Aug, 2006, 10). • “protect more families from preventable diseases such as diabetes, cancer and mental illness” (Victorian Premier Steve Bracks, 24 Jan 2006, 14).
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Table 1(c): Theme - suffering

Coding rule	Texts links neurodiversity with various forms of suffering.
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It will allocate \$120 million over four years to improve the quality of care given by general practitioners to those suffering a mental illness, which will help them and the families who suffer with them” (Costello, 23 May 2001, 12). • “We live in an age characterised by high levels of mental illness, perhaps the best indicator of the state of a nation’s happiness” (Denniss, 31 Dec 2004, 11). • “Yes, later Beach Boys albums would carry a couple of his songs, some of them among his best, but the man himself was suffering from severe mental illness” (Edwards, 18 Jun 2004, 18). • “An article about a woman’s struggle to survive depression that appeared in The Sunday Telegraph’s lift out is news.com.au’s top story so far this month, yet a story on mental illness is not usually seen as a circulation driver” (MacLean, 15 Jul 2004, 17). • “(Singh’s sentence reflected Justice Ken Crispin’s view that she was suffering from diminished responsibility at the time of the killing due to her depression, mental illness and drug abuse.)” (Neill, 30 May 2005, 10). • “Hirohito’s father had suffered mental illness and Hirohito ascended to the throne in 1926” (Sheridan, 06 Aug 2005, W12)

Table 2 (a, b & c) : News text informed themes challenging mental stigma.

Table 2 (a): Theme: assurance

Coding rule	Text reconstructs alarmist stereotypes of neurodiversity
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You are far more likely to be killed by someone you sleep with or drink with than by a mentally ill person.” (Burns, 24 May 2001, M.15). • “Most would acknowledge there is a small group of dangerous offenders who should be confined in secure facilities under the management of forensic mental health professionals, not correctional officers” (Fitzgerald, 12 Mar 2007, 8). • “I’m sure that if Maddrell had not been on drugs, he would not have done it.” (Bain, 14 Jun 2001, 13). • “The fact is that all of these perpetrators-- Port Arthur, Dunblane, Erfurt and, as far as we know, Monash- were law-abiding citizens. They never got into trouble with the law. They were never diagnosed with a mental illness” (Lee, 30 Oct 2002:13). • “There is simply no psychological profile of a terrorist and no evidence that mental illness, personality disorder or childhood trauma feature among their ranks” (Neighbour, 19 Feb 2007, 10). • “‘It is used in one-quarter of 1 per cent of all felonies and is successful in one-third of those cases, and in 90 percent of those the prosecution and the defence agree,’ New York University law professor Michael Perlin says” (Romei, 6 Dec 2001, 13).

Table 2 (b): Theme: natural

Coding rule	Text reconstructs mental illness away from something that can or must be ‘cured’
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “‘I have been so practised for many years in seeing myself as someone with a mental illness that it is hard to see myself any other way,’ he says. ‘But I am trying to ... the art is a part of that process.’” (Safe, 13 May 2003, 15). • “In a study he conducted last year, Healy said two completely healthy volunteers with no history of mental illness had suddenly developed suicidal and aggressive tendencies on a low dose of Zoloft.” (Harvey & Videnieks, 25 May 2001, 14). • “A beautiful young model, she endured years of shock treatment to end up a shadow of herself” (Higson, 13 July 2005, 16). • “The medication is risky because it can enhance suicidal thoughts for the first three to six weeks” (Lim, 1 Oct 2005, 14). • “Jonathan was hospitalised, but he ran away and refused his medications, which didn’t help him much anyway” (O’Neill, 3 Feb 2007, 12). • “Cho, who Aust confirms took anti-depressants-- which can trigger homicidal or suicidal behaviour – began expressing a creepy rage and anger in his writing projects” (Lusetich, 20 Apr 2007, 13). • “It took me ages to find enough packets of Uncle Toby’s Ritalin Bits for the whole family. What am I supposed to do with them now?” (Maushart, 27 Sep 2003, 46). • “Webb, who chairs the management committee of the Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council, sees suicide as a crisis of the self, rather than a medical disorder, and says this needs to be incorporated into suicidology” (Vergnani, 8 Dec 2004, 32).

Table 2 (c): Theme: abilities

Coding rule	Text recognises the abilities that can accompany neurodiversity
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Chewy philosophy is this: Each person has their own genius. You just have to create the environment for it to flourish” (Botsman, 4 Sep 2003, 11). • “I found a tape Dad made of me singing my version of Frank and Nancy Sinatra’s Something Stupid when I was eight,’ Johnston says. ‘I listened to it and realised I had a gift it was my duty to share.’” (Safe & Albert, 29 Apr 2003, 15). • “That was 1991, when he’d again been ranked among the brightest students at Mount Austin High School” (Guilliatt, 27 May 2006, 30). • “...given the incontrovertible link between psychological instability and creative genius” (Macintyre, 09 June 2004, 36). • “And, what difference should wealth and fame-- oh and suspected anorexia (itself a mental illness)-- make to one’s right to acquire a child? That is more difficult” (Stewart, 18 Jan 2001, 11). • “As a young adult, she fought a depressive mental illness while beginning to collect the ‘firsts’ that would see her, at 20, Queensland’s first Aboriginal teacher; at 35 the first indigenous woman barrister; at 40, by now living in NSW, the first Aboriginal head of a government department (beating the late Charles Perkins by four years); at 45 the first such magistrate; and at 55 the first university chancellor” (Woodley, 18 Jun 2001, 4).

Table 3 (a, b & c): Scholarly literature endorsed news themes promoting mental stigma

Table 3 (a): Theme: dysfunction

Coding rule	Text implies that neurodiversity necessarily negatively impacts on function
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The former three were often coded alongside elements which reported ‘strange behaviour’ of the people with mental health problems” (Rhydderch et al., 2016, p.50). • “The term schizophrenia is frequently used, overwhelmingly in a negative way, in the Portuguese media” (Rodrigues-Silva et al., 2017, p.430). • “substantial proportions of articles about mental illness still tend to be negative and stigmatising” (Whitley, Wang, Carmichael & Wellen, 2017, p.700).

Table 3 (b): Theme: alarm

Coding rule	neurodiversity is juxta positioned alongside menacing texts
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “articles with stigmatizing content (in comparison to articles without stigmatizing content) were significantly more likely to have danger as a theme” (Whitley, Adeponle & Miller, 2015, p.329). • “In an increasingly competitive newspaper market, editors were under constant pressure to respond to popular interests and tastes: clearly in the 1860s and 1870s, that taste ran to stories where railways and madness collided” (Milne-Smith, 2016, p.39). • “In this study, we also found that people with mental disorders are twice as likely to be portrayed as a perpetrator of crime compared with a victim” (Chen & Lawrie, 2017, p.311).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Dangerousness is still widely attributed to people with mental illness and there are many negative depictions reflecting stigma” (Ma, 2017, p.98). • “Furthermore, a considerable number of articles present people with schizophrenia as dangerous and as perpetrators of crimes” (Lampropoulos, Wolman & Apostolidis, 2017, p.1545). • “The repetition of articles in the redtop tabloids about personality disorder and homicide can be understood as contributing to such anticipatory stigma” (Bowen, 2016, p.602). • “Throughout the period there were a high proportion of articles related to dangerousness of mental illness” (Kunitoh & Suzuki, 2015, p.81). • “These findings coincide with our findings in that the articles related to schizophrenia or crimes conducted by people with schizophrenia received the highest proportion of attention in Canadian newspapers” (Shigeta et al., 2017, p.80). • “the dangerousness of people with schizophrenia was disappointingly accentuated in an overwhelming majority of the news articles...” (Yang & Parrott, 2018, p.559). • “When reporting a crime, schizophrenia was attributed to the aggressor in almost all cases (93%)...” (Rodrigues-Silva et al., 2017, p.428). • “this study suggests that language used in this group of widely read newspapers may contribute to negative views of those diagnosed with schizophrenia, and particularly to a perceived association with violence” (Bowen, Kinderman & Cook, 2019, n.p.) • “Many articles implied an association between dangerousness and people with psychosis” (Wickrama, 2016, p.13). • “coverage of schizophrenia still contains a significant number of stereotypes” (Climent, 2018, p.183). • “The mental disorder ‘risk’ theme present in these articles demonstrates that the presentation of individuals experiencing mental ill health as ‘dangerous others’ is still a prevalent discourse in Australian newspaper reporting...” (Mellifont & Smith-Merry, 2015, p.14).
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Table 3 (c): Theme: suffering

Coding rule	Texts links neurodiversity with various forms of suffering
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “newspaper coverage has been changing in that there is now more reporting of mental illness in relation to stress rather than in relation to dangerousness, particularly for depression” (Ottewell, 2017, p.82). • “much of the sample focused on managing mental illness and maintaining good mental health, with stories often mentioning examples of people who had recovered, thus refuting the myth that mental illness is an incurable life sentence” (Kenez, O’Halloran & Liamputtong, 2015, p.516). • “most stories of depression in our study were linked to suicide stories” (Shrivastava, Kalra & Ajinkya, 2015, p.409). • “possible predictors of article reinforcing negative stereotypes are an inconsistent headline, inaccurate medical terminology, outdated or negative language and giving more excessive emphasis to the illness rather than the person” (Pingani et al. 2018, p.799).

Table 4 (a, b & c): Scholarly literature endorsed news themes challenging mental stigma

Table 4 (a): Theme – assurance

Coding rule	Text reconstructs alarmist stereotypes of neurodiversity
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This finding is consistent with a recent study undertaken by researchers at the Institute of Psychiatry in the UK which showed a decrease in the number of articles using pejorative language and referring to people with mental illness as being dangerous” (Flynn, Gask & Shaw, 2015, p.271 citing Thornicroft et al. 2013). • “some articles emphasised that stereotypical notions of mental illness were untrue” (Kenez, O’Halloran & Liamputtong, 2015, p.516). • “This is encouraging as it shows a shift from the stereotyped killer-psycho mentality that is usually portrayed in the media” (Shrivastava, Kalra & Ajinkya, 2015, p.410). • “This kind of story, while not proposing mad participation, offers a key piece of news journalism that could effectively reduce the negative stigma caused by extreme news stories that feature mad people as violent entities” (Jackson, 2017, p.118). • “The improvement of the portrayal of conditions like depression has been reported in most of the articles reviewed” (Climent, 2018, p.183).

Table 4 (b): Theme – natural

Coding rule	Text reconstructs mental illness away from something that can or must be ‘cured’
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The critical psychiatry literature has been long concerned with the coercion, abuse, and neglect of people with mental health difficulties in psychiatry(e.g., Thomas, 2013), and the media has been reporting on such cases (e.g., Yeung, 2017)” (Atanasova, Koteyko, Brown & Crawford, 2019, p.6). • “Articles and letters take issue with the normal/pathological divide that characterizes and provides the basis for medicine and psychiatry” (Sawchuk & Clarke, 2015, p.159). • “Anxiety being mostly covered in this section can be viewed as media’s efforts in normalizing the experience of anxiety, thus increasing awareness in the readers” (Shrivastava, Kalra & Ajinkya, 2015, p.409)

Table 4 (c): Theme – abilities

Coding rule	Text recognises the abilities that can accompany neurodiversity
Supporting quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In the Catholic print media there is a focus on the special side of autism or ASD, including special gifts such as creativity, unusual talents and honesty” (Sawchuk & Clarke, 2015, p.159). • “More progressive reporting of achievements made by persons with disability would see a focus on the accomplishments themselves and systemic changes that can support accommodations rather than upon mental illness barriers that have been ‘remarkably overcome” (Mellifont & Smith-Merry, 2015, p.13).

Discussion

The discussion to follow critically addresses the need for balanced media reporting on the topic of neurodivergence. As informed by *The Australian* newspaper articles, this balance is required across key areas of: a) mental abilities and representations; b) mental challenges; and c) natural state. Next, the discussion offers scholarly evidence in support of the news text informed themes as revealed by this exploratory study. From a practical perspective and as supported by these exploratory research findings, an anti-mental stigma journalism guide to promote ethical reporting on neurodivergence is then provided.

News text informed balanced reporting on neurodiversity abilities and representations

The abilities of neurodivergent persons can be dismissed in various ways through medical model-oriented news reporting. Media texts can make generalisations and in doing so, be dismissive of the abilities of neurodivergent citizens. For example, one newspaper article suggests that stigma will be removed from mental ill health when society recognises that the brain is ‘prone to dysfunction’ similar to any other body component (20 predictions for Australia in 2026, 21 Oct 2006, M04). Another article suggests mental health might be the difference between a decent executive and a distinguished executive (Mental illness an executive worry, 26 Jul 2001). Barns (18 Jan 2006) reports on depression and politics as a bad mix. Hickie (6 Apr 2006, 10) also states, “the move should lead to a much wider range of psychological treatment options being open to people with common problems such as anxiety, depression, and alcohol and substance abuse.” Journalists, however, need to realise that articles which attempt to portray neurodivergence as dysfunctional, lessor than, or unsuited to particular careers risk promoting mental stigma. Furthermore, responsible journalism has no place for discourse that acts to ridicule neurodivergent persons. However, as it stands, Australian news texts can openly mock mental diversity through references to male mental ill health and ‘domestic blindness’, and a music obsession that drives household members ‘crazy’ (Matchett, 9 Mar 2006, 11; Overington, 24 Apr 2007, 13).

Neurodivergence is not always reported through a lens of dysfunction. Indeed, Australian newspaper representations of neurodivergent people are available to challenge negative stereotypes. These texts construct mental ill health in ways that recognise performance gifts, academic achievement, and ‘creative genius’ (Safe & Albert, 29 Apr 2003; Guillatt, 27 May 2006; Macintyre, 09 June 2004, 36). While not suggesting that all neurodivergent persons are gifted, ethical news writing nevertheless endeavours to promote understanding about their abilities. A good example of this style of writing is provided by Woodley (2001, 18 Jun 2001, 4) who advances the socially inclusive message that mental diversity need not derail significant career milestones:

As a young adult, she fought a depressive mental illness while beginning to collect the ‘firsts’ that would see her, at 20, Queensland’s first Aboriginal teacher; at 35 the first indigenous woman barrister; at 40, by now living in NSW, the first Aboriginal head of a government department (beating the late Charles Perkins by four years); at 45 the first such magistrate; and at 55 the first university chancellor.

A caveat on the above-mentioned text is the prospect that neurodivergence is not something that people inescapably fight with.

News text informed balanced reporting on neurodiversity challenges

Responsible journalism does not engage in alarmist portrayals of neurodivergent persons. However, rather than reassuring readers that neurodivergence is not something that is inevitably detrimental, news reporting as revealed by this exploratory study tended to juxtaposition mental ill health along side a range of unpleasant texts. Such texts included those of: social exclusion (i.e. institutionalisation); irresponsibility; drug use; violence; risk and danger; bankruptcy, suicide and divorce; and imprisonment (Cairns, 7 July 2006; Eccleston, 16 Apr 2001; Leve, 19 Feb 2005; Lunn, 21 May 2007; Rintoul, 8 Dec 2005; Stapleton, 13 May 2002; Wilson, 30 Apr, 2005; Faunce & Boslin, 19 Dec 2003; Wynhausen, 20 May 2006a). This is not to suggest that significant challenges do not exist, or that the media should sweep these issues under the carpet. Responsible writing, however, needs to clearly articulate that disadvantages in their different forms are not universally or inevitably experienced by neurodivergent persons.

As indicated above, one sphere of reporting where textual reconstruction in the Australian news media is required involves the stereotyping of neurodivergent citizens as ‘dangerous’. On a positive note, this exploratory study identifies efforts by some reporters to help remove stigma in this area. Such textual revisions include: emphasising that someone has a much greater likelihood of being murdered by a person that they know rather than by a mentally ill individual; highlighting the contribution of drugs to violent behaviour; recognising cases of massacres where the perpetrators were never identified as mentally ill; and acknowledging that a terrorist psychological profile does not exist (Burns, 24 May 2001; Bain, 14 June 2001; Lee, 30 Oct 2002; Neighbour, 19 Feb 2007). Media efforts have also been applied in challenging any possible suggested inter-sectionality among danger, mental ill health and unfair legal advantage. In this light, university law professor Michael Perlin, as cited by Romei (6 Dec, 2001, 13), reports that the insanity defence is utilised in a miniscule, one quarter of one percent of all offences. Ethical journalists should thus take every opportunity to redress the misinformed and stigmatising standpoint that people tend to feign mental ill health in order to get out of trouble in the courtroom.

News text informed balanced reporting on neurodivergence

Ethical journalism challenges suffering as a natural state for neurodivergent persons. As applied to a number of articles informing this study, an audience lacking in reference points might be excused for thinking that neurodivergence and misery automatically go hand in hand. Examples include reports of: suffering extending to the families of the mentally ill; mental ill health indicating the shape of a country's happiness; and the fight to survive mental illness (Costello, 23 May 2001; Denniss, 31 Dec 2004; MacLean, 15 Jul 2004). Further, in emphasising that a member of the Beach Boys was suffering with 'severe' mental ill health (Edwards, 18 Jun 2004, 18), journalists should explore and report on the possible ways in which the gift of neurodivergence might contribute to artistic brilliance. And while Neill (30 May 2005, 10) reports on the suffering of 'diminished responsibility' owing to mental illness, readers should not assume this lost capacity to be common place. Sensitivity in media reporting should extend to the survivors of psychiatric malpractice and the potential breaches of their human rights. Unfortunately, understanding of and empathy towards the human suffering as inflicted by unethical medical practice can at times be lacking in news stories. Covering historical medical studies involving 'uninformed volunteers', Safe (2 Oct 2004, 28) provides the quote, "still, he sees a certain romanticism in the way his father set out on his lone quest, relying on little more than his instincts and curiosity." Editors and journalists alike should ask themselves, how would those neurodivergent readers who might have had horrific lived experiences with medical mishaps be expected to respond to this quotation? Reporting that is empathetic to psychiatric survivors has a duty to explicitly make the point that there is nothing at all romantic about unethical experiments involving people with lived experience, regardless of the era in which they were conducted. News stories that risk stigmatising neurodivergent persons as medical curiosities need to be rejected outright by principled editors.

Balanced reporting positions neurodivergence as a healthy component of human evolution. Within this progressive outlook, neurodivergence is situated as natural and not a state from which people must medically recover. While not downplaying the benefits as enjoyed by mental health consumers or dissuading people from seeking professional help where needed, ethical journalism does not ignore or under estimate the risks that can accompany medical treatments. In this way, cautionary news texts communicate: possibilities for developing 'suicidal and aggressive tendencies' on a small dosage of anti-anxiety medication; the personally destructive consequences of shock treatment; the ineffectiveness of outdated treatments; as well as a reference to 'Uncle Toby's Ritalin Bits for the whole family' that one might construct as the writer taking aim at a diagnosis proliferation for a particular mental disorder (Harvey & Videnieks, 25 May 2001, 14; Higson, 13 July 2005; O'Neill, 3 Feb 2007; Maushart, 27 Sep 2003, 46). Furthermore, aligning with the theme of neurodivergence as a naturally occurring state, the progressive reporting on an Australian artist's prideful perception of his 'madness' is provided as

follows:

“When his case manager recently told him a drawing depicted ‘your creativity, not your hallucinations’, Doyle say she was ‘flabbergasted ... I was like, that’s my madness, I’ve worked years for that, don’t take it away from me!’” (Safe, 13 May 2003, 15).

The importance of reconstructing popular perceptions of mental ill health away from stigmatising depictions of biomedical control and towards those of nature, understanding and inclusion should not be understated.

Scholarly support for news text informed themes

The themes as revealed by this exploratory research on *The Australian* newspaper reporting of mental ill health are evidenced more broadly in the scholarly literature, albeit with some themes far more strongly represented than others. Commencing with dysfunction, this theme was identified through references to odd behaviour, the regular negative use of the term ‘schizophrenia’, and considerable proportions of news texts about mental ill health tending to be stigmatising and disapproving (Rhydderch et al., 2016; Rodrigues-Silva et al., 2017, p.430; Whitley, Wang, Carmichael & Wellen, 2017). Within the purposive sample of journal articles covering the news reporting of mental ill health, there was a paucity of reporting in terms of resistance to the dysfunction theme.

Nonetheless, Mellifont and Smith-Merry (2015) note that progressive reporting on the accomplishments of people with disability places a spotlight on these achievements instead of the mental ill health obstacles that have been ‘surprisingly’ conquered. Further, an example is provided by Sawchuk and Clarke (2015) who recognise an emphasis on autism gifts (e.g. creativity, honesty) within the Catholic print media. Again, balance is needed to be applied by journalists in their writing so that all autistic persons are not stereotyped as creative or honest. Unlike the underreporting of neuro abilities, there was no shortage of evidence to indicate that journalists are persisting with alarmist depictions of the mentally diverse (Ma, 2017; Lampropoulos, Wolman & Apostolidis, 2017; Kunitoh & Suzuki, 2015; Yang & Parrott, 2018; Bowen, Kinderman & Cook, 2019). Tempering these stigmatising depictions of neurodivergencecare findings from studies that support news reporting movement beyond messages of danger (Flynn, Gask & Shaw, 2015 citing Thornicroft et al. 2013; Shrivastava, Kalra & Ajinkya, 2015; Jackson, 2017). On the theme of suffering, Ottewell (2017) describes additional news reporting of mental ill health in relation to stress instead of danger. However, it is critical that well-meaning journalists do not inadvertently replace one stigmatising text with another (e.g. ‘danger’ with ‘stress/suffering’).

In their study of three major Australian newspapers (i.e. *The Age*, *The Australian* and *Herald Sun*) that was conducted over a 12-week period in 2012, Kenez, O’Halloran and Liamputtong (2015, p.516) suggest that through stories which repeatedly reference

examples of recovery, the myth of mental ill health as ‘an incurable life sentence’ is refuted. Balanced journalism is, however, challenged to refute the stigmatising biomedical-aligned myth that neurodivergence is necessarily a burden. Nonetheless, some journalists are taking up this challenge and are attempting to position neurodivergence as natural. Scholarly studies indicate that the media is: reporting on instances of abuse and oppression in regards to persons with mental ill health within psychiatry; challenging a ‘normal/pathological divide’ that offers the foundation for psychiatry; and covering anxiety predominantly in the lifestyle section that can be perceived as efforts to normalise such lived experience (Thomas, 2013; Yeung, 2017 cited in Atanasova, Koteyko, Brown & Crawford, 2019; Sawchuk & Clarke, 2015, p.159; Shrivastava, Kalra & Ajinkya, 2015). In this context, ethical journalism should not simplistically equate neurodivergence with illness and suffering. Rather, with the goal of reducing stigma, the media should take opportunities to report on neurodivergence as a natural and prideful part of an inclusive society.

A news text informed journalism guide to ethically reporting on neurodivergence

The anti-mental stigma journalism guide as depicted in Box 1 should be utilised by persons who are endeavouring to advance societies that are more welcoming of neurodivergent citizens. This guide is divided into two tiers consisting of: a) the personal level; and b) the societal level. Noting the limitations that are to be specified in the following section, this guide should be considered for possible future inclusion within educational resources for journalism students and also as a reference point for journalists and editors.

Table 5: News text informed anti-mental stigma journalism guide

Personal level	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do not ignore the critical voices of neurodivergent citizens who challenge mental stigma across its various forms. 2. Challenge a stigmatising medical model by recognising that some persons might have no need, desire or capacity to ‘recover’ from their neurodivergence. 3. Allow informed persons the freedom to question or reject medical labels or treatments. 4. Do not stigmatise neurodivergent persons who make informed decisions to use prescribed medications. 5. Use progressive discourse (i.e. do not label individuals as having ‘conditions’, ‘illnesses’, or ‘disorders’). 6. Be aware of issues that might be deemed offensive to psychiatric survivors. 7. Do not make fun of neurodivergent persons. 8. Avoid the use of stigmatising language (e.g. ‘crazy’). 9. Take care not to replace one stigmatising factor about neurodivergence with another.
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Societal level	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Do not attempt to associate neurodivergence within evitable suffering. 11. Do not suggest that individuals are using or feigning mental ill health in order to gain some sort of legal advantage. 12. Do not feed unconscious bias by attempting to situate neurodivergent persons as irresponsible, damaged, or dangerous. 13. Do not report on challenges as being universally experienced by neurodivergent citizens. 14. Investigate and report about possible stigma inspired barriers to the greater economic and social inclusion of neurodivergent citizens as well as how these obstacles might be overcome. 15. Identify and challenge negative stereotypes that target neurodivergent citizens. 16. Promote neurodivergence as a natural part of a healthy and inclusive society.
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Limitation

Themes, either supporting or challenging mental stigma, together with the anti-mental stigma journalism guide as revealed by this investigative research, are based on a small sample of news texts as sourced from a national newspaper (i.e. *The Australian*). Efforts to validate these news text informed themes are also confined to the Google Scholar database and the search term applied. Future research, drawing upon information attained from additional newspaper sources and different scholarly data bases, and utilising different search terms, might identify themes or anti-mental stigma reporting measures outside of those as discussed within this paper. Such research might also challenge aspects of these initial findings. With such restrictions in mind, this preliminary study nevertheless makes a notable contribution to media studies and the ethical reporting of neurodivergence by setting a foundation upon which future research can build.

Conclusion

The media is challenged to report on neurodivergence in balanced and ethical ways. Balance is soon lost through a focusing of media attention on the ‘recovered’. Indeed, it is a biomedical spotlight that serves to relegate persons who do not need or want recovery from their neurodivergence as not newsworthy. Moreover, it is a divisive approach that attempts to construct mental health ‘conditions’ as shameful and socially unpalatable. An ethical approach to reporting instead endeavours to educate the general public on the message that nobody deserves to be labelled, stigmatised or discriminated against on the basis of their neurodivergence. Rather than focusing on stigmatising, biomedical approved topics, a paradigm shift in the media reporting about neurodivergent persons should instead embrace values of recognition and inclusion. For it is this progressive and inclusive ideological shift that might assist in advancing the proud message that neurodivergence is a natural part of our evolving humanity.

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Sound and Fury: Petit Récit and the Postmodern News Media

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Abstract

Reality and its representations had been a serious philosophical concern since the time of Plato. Various philosophies, religious thoughts, and institutional policies have claimed themselves the true champions of objective representations through their legitimizing narratives and discursive practices. Attempts had been made to strengthen the official narratives, and such attempts had been rather successful until the postmodern era. However, the postmodern thought infiltrated into the dominant discourses and questioned their legitimizing narratives through petit récit/mini-narratives which emerged from the periphery. The postmodern influence in shattering the dominant ideology is especially evident in the media world. The postmodern turn, accelerated with technological advances, is seen as liberating and revolutionary since it breaks the social boundaries and enables the minorities and voiceless to gain their voice and disseminate their ideas. This paper investigates the nature of representation in the media, and how the mass media landscape has been reshaped in the postmodern world. The social media, once perceived as a mere communication tool, became a news generating platform, challenging and often dominating the traditional media outlets. While social media succeeds in reshaping the media landscape, their continuity with the past – simulacrum and ideology – questions their ability to bring a real revolution in the field of media.

Keywords: Postmodern media, Social media, Participatory journalism, Mini-narratives, Propaganda

Introduction

In 1979, Jean-François Lyotard famously declared in his book *La Condition Postmoderne* (translated as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*) that the era of objective reality has ended. The objective reality, constructed through the legitimizing

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narratives of religious myths, literary narratives, philosophical doctrines, political ideologies, and scientific theories were questioned by *petit récit*¹ that emerged from various and often oppressed quarters. This radical shift to pluralism and heterogeneity marked the postmodern approach which rejects universal narratives, a representative feature of enlightenment progressivism aiming to resolve the problem of difference. Contrary to the naïve enlightenment progressivism, the postmodern emphasis on small narratives called for a critique of totalizing archetypal narratives created by the dominant discursive structures of the society, which are often biased and flawed. Stressing on the otherness and discarding the inclusive politics, mini-narratives, the quintessential feature of postmodernism, gave a new direction to mass media too. The postmodern turn, accelerated with technological advances, is seen as liberating and revolutionary since it breaks the social boundaries and enables the minorities and voiceless to gain their voice and disseminate their ideas. However, in the “ecstasy of communication” accelerated by the new media, the objectivity was compromised for personal belief and reality was substituted by simulation (Baudrillard, 1988).

Literature Review

Questioning the grand narratives or meta-narratives in the Western world can be traced back to the enlightenment era, which then continued through the modern and postmodern times. However, the desired result of the questioning turned to be antithetical in divergent periods. While the enlightenment thinkers wished advancement and social progress through reasoning and experiments, the questioning spirit got the modernists slightly uncomfortable regarding their own existence on two grounds: firstly, the structures that held the world were slowly crumbling; secondly, the meta-narratives that explained the world had been losing their hold in the face of mini-narratives which encouraged plurality and difference.

One of the early critics who decried such a historical turn that led to postmodernism was the German theorist Jürgen Habermas (1980), who, in his influential essay “Modernity— an Incomplete Project” published in 1980’s argued that the project of modernity, which is the continuation of the Enlightenment project of basing authority on reason had got out of line when the real aesthetic object and the moral concern gave way to the technique of production—breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions— and redefinition of man’s place and purpose in the universe. According to Habermas (2001), the *raison d’être* of the project of modernity was “to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic” (p. 1754). To his dismay, faith in reason didn’t lead to human progress but got detached from the everyday life of people. Moreover, man’s inquisitive nature reached up to questioning the fundamental principles that supported traditional ways of life, religion, and morality, which then deprived the humans of the world of certainties. This phenomenon was catalyzed by the catastrophes of wars that shook the “faith in the moral basis, coherence, and durability

of Western civilization and raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the postwar world” (Abrams, 2012, p. 202). Modernity became a failed project for many, including Habermas since it could not reach “the infinite progress of knowledge and in the infinite advance towards social and moral betterment” (Habermas, 2001, p. 1749).

Though many critics and artists who believed in liberal ideals of human rights and justice responded to Habermas and contested his claims, it was Jean-François Lyotard who challenged Habermas’s projected goal of the “modernity project”. Lyotard defied the authoritative and legitimizing narratives that Habermas embraced and declared that the incomplete or failed “project modernity” in fact ushered a new era, postmodern, which can be defined as “incredulity towards meta-narratives” (Lyotard 1984, p. xxiv). This postmodern suspicion about the meta-narratives comes from the realization that all these meta-narratives whether Christian, Marxist or myths of scientific progress, are all mere illusions created by the dominant class to “smother difference, opposition, and plurality” (Barry 2002, p. 87).

Human progress and perfectibility imagined by the Grand Narratives are not justifiable and as Peter Barry (2002) elaborates the Lyotardian schema saying, “the best we can hope for is a series of “mini-narratives”, which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances” (p. 83).

The strike on the monopoly of the essentialist structures² (Habermas (2001, p. 1754), created and fostered by grand narratives was accelerated at the outset of the modern time by the great technological advancements such as industrial printing presses, telephones, photography and films. Scholars like Walter Benjamin were optimistic about the revolutionary aspects of modern technology. In his seminal essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin (1973) considers that new technologies, especially photography, and film, have “transformed the entire nature of art” (p. 220).

Capitalist mass production questioned the timelessness of different art forms and removed them from their original place and thus dispelled the aura attached to them. Thus, Mona Lisa is removed from its privileged place in the Muse´e du Louvre in Paris, and Beethoven’s symphony is taken away from concert halls: they are now available in the living rooms. Moreover, these classical pieces are no more the possessions of aristocrats or bourgeoisie elites; they became accessible to people who belonged to any class (Benjamin, 1973). Similarly, the religious texts came down from the walls of the monastery to the hands of common people for new interpretations which destabilized the church’s monopoly over biblical interpretation (Innis, 1950). Slowly, the center of the establishment began to slip from its position.

Later, the emergence of television, digital networking, specifically, the social networking sites/apps became instrumental in this information explosion and decentralization of power; the proliferation of competing texts and their endless signification defines the postmodern condition.

In this app-led world, the news corporation giants seemingly lost their authority when their stories got mixed up with the news generated on digital devices available on the market. Text messages and emails were the first digital networking tools tested in revolutionizing and complicating the world of communication and establishing a community of networked communicators and audiences. It proved that computer-mediated communication can reach the audience fast and get the desired results quickly.

The protest in Manila in 2001 to oust President Joseph Estrada from power and the protest in Spain in 2004 to overthrow Prime Minister José María Aznar were chiefly coordinated by text messages. Similarly, protestors used text messages to gather thousands to protest against the Spanish Prime Minister José María Alfredo Aznar López in 2004. Later, in 2006, street protests were organized in Belarus against President Aleksandr Lukashenko using e-mail (Shirky 2011). This trend of collecting and disseminating news got a lot more diversified through social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. From a mere communication platform, these social media sites/apps evolved into the status of mainstream news platforms, blurring the boundary between essentialist and non-essentialist structures (Tusa, 2019).

Millions began using social network sites for sharing and reading the news, whether it is recycled news from main stream media or created by amateur journalists. The passive audiences have been empowered through the new digital media and have turned out to be newsmakers instead.(Christensen, Torp & Firat, 2005).

In his article “Social Media and the News,” Alfred Hermida (2016) confirms this idea saying, “Social media falls within the scope of participatory communication technologies that are presumed to enable people to interact, participate and collaborate in the production of media, rather than just consuming media” (Witschge, p. 83).

The interactive media sites radically changed the face of journalism. Social media sites have already outpaced the print news in recent years. Even the newspapers which were once the major source of news lost its place in the media industry in several countries. A recent study by the Pew Research Center (2018, December) confirms that the social media edge over the print media as a news source in recent years in the United States.

Recent Trends

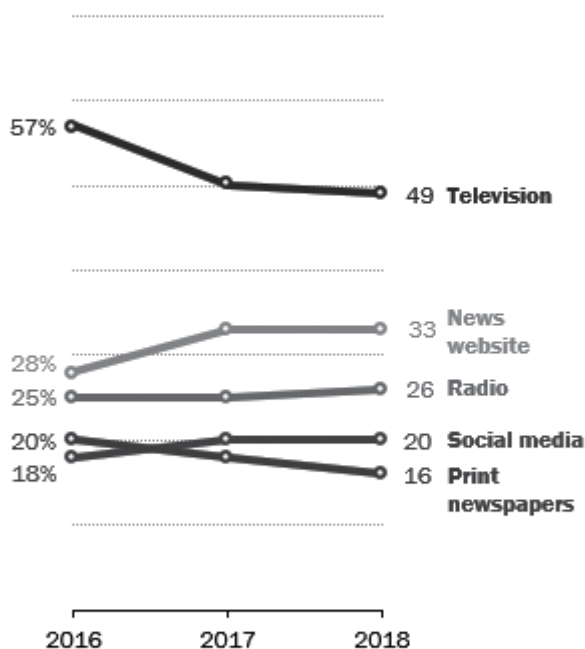
More Americans get news often from social media than print newspapers.

Figure 1: Graph statistics of news consumption in the United States

(Adapted from "Social Media Outpaces Print Newspapers in the U.S. As a News Source," by Shearer, E. (2018), Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/10/social-media-outpaces-print-newspapers-in-the-u-s->)

More Americans get news often from social media than print newspapers

% of U.S. adults who get news *often* on each platform



Note: The difference between social media and print newspapers in 2017 was not statistically significant.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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As the graph shows, only 16% of the Americans got their news from print sources in 2018 compared to 20% in 2016. On the contrary, the news consumption on social media rose up to 20% in 2018 from 18% in 2016. It is not only the print media but other mainstream media like television which generates news from the legitimate sources, also lost its hold on people while the news websites began gathering momentum in recent years. The television which had 57% viewership in 2016 declined to 49% in 2018 and the news websites gained up to 33% in 2018 from 28% in 2016 (Shearer, 2018).

One of the major advantages of social media was that individuals with mutual values or interests could share their ideas and even group themselves to undertake collective action without having any controlling center. In this process, social media turns out to be an ideal platform to foster counter-narratives which questions and disturbs the Center. After analyzing 743365 tweets Callison and Hermida (2015) of the University of British Columbia came to the conclusion that people from the marginal community and periphery are the “most influential voices on the Twitter” (p. 695). They confirm “while institutional actors such as journalists still wield considerable influence over information flows on social media, committed individuals engage with media by contesting narratives and highlighting media messages that are in line with their views, appropriating the socio-technical affordances³ of twitter” (Callison & Hermida 2015, p. 697). Even though these authors do not deny the influences of the “institutional actors,” they believe that a “greater proportion of indigenous and alternative voices rose to prominence” through digital media and facilitated a redistribution of power. Similarly as Callison & Hermida (2015) point out, “studies into recent social movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring show how committed individuals are appropriating social media as a tool to articulate a counter narrative and to contest selective or dismissive framing by mainstream media” (p. 710).

Another study by Felix (2013) also confirms that social media played a crucial role in the protest movements in Iran (2009) and Egypt (2011). These two movements are known as the Green movement and the Arab Spring respectively, proved the importance of social media in penetrating the dominant structure of power and subsequently came to be known as the Twitter revolution and the Facebook revolution. It is uncontested that many revolutions happened before without the help of digital networking. The role of social media was rather accelerating the process which would have happened rather slowly.

This trend is in tandem with the postmodern philosophy which does not believe in any absolute truth or authority. It proves that there are no “correct images,” “correct narratives” or “correct answers” as are often provided by the mainstream media. Conformity with established rules become a thing of the past. Instead, as Lyotard (1984) says, postmodernism brings forth what was often thought to be unrepresentable, whether it is in art, religion or politics, to the forefront. Lyotard writes:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable (p. 82).

However, the Social media landscape is not entirely transparent. Just like the traditional media is often accused of ideological leanings, social media platforms controlled mostly by Western millionaires are accused of manipulation, data gathering, and safeguarding the interests of special interest groups. What many people believed to be a platform for free expression and celebration of diversity can be made into the tools of suppression and decimation of diversity. This data controlling is done through different methods: disabling the live user comments; deleting the social media account of certain people or groups; suppressing the news from certain groups (such as LGBTQ) or political parties, etc. One of the recent incidents was regarding the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Facebook banned four separatist groups in Myanmar as terrorist organization and banned their content on Facebook. In a news article titled “Overreacting to failure”: Facebook’s new Myanmar strategy baffled local activists. The Guardian newspaper (Wong, 2019, February, 07) focused our attention to Facebook’s inefficient ways of dealing with the issues in Myanmar. The article states:

But the company failed to take timely action when its platform was used by Buddhist extremists to inflame hatred and violence against the Rohingya minority in 2017. Even as the Myanmar military, known as the Tatmadaw, was carrying out a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya, Facebook designated a Rohingya insurgent group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, as a dangerous organization, while taking no action against the Tatmadaw (para 9).

The Myanmar event is not a single incident that should be put aside as an exception, but this is one of the numerous events that are happening in the social media world. Suppression of differing viewpoints and dissemination of desired viewpoints which we usually find in the mainstream media just continued in the world of social media too, nullifying the revolutionary aspect of the new media. McSherry (2018), the Legal Director of Electronic Frontier Foundation points out some of the recent censorship on the social media:

Flickr removed photos of Egypt’s state security force from a users’ account claiming the takedown was because the user did not create the images himself. Facebook allows white supremacists to spread violent threats while censoring Black Lives Matter posts and activists of color Facebook removed the account of an independent journalist and blogger from China because the blogger did not want to use his government name out of fear of the penalties to activists who violate China’s strict speech rules. Twitter regularly removes content related to sexual health and condoms but allows Playboy to promote its account freely. Egyptian journalist Wael Abbas has been censored by Facebook, Yahoo, Twitter, and YouTube in connection with his work documenting police brutality (pp. 3-4).

Similarly, in April 2019, a girl in India posted a video on Instagram where a woman

was addressing the men to rape the girls who were wearing short skirts. The girl wanted the world to see this insult and react to it. But in a few hours, Instagram deleted her video and she remarked “Instagram deleted our post! Wow! Way to go Instagram, nice way to shut women up” (Shayaan Bakht, 2019. Para 5).

The authors of the article “Weapon of the Weak? The social media landscape of interest groups” claims that the social media platform is not a weapon for the weak. They say that they could find “limited evidence that social media have been able to reinvigorate democratic processes by changing inequalities in the landscape of political representation among interest groups” (Van, Otjes & Rasmussen, 2016, p.1). This kind of filtering and moderation of the content led to a hearing in the United States in 2018 April by the House Judiciary Committee. Chairman Goodlatte of the Judiciary Committee said, “the advent of social media has made it possible for people to connect across continents, explore vast amounts of information, and share meaningful dialogue with friends and strangers. However, this same technology can be used to suppress a particular viewpoint and manipulate public opinion.”

What is contradictory here is that often the government themselves ask them to ban the social media at certain regions or filter the contents. Recently, Facebook admitted that it was asked to delete certain accounts by both US and Israeli governments. Greenwald (2019) reports that a meeting between Israeli authorities and the Facebook team was held in 2016 to determine which Palestinian Facebook accounts have to be removed. The meeting was called because Facebook was not willing to remove voluntarily the Palestinian Facebook accounts, which according to Israelis, promoted “incitement.” Greenwald (2019) writes “Shortly after news broke earlier this month of the agreement between the Israeli government and Facebook, Israeli Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked said Tel Aviv had submitted 158 requests to the social media giant over the previous four months asking it to remove content it deemed ‘incitement.’ She said Facebook had granted 95 percent of the requests” (p.1).

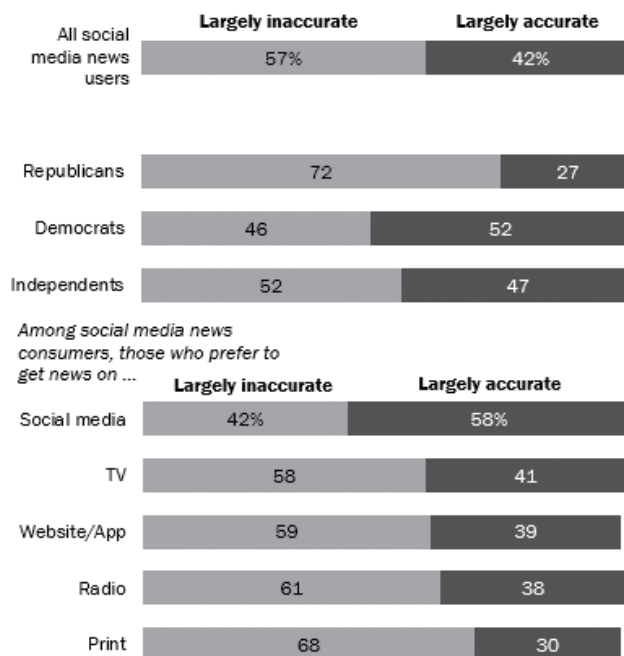
The Palestinian Information Centre (PIC) confirmed that soon after the meeting “at least 10 of their administrators’ accounts for their Arabic and English Facebook pages - followed by more than two million people - have been suspended, seven of them permanently” (McKernan, B. 2018, para 7). It raises the question of whether social media is hijacked by the establishment like the mainstream media outlets. Both the internal (based on the tech giant’s affiliation) as well as external filtering (the governments) confirms this idea.

There is also increasing lack of belief in the news disseminated by the new media. If the slogan was “incredulity towards meta-narratives,” now the slogan is “incredulity towards mini-narratives.” A PEW research study (2018, September 10) shows that a good number of people consider social media news as inaccurate or fabricated.

Figure 2: Graph Statistics of Social Media News Inaccuracy in the United States

(Adapted from "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2018," by Matsa, K. E., & Shearer, E. (2018) Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.journalism.org/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/>)

More than half of social media news consumers expect the news there to largely be inaccurate
% of social media news consumers who say they expect the news they see on social media to be ...



Note: No answer responses not shown.
 Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.
 "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2018"

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This graph shows that American news consumers are skeptical about the news that they get from the social media. Moreover, the social media news consumers are also highly skeptical of the news they receive from other sources like TV, radio, and print. What is interesting in this graph is one section of the population tends to distrust the social media more than the other section: while 72% of the republicans consider the news largely inaccurate, only 47% of the democrats consider social media news inaccurate. It also points out the biased news in the traditional media (Matsa & Shearer 2018).

One of the major reasons for the mistrust could be the social media world's preoccupation with activism and propaganda. Nick Rochlin (2017), in his article "Fake news: belief in post-truth," gives us a glimpse of what happens in the news world. He writes, "As we enter the post-trust era, in which facts and evidence have been replaced by personal belief and emotion, the nature of news, and what people accept as news, is also shifting toward a belief and emotion-based market. The truth of the story no longer matters. What matters is that the story falls in line with what a person wants to hear" (p. 2). Rochlin's argument is based on selective exposure theory which explains that people gravitate towards certain news items and media channels while ignoring others.

Yet another reason for the mistrust of the social media news is the ever-expanding domain of fake news which again caters to the interest of certain groups. In this technological era, it has become easier to create fake news or realities to advance one's cause and to secure one's hold over people. What is presented to the public, thus, tends to be one-sided, biased and manipulated, and the onset of technology has made this task achievable with even more of finesse. For example, using morphing or deep morphing⁴ techniques to produce inaccurate/abusive content or using old content with new tag lines to metastasize⁵ propaganda. All these methods were in practice even before, but with improved technological functions, it has become a faster and insidious process. To make it worse, technology's penetration into all spheres of life has slowly taken us to an era of virtual reality; it has become an accepted reality in the present century, especially for a generation that spends a good amount of time on social networking sites and video games. However, it caused heavy damage to the media consumers, both traditional as well as new media. The news industry is controlled by multi-national corporations which are enchanted by the limitless power of technology, and have almost lost their grip on reality, like Odysseus' men who got intoxicated on the fruits of lotus. They would go to any extent to manipulate the news content to suit their interest.

It is above any contention that the media world, with its technological gimmicks/media spectacles, provides a partial representation of the truth and sometimes even a substitution or replacement of the truth. Reality and its representations have been a serious philosophical concern since the time of Plato. For Plato, the world itself is a copy/representation of the real world outside the reach of human beings, and the poets who engaged in copying the duplicate were condemned by Plato as it was twice removed from reality. Plato's stand is considered as radical by many thinkers; however, in the postmodern era, Plato's concern over reality once again raises the question if it is possible to know the empirical reality.

The postmodern concern is not poets or novelists who create a fictional world, but the media which proudly states that they represent the reality as such. French philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard calls this postmodern phenomenon "simulacrum" - blurring of the boundary between real and simulation. It is not a situation where one has lost the ability to distinguish the natural from the artificial or the reality from its representation.

It is much more than that. According to Baudrillard (1994), the postmodern simulation “is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (p. 2). The problem is not the authenticity of the images or masking the “absence of a basic reality”, but the lack of basic corresponding reality itself. Baudrillard (1994) writes, “it is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” (p. 1). It is this postmodern media’s fascination with the hyperreal that made him say that the Gulf war didn’t take place.

In his article “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place” (1995), Baudrillard (1995) looks at the Gulf war as just another media spectacle - a ‘simulation’ and well-rehearsed wargame. It was not the first time that television screens displayed pictures of war; however, it was the first time that they were displayed live from the battlefield. Due to the graveness of the issue, unquestionably, what was projected by the media was under strict scrutiny by the Pentagon, and this control led to the depiction of a one-sided story thoroughly overwritten by an electronic narrative. What the viewers were ultimately exposed to was a “clean war” that did not outline the amount and severity of human casualties. For the viewers, the images displayed on the screen served as a depiction of the actual event and was accepted due to the so-called reliability.

In the process of manipulation and concealment, what eventually gave way to speculations regarding the authenticity of the news concerning the Gulf war was the discovery that one of the CNN reporters, Charles Jaco, who was assumed to have been reporting live from battlefield was essentially reporting against a fake backdrop, with added sound effects that gave viewers the idea that he is braving the war amidst the missiles and sirens. In the introduction to Baudrillard’s book, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Paul Patton writes:

Fascination and horror at the reality which seemed to unfold before our very eyes mingled with a pervasive sense of unreality as we recognised the elements of Hollywood script which had preceded the real (the John Wayne language and bearing of the military spokesmen), and as the signifiers of past events faded into those of the present (the oil-soaked sea bird recycled from the Exxon Valdez to warn of impending eco-disaster in the Gulf) (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 2).

Thus, in Patton’s words, “it is not a question of being for or against the war. It is a question of being for or against the reality of war” (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 2). In short, all these events showcased by the media were a “simulacrum, a hyperreal scenario in which events lose their identity and signifiers fade into one another” (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 2), and they aimed not to be a representation of the war but battled their way across to be identified as the war itself. What is more interesting about this postmodern phenomenon is that sometimes even reporters who are in the field learn about reality through media. Patton writes:

Occasionally, the absurdity of the media's self' representation as purveyor of reality and immediacy broke through, in moments such as those when the CNN cameras crossed live to a group of reporters assembled somewhere in the Gulf, only to have them confess that they were also sitting around watching CNN in order to find out what was happening. Television news coverage appeared to have finally caught up with the logic of simulation (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 2).

In recent times, such happenings can be applied to various events, for example, a picture of an injured Syrian boy sitting in an ambulance went viral and became the face of the recent Syrian war⁶. However, videos debunking this picture started doing the rounds, causing confusion amidst viewers. Similarly, another picture of a little boy lying face down on the beach broke many hearts⁷. That too was later said to be orchestrated wherein the boy's position was changed in order to cause the desired effect. If these images were produced to show the extent of human casualties that they couldn't capture the moment it happened (as they failed to capture the human casualties on the spot, so they reenacted these casualties for the audience), the aim of CNN report of the gulf war was to show a clean war with relatively few human casualties, and to focus more on "the accepted story of the war: high-tech weapons, ecological disaster, the liberation of Kuwait" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 3). When real images are made to amount to selective images like those produced and displayed by the media, for example, the clean war, the resultant product is a novelty which is dissimilar to the real events as they were understood before the age of modern technology. Baudrillard (1995) calls such images "structural unreality of images." According to Baudrillard (1995), this "structural unreality of images" produced by unconditional simulacrum "governs all information, even the most pious and objective." (p.46)

A clean war in Iraq through the "structural unreality of images" is accepted in the Western media because the 'Western nations cannot be evil'. Or, for that matter, no nations want to produce undesired images to the world. Baudrillard (1994) writes, "The challenge of simulation is never admitted by power. How can the simulation of virtue be punished? However, as such, it is as serious as the simulation of crime" (p. 21). It poses a serious question. Barry Glassner, in his book, *The Culture of Fear*, addresses this issue, especially when he talks about teenage pregnancy and abortion. Glassner (2000) writes,

Anyone who commuted by bus or train in the Washington, D.C., area during the mid-1990s or sought an abortion in the South in that period will probably remember this fear campaign. More than one thousand advertisements appeared in buses and subway stations around Washington and Baltimore alluding to a scary statistic: "Women who choose abortion suffer more and deadlier breast cancer." In Louisiana and Mississippi legislators passed laws that require doctors to inform women twenty-four hours before an abortion that the procedure can increase their risk of breast cancer (p.17).

The knowledge is constructed for the so-called betterment of the society; lies are spread to support the religious ideology. All this affirm the fact that we live in a world of total simulation. Hegarty (2004) writes "... the order of simulacra we now inhabit (the third) is a simulation, and here there is no real to imitate (again we can refer back to the vanishing referent in previous texts) as the simulation is not an imitation, but a replacement" (p. 50). Thus events can be unconnected from reality and substituted by propaganda images to serve one's purposes.

The entire project *The Culture of Fear* by Glassner is an effort to comprehend how knowledge and information are constructed and disseminated. Some of these issues such as teenage moms and road rage should be labeled as "misinformation" since its only function is to create panic among people. Glassner (2000) writes, "Start with silly scares, the kind that would be laughable were they not advanced with utter seriousness by influential organizations, politicians, and news media. Promoted by the same means as other fears—and often to the same ends—they afford a comfortable entry point into the fear mongers' bag of tricks" Glassner (2000) gives an example:

Oprah Winfrey, in a program on road rage in 1997, used the same approach. First she transmuted familiar occurrences into a huge new danger. "We've all been there. It starts out with the tap of the horn, an angry gesture, a dirty look," she declared. Then she proceeded to recount a few actual incidents in which the outcome was a shooting or fistfight. That expressions of annoyance almost never intensify to a shooting or fight was beside the point "This is a show that affects so many people," she said, and then cleverly produced an impressive but ultimately meaningless number. "This woman's biggest offense was pulling out of her driveway...countless millions of you have done that," she said in the course of introducing someone who had been attacked by another driver (p. 1).

If we take any news program, it is carefully orchestrated, beginning with the setting of the studio, to the anchor, people who debate on a particular issue, and the audience. The rhetorical situation should be in favor of the channel for the success of the program as well as the premeditated message that they want to deliver to the world. So if we look into the news programs, all we come across is peelable layer after layer of propaganda which is not explicitly stated or visible to us. Moreover, these media outlets transfer values and morals into norms through political, social and economic influence.

This cultural phenomenon occurs due to the constructionist approach that the media world follows. The constructionist approach as the name suggests considering the world as primarily constructed through the languages and images. "...[The] world," Jason Toynbee (2006) remarks, "is largely a mediated world, which is not just accessed through symbolic structures such as language and genre but is actually produced by them" (p. 159). This is the reason why sometimes news programs look like soap operas. Toynbee writes, "...as with a soap, the news offers emotional release – countless opportunities for

identifying with fellow humans who have struggled, suffered, or found joy in their lives” (p. 158). In the process of delivering the news through fictional packages, media, in many respects, act as agents who provide a particular ideology or world view to its audience. For example, Al Jazeera is known for many wonderful programs such as “101 East,” a documentary program focusing on the cultures and politics of Asia; “Al Jazeera World,” a one hour documentary film on the world affairs; “Counting the Cost,” a program that gives weekly insights into business and economic stories; “Inside Story” which discusses the day’s top stories; “People & Power,” an inquiry into the display of political power across various pressing issues; “The Stream,” a look into novel pursuits and perspectives that showcases stories from undiscovered angles; “Techknow,” a program that uncovers latest scientific and technological advancements and how they are responsible for impacting lives. However, only a reader/viewer who has a critical eye could find out if these programs are neatly packaged with a certain agenda or ideology.

The constructionists reject the fact that social phenomena have a real independent existence. They are interested in how the meaning and ideology are intertwined in the process of producing meaning. Since the news media operate in specific political and cultural contexts, they cannot escape the specific context in which it is produced. To make it more comprehensible, Toynbee quotes Stuart Hall who says that even though ideology is embedded in a text, the way people decode it is totally up to them. Some segment of the population goes hand in hand with the media texts, some go for a “negotiated reading” where they accept some part of it and reject some other part, and finally, there is the last group that indulges in ‘oppositional reading’ where they are in disharmony with the preferred meaning, recognizing the ideological characteristic which provides legitimacy to power relations.

In this phase of late capitalism, we are only ensuring through our inventions and discoveries the “survival of the fittest.” Moreover, since media is almost business-like in nature, especially with its monopolistic feature of ownership, there is a lot more pressure on media firms to survive against the competition they face, and thus we can derive that most of the information that is presented to us is packaged as sensational too for this very reason; more ratings is equal to better profits, which eventually assures its survival in the competitive realm.

As far as manipulative journalism is concerned, the question arises, what kind of power is the media allowed to exercise, and where should they draw the line? When journalists play the role of political actors or surrogates for public officials to assist certain political agendas, they monopolize the field and disseminate the discourse of the dominant class (Graber & Dunaway (2014)). The political and propagandist nature of the media is evident in one of the recent advertisements in the Indian media. *Times Now*, which is one of India’s popular news channel features an advertisement with Editor-In-Chief Rahul Shivshankar in which he says the following: “Time has come to separate fact from rhetoric

and propaganda”⁸ (India Upfront, TV broadcast). What this probably implies is that news channels are themselves conscious of the rising awareness amongst the viewers about a concept like propaganda. However, if we take a closer look at the advertisement, it serves as propaganda too. The promise of providing hard facts and nothing less to viewers would increase their ratings and thus lead them to become the dominant power holder in the media sector.

The spectacular feature of new media is that it is considered to be more democratic and revolutionary when compared to the old media. People are free to voice their opinions on a public platform without actually having to wait for a newspaper to accept their entry, or any radio station or TV channel to invite them to be part of their selected few. No one has to print pamphlets and distribute it these days; it is a lot easier, and definitely a lot more cost-effective, thanks to technology, because anyone can disseminate his or her views through social media or respond to the news programs or any other programs through the added feature “comments” on many of the online media pages. Similarly, people could share and respond to these programs through Facebook or any other social networking sites, and invite further feedback and start a conversation or debate. But there are several factors that go unnoticed. Facebook and other social networking companies have to agree on certain terms and conditions to function in most of the countries. What does it tell us, and especially, when those terms and conditions are startlingly different from country to country? The information is strictly controlled by the governments or the media giants. The less democratic the country, the more censorship placed by the governments. The increasing government surveillance and monitoring of the new media are evident in countries like North Korea, China, and Saudi Arabia where certain social networking sites are banned, not just the content. The situation may not be better in democratic countries either. India, which claims to be the largest democracy in the world ranks 140 in the 2019 Press Freedom Index, while the 1st rank goes to Norway and the last couple of places go to North Korea (179) and Turkmenistan (180) respectively. The censorship on the press is an extension on the restrictions placed upon other media too. Wiki leaks and Snowden incidents proved global surveillance by the different parties. If the government plays a crucial role, especially, in the non-democratic countries, it is the media giants who have a major stake in controlled dissemination of the contents. Whether it’s Twitter, Facebook, blogs or any other form of social media, the truth is everything is increasingly being monitored and those social networking sites delete certain information which they consider to be a threat to their existence in the largely ideologically led world.

Conclusion

So, is the media really liberated in the postmodern world? The truth that most of the media corporations are owned by or partnered with big business firms, who own a large share of the economy and dominate the market by merchandising their ideology. This leaves the idealist view of media as an open forum where everyone is granted access a

myth. As much as we would like to ignore it, what these media firms portray is bound to be influenced by the ideologies of the ones running these firms. Any Media, certainly inform and educates their users, which are their primary function, but, unfortunately, this process is drowned in deceptive techniques, fuelling the hold of the dominant class over the society. Though it is structurally egalitarian, it is through a functional process that we come across propaganda and manufactured bits of information that serve the purpose of authoritarian rulers. Essentially, media is still a weapon to spread dominant ideologies. In short, in the postmodern era, media is no more about passive consumption but about being an active harbinger of production, involved mainly in the production of ideologies. Media has the power to bring about change since every piece of information is at the easy disposal of the receiver; however, the deceptive laws and prevailing political norms still hinder such progression. Since the existing power structures continue to hold a monopoly over the society and media, media allows no scope for the response. The viewers are still at the receiving end of information, while a true revolution is in the ability to garner responses from the viewers, which involve bringing a change in the whole structure of media itself.

Notes

- 1 Petit récit, translated as little narrative or mini-narrative is a term used by Jean-François Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition*.
- 2 According to Habermas (2001), the *raison d'être* of the project of modernity was “to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic” (p. 1754). These are the essentialist structures.
- 3 The mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013, p. 39).
- 4 While the traditional morphing technique involves using computer to change one image or shape into another, deep morphing technique, as Korshunov, P., & Marcel, S. (2019) says, “seamlessly mimic facial expression of the target person and, therefore, can also be successfully used to generate convincing fake videos of people talking and moving about” p. 1.)
- 5 Metastasize is a medical term which means “spread like cancer.”
- 6 See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/18/boy-in-the-ambulance-image-emerges-syrian-child-aleppo-rubble>
- 7 See <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34141716>
- 8 See <https://www.facebook.com/Timesnow/videos/10158185736665311/?v=10158185736665311>

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Challenges of Fake News: Mis-information, Dis-information, Mal-information in an Increasingly- Networked Human World

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Abstract

The term fake news with all its related aspects has assumed a significant space for discourse in the modern day mass media and the networked world. With an enormous information overload aided by mass media and new media today, it is an appropriate time for the stakeholders to take an in-depth look into how it has made its inroad into society. Thereby being able to influence a considerable portion of the masses. A study by BBC has demonstrated how more often than not these kinds of information were circulated with a 'nationalistic fervour' for influencing more and more people. It also needs to be examined how the phenomenon has been able to project itself in stark competition with news and information. This paper attempts to study the situation prevailing in the contemporary world including India, USA, Europe and Sri Lanka with a view to examining its role in the electoral politics of these nations.

Keywords: Fake news, New media, ICT, Ethics, Fact-Checking

Introduction

The advent of the digital era supported by the internet can be likened to a situation visualized by Charles Dickens in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. The situation - "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" seems to be an apt description of the current times. Only that 'was' needs to be replaced with 'is.' Why so?

'Best of times' because the digital revolution has facilitated usage of an almost

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infinite amount of virtual space for expressing our views and opinions on anything and everything, availability of the enormous amount of information and news among others. Besides, it has also helped in rendering anyone a journalist-cum-editor-cum-publisher at the same time in contemporary times. Therefore, in the field of information generation and dissemination, it is a truly revolutionary and evolutionary development. On the other hand, there is a definite flipside to it also. That is, primarily the spread of 'fake news' or any 'un-authenticated' news or information.

With the passage of time, like other walks of life, mass communication and media, especially journalism has also undergone a sea change in all its aspects. To begin with, earlier there was a paucity of news and information. Today one is flooded with commodified news and there is an information overload. The place of human angle and efforts in journalism are being progressively replaced by robotic algorithms and artificial intelligence in serving news items to the target audience. "The commodification of journalism is a result of free publication possibilities, free distribution and data-driven personalisation that no longer respects the quality of journalism, but the effectiveness and penetration of a news article on the market. This way of thinking has embedded itself into the way news media measures success" (Palo, 2019, para. 4).

In the words of Twitter's Chief Executive Officer Jack Dorsey in Delhi (mid-November, 2018), it seems that technology has overpowered the human efforts as it is difficult to tackle this menace. The issue of 'fake news' or disinformation or misinformation whether for any sinister purpose or not has gained notoriety and is at a crucially-problematic stage. It is impacting all the stakeholders following a large-scale availability of them in their day-to-day life (Bhanj, 2018).

According to the BBC (2019), "Fake news is news or stories on the internet that are not true" (p. 5). It also says that "there are two kinds of this phenomenon: First, false stories that are deliberately published or sent around, in order to make people believe something untrue or to get lots of people to visit a website. These are deliberate lies that are put online, even though the person writing them knows that they are made up. Secondly, stories that may have some truth to them, but they're not completely accurate. This is because the people writing them – for example, journalists or bloggers – don't check all of the facts before publishing the story, or they might exaggerate some of it" (p. 6, 7, 8).

The blog 'In This Together' says that 'misinformation' means false information spread without the intent to deceive. While at the same time 'disinformation' suggests the deliberate intent to mislead. In a discussion over the BBC Sound Production's documentary titled 'The Misinformation Virus' the blogger makes this statement (IAIN, 2020).

On the other hand, Funke (2018) says that ‘misinformation’ is the word of the year (for 2018) selected by Dictionary.com. He says that ‘Dictionary.com chose the word — which it defines as “false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead” (para. 3) — amid the growing role of technology platforms in spreading fake information online. The reference also informs that for the year 2016 the word of the year was ‘post truth’ followed by ‘fake news’ in 2017 (para. 1, 2).

Further, Dictionary.com defines “disinformation” (n.d.) as “deliberately misleading or biased information: manipulated narratives or facts: propaganda” (para. 2).

So it seems all these three types of information campaigns are carried out with a deliberate agenda, which may not always be in the public good. Hence, fact-checking is required at a much higher level now than earlier.

Today all the technology giants on the internet and digital platform are being forced to leave no stones unturned for taking up urgent and deliberate steps for setting things right. Social networking sites including Facebook, WhatsApp, have been investing a lot of time and energy for training groups and communities about how to go about the process of ‘fact-checking’ for finding out which information and news are right and which are wrong. Even the search engine Google is not left behind in this direction.

“Google announced its first attempt to combat the circulation of ‘fake news’ on its search engine with new tools allowing users to report misleading or offensive content, and a pledge to improve results generated by its algorithm” (Hern, 2017, para. 1).

A full-page advertisement from Facebook in *The Assam Tribune* (December 3, 2018) made an appeal to the people for helping stop the spread of rumours and fake news on the WhatsApp platform. This is the oldest daily (both in English and vernacular) of the north-east region (NER) since 1939 based in Guwahati. Similar advertisements were released in several other dailies across the country (Mangaldas, 2017).

In this regard, it needs to be mentioned that more than a century ago, in 1914, Missouri (USA) journalist Walter Williams penned *The Journalist’s Creed*, ethical commandments that every journalist should live by (<https://www.fourthestate.org/journalists-creed/>). It claims that “accuracy and fairness are fundamental to good journalism (para. 3)” and “a journalist should write only what he holds in his heart to be true” (para. 4) and “suppression of the news, for any consideration other than the welfare of society, is indefensible” (para. 5). *The Guardian* commentary by Nadja Sayez (2018) adds, “But in a time where ‘fake news’ is at the forefront of American politics, it makes sense to look back on journalistic integrity, the history of propaganda and the future of the mass media as America gears up for the mid-term elections vote in November” (para. 4).

In the meantime, a report titled *Fake news and disinformation online* published by

European Commission (2018) said, “Online platforms and other internet services have provided new ways for people to connect, debate and to gather information. However, the spread of news intentionally misleading readers has become an increasing problem for the functioning of our democracies, affecting peoples’ understanding of reality” (p. 2). We define it as false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit,” notes the report. It means sloppy journalism, satire, lying politicians reported accurately, and hate speech will not figure under the label of disinformation, although sensationalist stories might. [Report of the group of 39 experts constituted by the European Union in March 2018 to suggest ways and means for tackling the menace of ‘fake news’ or ‘disinformation (European Commission, 2018)].

So, it can be said that ‘fake news’ is also taken in the same category with ‘misinformation or disinformation’ mostly with an intention for a specific gain for some persons or parties somewhere that remains unseen for the general audience. This happens especially at times of elections, war etc. which is why any scholar would like to call it as something more akin to ‘propaganda war’ than anything else.

O.P Rawat, the former Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) of India, retired in December 2018, in an interview with *The Hindu* (December 1, 2018) said that among the several suggestions for reforms in the regulations and guidelines by the Commission under his leadership, one of the topmost was regarding fake paid news issue (Pandey, 2018). “The second important reform pertains to the media including social media. Fake news affects voter behaviour in a big way and right now, the only mechanism is Section 126¹ and Election Commission (EC) instructions on paid news. We have to bring in a robust mechanism for conduct on social media platforms, which we are working on. We have already interacted with organizations like Google and WhatsApp”, Rawat said.

A brief history of fake news

At this point, it should be noted that the incidence of ‘fake news’ either intentional or inadvertent is not a new phenomenon. Rather it has been there for many years. Some examples are given below.

One example was a school student named Ramar Pillai from Tamil Nadu claiming that he had invented a system for converting water and bio components to pure petrol around the mid-1990s. This had driven the scientific community mad and the newspapers were having a field day reporting about it. But it later turned out to be a complete fake. As it was not the age of the internet, it did not do too much damage (Arul, 2016).

Earlier, it was on October 30 1938, that a mass panic broke out in the USA because of a 62-minute radio dramatization of “The War of the Worlds” – a story by legendary science fiction writer HG Wells. The drama chose to take the name of a small town -

Grover's Mill, that actually exists near Princeton in New Jersey as being taken over by aliens that made people believe in it. Though it was just a radio drama yet the effect was huge and people deserted their homes in search of safer places.

Then, about a century prior to this issue, *The New York Sun* published a series of reports which created a sensation of sorts that described “giant man-bats that spent their days collecting fruit and holding animated conversations; goat-like creatures with blue skin; a temple made of polished sapphire” (Standage, 2017, para. 1). These were the astonishing sights witnessed by John Herschel, an eminent British astronomer, when, in 1835, he pointed a powerful telescope “of vast dimensions” towards the Moon from an observatory in South Africa. Or that, at least, was what readers of *The Sun* were told in the reports (Standage, 2017, para. 1).

The report goes on to add that the activity pushed the circulation of the paper from around 8,000 to over 19,000 copies soon even overtaking *The Times* of London to become the world's bestselling daily newspaper. There was just one small hitch. The fantastical reports had in fact been concocted by Richard Adams Locke, *The Sun*'s editor. Herschel was conducting genuine astronomical observations in South Africa. But Locke knew it would take months for his deception to be revealed because the only means of communication with the Cape was by letter. The whole thing was a giant hoax – or, as we would say today, “fake news” (Standage, 2017, para. 2).

“Thanks to internet connectivity, fake news is again a profitable business. This flowering of fabricated stories corrodes trust in the media in general and makes it easier for unscrupulous politicians to peddle half-truths. Media organizations and technology companies are struggling to determine how best to respond. Perhaps more overt fact-checking or improved media literacy will help. But what is clear is that a mechanism that held fake news in check for nearly two centuries – the bundle of stories from an organization with a reputation to protect – no longer works. We will need to invent new ones” (Standage 2017, para 6).

The podcast from National Public Radio titled *Fake news: An origin story* (Vedantam, Cohen & Boyle, 2018) quotes Columbia University Professor Andie Tucheras saying that fake news was deeply rooted in American journalism. Further, the podcast mentioned that, ‘about fake news there was nothing new in that country and it was as old as American journalism itself’. “The first newspaper published in North America got shut down in 1690 after printing fabricated information. Nineteenth-century newspapers often didn't agree on basic facts. In covering a lurid murder in 1836, one major newspaper implicated the man who had been accused of the crime, while a competing newspaper described the accused as the victim of an intricate conspiracy” (Vedantam et al., 2018, para, 3). The podcast (<https://www.npr.org/2018/06/25/623231337/fake-news-an-origin-story>) further claims that it was no coincidence that newspapers covered stories like this one in dramatically different ways. “They both looked at the same crime and had entirely

different interpretations based on what they thought their readers would prefer to read,” said Andie Tucher, who had carried out an in-depth research into the history of fake news (Vedantam et al., 2018, para. 4).

On another front, former US Secretary of State Ms Hillary Clinton who was highly critical of Facebook for its handling of the entire issue of fake news said, “Part of our problem, those of us who are appalled by this war on truth and this fake news which is truly surrounding us these days, is that we’re not very good at combating it. It is hard because you are up against algorithms, plus all these other powerful forces, it’s really hard” (as reported by Lang, 2019, para. 2). Ms. Clinton urged the ‘social network giant’ to ‘fact check’ advertisements from politicians to curb the menace of fake news. She also argued for “a whole new agenda of legislation and regulations” (para. 3) to govern how companies like Facebook, Google exploited the data of its users. “The use of our data to manipulate us, to make money off us, is really one of the cardinal challenges that we face... This is our information, but people seem to forget that they should demand to own it,” (para. 5), Ms Clinton reiterated.

In yet another important development, on October 31, 2019, Twitter announced that ‘political advertisements will not be allowed on this platform’. To quote Dorsey again, “these online advertisements present – with ‘increasing velocities, sophistication, and overwhelming scales’ – wholly new challenges to civic discourse, such as machine learning-based optimization of messaging and micro-targeting, unchecked ‘misleading information’, and not to mention ‘Deepfakes’ (Business Today, 2019)². According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, Deepfake³ is typically used to refer to a video that has been edited using an algorithm to replace the person in the original video with someone else (especially a public figure) in a way that makes the video look authentic (“Deepfakes”, para. 1). Another way of defining it is – Deepfakes are videos that use AI technology to paste a celebrity face onto a different body (para. 3).

It can be said here that even in the ancient epic of *Mahabharata* there was an incident that may be compared with what can be called an ancient example somewhat akin to that of fake news. That is, while the war between the *Kauravas* and *Pandavas* was on in full swing, a situation emerged that the defeat of the war for the *Pandavas* who were the favorites was imminent. Then, Sri Krishna who was of much higher intelligence and diplomatic skills than any average man could even imagine devised a way to circumvent the problem. There was a great teacher of warfare and self-defense skills named *Aswatthama* who was also an important part of Kaurava’s war-management team. Unless his attention was diverted it would not be possible to strike effectively at the enemy. However, the twist was that there was an elephant with the same name that was killed in the war. And on Sri Krishn’s advice, the news was passed on to relevant quarters that Aswatthama was dead but actually it was the elephant. The second part was spoken in such a manner that the person concerned could not hear it properly and

mistook it that the human Aswatthama was killed, which had a regressive impact on the opposing camp. This finally led to an unfavorable situation for the *Kauravas*.

Things have worsened to such an extent that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was forced to undertake a detailed and extensive research study under a bigger initiative called *BBC Beyond Fake News* in 2018. It was carried out in India, Kenya and Nigeria ‘into the way ordinary citizens engaged with and spread fake news’. This is the part of the new anti-disinformation initiative programme and discussions launched in 2018 by the BBC. The intriguing finding is that in India, the majority of the people shared or spread the fake news messages with a ‘nationalistic fervour’ for the purpose of “nation-building” without going for ‘fact-checking’ (Chakrabarti, 2018).

This is happening more on the Twitter platform. The report says that emotion is the primary reason for this phenomenon. “While most discussions in the media have focused on fake news in the West, this research gives strong evidence that a serious set of problems are emerging in the rest of the world where the idea of nation-building is trumping the truth when it comes to sharing stories on social media,” Jamie Angus, Director, BBC World Service Group. The report (*Beyond Fake News*, 2018) further says, “Fake news stories are about India’s progress, Hindu power and revival of lost Hindu glory are being shared widely without any attempt at fact-checking. In sharing those messages, people feel like that they are facilitating and contributing nation-building”.

The Hindu (“Facebook deploys independent factcheckers”, 2018) reported that Facebook had decided on the deployment of independent fact-checkers for curbing the spread of fake news and disinformation ahead of the Assembly polls in Rajasthan in December 2018. The emphasis was upon stopping impugned news from becoming viral. They had deployed dedicated teams focusing on defense against election interference, protection of the community against abuse and ensuring more control on information, according to Shivnath Thukral, the Facebook’s public policy director for South Asia. “While Facebook uses machine-learning tools to tackle the reported contents, the fact-checkers will consider the regional language context for understanding the reported post,” Thukral said.

At this point, it may be worthwhile to mention two interesting aspects which may not be directly concerned with our main theme of discussion here. Yet, they are relevant in an indirect manner. First of all, the fact that some of the investors of Facebook have called on Mark Zuckerberg, the founder-cum-Chief Executive Officer to step down as Chairman’. This is following reports that the company hired a Public Relations firm to smear its critics, according to *The New York Times* (*The Hindu*, 2018, p. 10). It seems that the firm used the services of the specific PR agency to smear critics after the crisis situation that developed following revelations over Russian interference in the US Presidential polls of 2016.

Secondly, the curious relationship between the election of US President Donald Trump and Facebook never ceases to be of interest to the researchers as well as others concerned. Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (UC3M), the University of Warwick and ETH Zurich has studied the effectiveness of micro-targeted political advertising on social media such as Facebook in the United States and revealed in their findings that Trump spent an amount of US\$ 44 million with 1,75,000 different advertisements in this platform during the 2016 election campaign. This is quite high compared to US\$ 28 million spent by his rival Ms Hilary Clinton for the same purpose (“Facebook ads helped Trump,” 2018).

In another example, according to the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) statistics – BJP has been the number one advertiser on TV for the week ending November 16th (2018) across all channels, just prior to the upcoming assembly polls in several states of India (December, 2018). This party seems to be a good media manager with more than the adequate mounting of advertising and publicity campaigns whenever it was needed. The *Mera Bharat Mahan* or Shining India campaign during the earlier full-time rule of the party is a case in point. This would be of interest from a psephological as well as media research point of view to study how much of these efforts actually became successful in the end.

Here there is a reference to the discussions in the early 2010s around *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, the American TV shows that blurred the lines between ‘hard news’ and satire. The report titled *Duty, Identity, Credibility: Fake News and the Ordinary Citizen in India* (BBC, 2018) says that it was difficult to imagine at this particular moment in time, this form of ‘fake news’ was even called ‘some sort of corrective to, and substitute, for mainstream journalism’ (Chakrabarti, 2018, p. 10). This report also added that today it was fair to say that the term ‘fake news’ carried few positive associations. Also that it is an inarguably negative term, irrespective of who is using it. However, broadly speaking, all users of the terms refer to misleading or false information (p. 10).

‘Fake News’ in the Indian media

The BBC report (2018) says, “In the course of this project itself, we have found that coverage of ‘fake news’ in the Indian media over the last three odd years has grown by nearly 200 %, partly driven by the Cambridge Analytica exposes at the time of state elections. In all, there have been 47,5437 news articles online about ‘fake news’ between January 2015 and September 2018. English language media were the first to start talking about ‘fake news’ and continue to cover it most often, with the vernacular media starting to engage with the issue more of late” (p. 10). It also pointed out that in Twitter, the right-leaning groups seemed to be ‘more closely aligned’ amongst themselves than their ‘left-leaning counterparts’ thereby facilitating the fake news items to spread much faster

and wider than others.

It is interesting to note that *The Hindu* carried a front-page news story “No perfect solutions to deal with fake news” quoting the CEO and co-founder of Twitter Jack Dorsey (Bhanj, 2018). Dorsey (while addressing the students of IIT, Delhi) expressed helplessness, that the organization had no perfect solution to deal with ‘fake news’ and “misinformation” on social media in the context of the general polls for 2019 (held in April of that year). Dorsey likened the situation to that of a security issue and said that even the best lock could be broken with the added challenge of always trying to make a better lock. “We need to be 10 steps ahead of those trying to spread misinformation and need to ensure that people reading misinformation do not need to take action based on the information” (“Have to outsmart those”, 2018). Twitter was also pulled up by the Union Home Ministry of India on November 12, 2018 for being slow in taking down contents and accounts that incited communal violence (“Government warns Twitter of strict action”, 2018).

The problem has become a major concern for all quarters involved. In this regard, Facebook was all set to employ ‘independent fact-checkers’ for curbing the spread of ‘fake news’ and misinformation ahead of the Assembly polls in Rajasthan (Iqbal, 2018). This was an effort for preventing such items becoming viral.

“Through the improved artificial intelligence machines, thousands of pages, groups and accounts involved in coordinated inauthentic behavior have already been removed,” said S. Thukral, Facebook’s Public Policy Director for India and South Asia (*The Hindu*, 2018) adding that its policy was to – reduce, remove and inform.

India in January 2020 boasts of about 1156.44 million cell phone connections, according to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) Report. This is supported by 504 million ‘active internet users’, as per the report of Internet and Mobile Association of India (“India has over 500 mn active”, 2020). Continuing the discussions, the Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mr Prakash Javadekar (October, 2019) said, “Fake news is more dangerous than paid news and there is need for the government and the media to combat it jointly” (*The Hindu*, October 3, 2019). During an interaction with Press Trust of India (PTI) scribes in Delhi, the Minister reiterated the need for instituting some regulations for the Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms as several representations were received from quite a few mainstream media outlets pointing out that the OTT platforms were ‘completely unregulated’.

While admitting that there has been a spurt in news portals in India with several of them seeing a rise in the number of online subscribers, the minister called for cooperation from all quarters concerned. He said, “Fake news has to be stopped and that is our joint responsibility. It is not just the government’s job, it is everybody’s job. Those who are in

the business of genuine news, they all must strive hard (to combat it).”

In the practice of ‘citizen journalism’ also, there may be a lot of discrepancies because of difficulty in ‘fact-checking’ or cross verification of the inputs.

Ethical issues or dimensions

Furthermore, there is the question of ‘ethical’ issues in media. In India traditionally dependance is more on a ‘self-regulatory’ mechanism rather than legal imposition.

The Press Council of India is there for dealing with violations regarding the print media and the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) for films. However, for electronic media and the digital and social media (these two being comparatively newer phenomenon), a self-regulatory body – has already been formed for regulating their functioning. Hence, the challenge is to have such a body in the near future so that issues discussed here can be resolved in the future for the benefit of all the stakeholders in particular and the society in general. Of course, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) is a technical regulatory body for this medium, though a lot of associated issues are yet to be resolved in this sector.

There was a demand for including the electronic media under the purview of the PCI for many long years though this was not given a thought yet. So it is time to bring digital and social media under the purview of the PCI or maybe a new body like Media Council of India by broadening its scope of functioning. And this should be entrusted with more Constitutional and Judicial powers.

This is the Information and Communication Technology age – it is difficult to suppress any information from anyone. Yet, a lot depends on ‘how’ and for ‘which target audience’ of the society we are presenting news and information. Are we releasing only selective news items to suit certain sinister interests or neutral ones?

On the other hand, there is a blessing in disguise in the availability of so many diverse media outlets for us. That is – it has rendered it very difficult to cheat or hoodwink people by furnishing wrong or incorrect information or copying things from somewhere else. Even if it is published or uploaded, there is every possibility that someone somewhere will get to know about it and raise the issue.

Example – Israel’s bombing of Palestinian areas in 2006 when a ‘doctored’ photograph by a Reuters photojournalist had to be withdrawn after a blogger had pointed out its fake nature. The photographer admitted that it was retouched up to 30 % and this was a common practice among photojournalists⁴.

Responding to the grave emerging situation, several organizations are coming forward

to facilitate the fight against these developments. A leading one is www.hoaxslayer.com. It has been involved in debunking email and social media hoaxes, thwarting internet scammers, combating spam etc. More importantly, it is also educating web users about email, social media and internet security issues. There is also the www.boomlive.in which declares it to be an independent digital journalism initiative with a mission to fight misinformation and make the internet safer. It claims to be the country's premier fact-checking website, committed to bring verified facts rather than opinion to the readers. Then there is www.altnews.in committed to fact-checking in a fair, transparent, non-partisan and evidence-backed manner among others.

With time, more and more intriguing and damaging information is coming out in the public domain. For example, it seems that Facebook knew about the potentially-malicious Russian activities in 2014, long before they became public. This was revealed by a British MP in November 2018 following a Parliamentary hearing where international lawmakers grilled the company ("FB knew about malicious," 2018). This was revealed by Mr Damian Collins, head of the Parliamentary enquiry team into fake news and disinformation quoting from internal Facebook emails seized from the US software company 'Six4Three' under a rarely-used Parliamentary enforcement procedure. This also informs that a Facebook engineer had notified the companies in October 2014 that Russian IP addresses were accessing 'three billion data points a day' on the network.

Now, it can be said that it is also the worst of times because technology has diluted the traditional and significant role of gatekeepers or the institution of Editors to a great extent. Otherwise, these persons would utilize their positive intervention for allowing only the authentic news items to be passed on for human consumption. But in this digital era, people have become content suppliers as well as editors without the benefit of the third party intervention or gate-keeping in the true sense. With the coming of blogs, portals, vertals etc. the issue of verifiability of a considerable portion of this numerous amount of information and news circulating around us is a major concern.

The Sri Lankan experience

Meanwhile, the spectre of fake news gripped and muddied the water during the run-up to the recent Presidential elections in Sri Lanka (November 16, 2019) as reported by *The Hindu* (November 14, 2019). The news report commented that while the campaign ended on November 13 (2019), "voters were concerned about an apparent spike in fake news on social media and its possible impact over the two days remaining for the actual polling" (Srinivasan, 2019, p. 12). The report quotes a media analyst saying that the scene was dismal because about a third of the country's 21 million population were online at present. "While a third of the population uses social media, 86 % of all households have a TV. The top three, ratings-leading private channels are openly aligned with one or the

other of the main presidential candidates,” the analyst said.

While admitting that three credible independent media monitoring services – Ethics Eye, FactCheck.lk, AFP FactCheck were actively available in the country, there was none that covered Television or Radio – both of which remained the primary sources for news and current affairs for most of the Sri Lankans.

Mahinda Deshapriya, Chairman of the Election Commission of the country addressed the media saying that this was the most partisan media behaviour he had seen in any of the country’s elections.

The report says that some of the supporters of candidates unleashed racist posts, fakes news-based attacks mostly on the usual three platforms – Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter. Some of the users and media watchers are intervening in various ways by asking how the networks allowed politicians to promote content found to be false among others. The news report also quoted the spokesman of one of the candidates as saying, “fake news is a concern for all of us, especially since campaigning ends today. Sometimes when one side peddles it, the other side is compelled to respond. It is the ruling party that must take a lead and stop it.”

So, in simple words, the threat of fake news-based media campaigning in any walk of life looms large always and needs to be tackled in an effective and decisive manner.

A potential solution

Talking of a solution to this vexed issue, one viable aspect may be – media literacy and specifically digital media literacy. In simple terms, this means the capacity building for understanding the nitty-gritty of the media as well as their contents. Such as - how are they going to affect us? Is there any hidden agenda? How to tackle it if there is any. This is another vast field of study in its own rights and needs comprehensive discussions in the future.

The question is – how to evolve a system or method for a proper and adequate gate-keeping of news and information for saving the society from the ills of misinformation or disinformation in the name of fake news in the future.

Taking into account all the relevant developments and in the face of strong criticism from many related stakeholders, Twitter has finally announced a tie-up with UNESCO to tackle the menace of fake news. This is a major damage-control exercise that is expected to offer at least a good boost to the efforts seeking a solution to the entire mess.

According to UNESCO in this regard, “Social media conglomerates are often looked upon with suspicion when it comes to the management of their platforms and

collaboration for social development. Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is a potent way to help people to critically navigate these information superhighways while enabling them to understand that they have the autonomy to choose what they do online or not” (para. 1)⁵.

The partnership facilitated updating of the Teaching and Learning with Twitter Guide during the Global MIL Week celebrations from 24-31 October 2019 with MIL as its only focus. According to Global Vice President of Public Policy, Government and Philanthropy of Twitter Colin Crowell,

“We are hopeful that this handbook will have a tangible, beneficial impact on students across the world by helping educators impart critical information and skills to younger generations about how to navigate an increasingly-complicated media environment. We deeply treasure our global partnership with UNESCO on MIL and this project benefits immeasurably from the global body’s expertise and inputs in this area. We look forward to continued discussion and collaboration with UNESCO on how MIL can be a defense against disinformation and propaganda around the world” (para. 6)⁶.

This aspect is important because MIL can be one of the convenient and effective long term options for making people aware of dangers of misinformation/disinformation and fake news. It is a good effort to see this social media platform partnering with UNESCO for such a good cause. Coming from UNESCO, it is strongly expected that this initiative will lead to an expansion of the MIL aspects to the maximum possible extent for educating the users of the social networking platforms irrespective of caste, creed, colour etc.

A few good aspects of this activity are – dealing with cyber-bullying, global citizenship education, nurturing one’s digital engagement through MIL footprints, learning activities for educators and development actors among others.

Conclusion

The issue of ‘fake news’ is one of the prime challenges the phenomena of ICT and New Media are throwing at us. With the majority of the world population going digital and everyone becoming more and more engaged citizens of an Information-cum-Cyber world, it is time to wake up to face this challenge and tackle it for all future purposes. It is a foregone conclusion that with the advent of each age in human civilization, our life is becoming far more dependent on ICT and New Media. In other words, there is no escape from it. Further, it is to be noted that no technology or tool is either good or bad in itself. But it depends upon how we – the human beings use it – whether for negative selfish purposes or for positive philanthropic purposes. Taking into account these circumstances, it is only a good idea to learn to live with these developments in

an effective and convenient manner. In this regard, we must never let the control of technology slip from our hands. On the contrary, we must keep it subservient to our interests and goals for the future.

If humankind can manage to grow a mutually-beneficial and complementary relationship with the two phenomena, the world would become a far better place to live in the future. Besides, unless there are people to utilize these platforms, ICT innovations and social networking entities, how would they survive at all. Thus, humankind needs to put up a united front to show the media its own path whenever it veers or digresses from its ideal path of development under any circumstance. This is because, in an ideal situation, the relationship between media and human beings should be mutually-beneficial and complementary. In simple words, media should strive for inculcating good taste and a positive lifestyle among the people. And the latter must also keep an eye on the functioning of media and whenever needed, must intervene to keep media's path socially-relevant, truthful, objective and socially-responsive. Only such a meaningful and symbiotic relationship can bring in an eternally-healthy environment to society.

Notes

1. Section 126 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, prohibits displaying any election matter by means, inter alia, of television or similar apparatus, during the period of 48 hours before the hour fixed for conclusion of poll in a constituency. For details of relevant portions pls. see link- <https://eci.gov.in/files/file/9509-general-election-to-17th-lok-sabha...>
2. See <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/world/twitter-to-ban-political-ads-ceo-jack-dorsey-political-message-reach-should-be-earned-not-bought/story/387599.html>
3. Merriam-Webster (n.d). *Deepfake*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/deepfake-slang-definition-examples>
4. See (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3286966,00.html>).
5. See <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-and-twitter-team-media-and-information-literacy>
6. See <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-and-twitter-team-media-and-information-literacy>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future [7th Edition]

Authors: Stanley J. Baran and Dennis K. Davis

Publisher: Cengage Learning

Year: 2014; Price: \$65.03; Pages: 408 (Paperback)

Stanley J. Baran and Dennis K. Davis are back again with their adequate and admirable work on communication theories with an extensive focus on the emergence of mass communication and its applications. Both the authors have been collaborating on media theory textbooks for over 30 years beginning with a book published in 1981 and their collaboration continues to the seventh edition of this book. Readers can perceive the imprints of the expertise of the authors in the narratives of the textbook. It provides an absolute and detailed overview of a series of mass communication theories.

Whereas the previous edition aims to address the challenges imposed by technological change and globalization, including the way in which media theory is evolving as a response to these challenges, this edition focuses on the way media affect the system of self-governance and the ability to know our world and its surroundings. The textbook features significant historical background about the discipline which makes it a notable reading for a novice to the discipline. One more bright side of the textbook is that it articulates the significant events in the development of the mass communication discipline which have remarkably contributed to the rectification of the industrial norms and standards.

Authors have considerably highlighted the most important era of media theory development i.e. the time of crisis and social turmoil, as during catastrophic events important questions about the media effects and uses were desperately sprung into the society. Reflecting on the substantial events of the twenty-first century, adequately considerable attention is devoted to the theories of media cognition and framing. Important questions concerning media and propaganda are also subtly addressed in this book.

Distinctive approach

The principal feature of this book is that it presents a comprehensive, compendious

and balanced introduction of the two broad bodies of communication theory that are dominating the field i.e. the social/behavioral theories and the cultural/critical theories. Chapters in this book deliberately discuss the strengths and limitations of these two bodies of theory. These discussions at length contain details about how these bodies have evolved in the past, how they are evolving in the present, and what new conceptions they might produce. Detailed information about these schools of thought has been emphatically represented.

Due to the contrasting nature of both the school of theories, instructors and students who want to study both types of media theories are compelled to use two or more textbooks and then they need to sort out the diverse criticisms of competing ideas offered by these books. In order to solve this issue (which is solved to a considerable extent), authors have systematically explained the valid differences between these theories in this book. It makes this textbook a combined information hub for both the school of thought.

Extensive historical insight

This book establishes a strong grounding about the historical development of the discipline. It also traces the history of theory in an understandable, straightforward and comprehensive manner. Significant historical events such as the broadcast of *War of the Worlds* on radio, the debate between Edward R. Murrow and Joseph McCarthy on television during the cold war and many more are explained in a very deliberate and interesting manner. This assists the reader to understand the importance of these events in the development of significant mass communication theories.

Another salient feature of this edition is that it unfolds the history of the theory in a fascinating manner. The authors have identified three trends in theory development. The first trend is the mass society and propaganda theory trend which was dominant from the 1920s until the 1940s. It gradually gave way to the media effects theory trend, a trend that dominated media research from the 1950s until the 1980s when it began to be challenged by the critical cultural theory trend. All three trends are discussed in such a way that it instigates a sense of curiosity in the reader. Extensive historical insight into the discipline makes the reader comfortable with the contemporary scenarios in industry and the academics both.

Instilling critical thinking

The authors want to make the reader be aware of how the radical changes in media that took place in the past are related to the changes taking place now. To achieve this they have included various pedagogical devices in the textbook. These devices are designed to encourage critical thinking in the reader by instigating reasoning aptitude. These devices include ‘Learning Objectives’ at the starting of each chapter to guide the reader

about the theme of the chapter and a section named as ‘Critical Thinking Questions’ at the end of each chapter to encourage the reader to think skeptically about the theories discussed throughout the chapter.

Besides these, ‘Thinking about Theory’ boxes is another device included in the chapters that discuss how a theorist addressed an issue and tried to resolve it, these boxes also highlight and criticize important, issue-related examples of the application of media theory. These devices do have an enormous impact on the reader to think about the theories they are exploring in the textbook and develop their own thinking about relatable issues.

Philosophical approach

This textbook has a relatively straightforward philosophical approach towards the study of media theory. Readers need these theories to understand the role of media for them as individuals and as a guide for the development of media industries for our society at large. Changes in media have always posed challenges but have also created opportunities. Readers can be benefited by recognizing these opportunities in utilizing them.

As a conclusive remark, this textbook delivers a historically based, absolute, authoritative introduction to the mass communication theory. With the help of graphics, images and other material authors have tried to illustrate the key theories interactively. These materials make an enduring impression of important events in the reader’s mind. This book discusses how each body of theory contributes to our understanding of media and human development, the use of media by audiences, the role of media in society, and finally the links between media and culture at large.

The book ends with a deliberation of how media theory is evolving to meet contemporary challenges, especially those posed by the new interactive digital technologies. It also discusses various strengths and limitations of both social/behavioral and critical/cultural theory. According to the authors, it is easy to learn theories when they are examined with circumstantial information about the motives of the theorists and the problems and issues they want to address through these theories. This textbook can be considered as important reading for those who want to pursue careers as communication scholars as it helps the reader to gain an understanding of media in this technologically advanced era.

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The War and Media

Author: Suman Kumar Kasturi

Publisher: Black Prints, New Delhi

Year: 2019; Price: 1595 INR; Pages: xix +242.

Ever since the advent of the modern mass media, war news assumed a lot of significance. Though governments were very sensitive and determined to ensure that media should not divulge the matters relating to the movements or the strengths and weaknesses of the army, media always evinced interest to give ample coverage to war. Being a young Air Warrior, fascinated by the slogan “Hate war, if you can prevent it”, and a Doctorate in Mass communication as well as a journalist, the author’s life experiences motivated and provided to him all experiential and intellectual strength to write this book. This in-depth and comprehensive work is divided into nine chapters spread into five parts, which are thematically interlinked with each other.

In the Introduction to War and Media, the author describes the six phases of warfare, media’s over enthusiasm in reporting conflicts, and propaganda as a form of communication, covering even the recent episode of Indian Air Force Wing Commander Abhinandan which took place after the Pulwama terrorist attack.

The first part of the book starts with the first chapter, titled, “Conceptualising the War,” in which the author has gone into the roots of the war and presented a vivid picture of different types of wars with extraordinary illustrations. In the widely held nouse, a war is defined ‘*as a conflict among political groups involving resentments of substantial duration and degree*’ and in a nutshell, a war is simply referred to as a state of armed conflict between different countries or different groups within a country. Though the author maintains that wars are as old as the existence of humans, he clarifies that conflicts are not instinctive to human beings, and only became prevalent at a later stage in human history. The second chapter presents an overview of Indian warfare. Starting from the Vedic period, it delves into the war during different phases of the Indian history (Ithihasa), during the dynasties of Magadha, Shishunaga, Nanda, Mourya, Shunga and Sathavahana. In gist, it provides the glimpses of war in entire Indian history, comprehending ancient to modern times. The fundamentals of war strategies are presented in third chapter. Different types of warfare, prehistoric war stratagems, the Mahabharata strategies, including Kraunch Vyuh (Heron Formation), Garuda Vyuh (Eagle Formation), Mandala Vyuh (Galaxy Formation), Vajra Vyuh (Diamond or Thunderbolt Formation), Makara Vyuh (Chrocadile Formation), Ardha Chandra Vyuh (Half Crescent Formation), Shakat Vyuh (Cart Formation), Suchimuh Vyuh (Needle Formation), Chakra Vyuh (Wheel/Discus Formation), Padma Vyuh (Budding Lotus

Formation) and other Vyuhās (Strategies) with illustrations.

The second part of the book consists of two chapters: *History and Development of Modern Warfare*, and *Elements of Modern Warfare*. The fourth chapter describes that modern war is more than military in its operations and it came to conscript every aspect of life. Systematically it illustrates the evolution of warfare in eighteenth century, nineteenth century, and imperial warfare in India. In addition to describing the First and Second World Wars, it analyses the elements of modern war. The fifth chapter enlightens about the Nuclear, Sea and Air warfares. It enriches one's knowledge on the cold war and subsequent development's as well as the usage of different advanced weapons.

The third part of the book comprises only one chapter, *War Theories*. A theory of war is a contemplative and rational type of abstract or generalized thinking not only about the science of armed fighting, but also about the art of methods or principles of instigating armed conflicts. The causes of war, biological and social theories of war and socialist, nationalist and philosophical analyses are presented on war and its prevention.

The fourth part of the book, *War and Peace Journalism*, consist of seventh and eighth chapters, viz, *War Reporting* and *Peace Journalism*. As the author mentions, *War Reporting* is the soul of this book. War reporting is a branch of journalism that requires the journalist, commonly known as a war correspondent, to relocate to the country where a raging war or a conflict-ridden situation is imminent. This chapter analyses different facets of war reporting. The eighth chapter posits peace reporting as an important emerging branch of journalism. The aim of peace journalism is to promote peace and it delineates the role of media in conflict resolution.

The fifth part of this book is conclusion, presented in ninth chapter entitled *Beyond War*. It analyses the psychological warfare and basis for the selection of media. The author noted that all those who abhor war like several prolific authors, poets, and other learned persons have attempted in different forms to portray the subject of war in their works. Their aim is to let human kind know, that war ultimately makes either side suffer with consequences. The book concludes that a war can be prevented only with effective communication.

This book can be described as a feast to quench the intellectual thirst of a voracious reader. The language and style of presentation is lucid. It is highly useful not only to the students, research scholars and faculty members of Mass Communication, but it will also be useful to the academia in Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities as well as for general readers.

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