Chapter Eight. Research in Media
Media and its (Dis) contents

Media’s content and its various structures have been the focus of attention of researchers and social scientists. Before moving into the core of advertising research it is important to delve into the corpus of research done into mass media, its various trajectories, and then find the various trends of research in the field of advertising. Amongst the avalanche of research done in the field of mass media one can detect a discernible structure. If the entire communication process can be broken down into parts, one can detect that much of the research in the field deals with the institutions that create content, the content or the ‘text’ of the media, the various channels thorough which the content of the media is disseminated to the consumer/reader/audience, and finally the consumer/reader/the audience itself, which coincides with the communication model introduced by Harold Laswell.

Though there have been circular models well, we can detect the major components to be the same. ‘Most mass communication research has implicitly followed this model. The work on institutions and their processes, on the
produced in the communication, on the audience and how it affected clearly
derives from a process-based linear model [1].

The Source

The source of the media's message concerns the producer of text/message. And
media production is a socially interactive process carried out by establishments run
by individuals, either singly or in group within institutional, organizational,
technological, and other structural contexts. Media production is embedded within
the much larger political-economical condition. Being a social and economical
activity it operates within the context of media ownership regulations, regulated
by laws (such as those relating to defamation, pornography, indecent
representation, libel, sex and violence etc.) that accord varying degree of
operational freedom. The study of the source therefore operates at two levels: the
macro level- which concerns itself with globalization and the structure of media
ownership becoming the domain of political economy. The political economy
theory has often laid claim that media ownership impinges upon media content.
Karl Marx commented:
The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance ².

According to Marxists perspective, the content of the media will be a reflection of the political and economic ideals of the ruling class designed to create a false consciousness amongst the working class by divorcing them from their social reality. This political economy approach has elucidated on the ownership of production (mental and material), interrogating ownership patterns of media agencies, investigating concentration of media ownership, media conglomeration, and its social, economic and political implications. This approach though alarmist
at times has often concentrated on privatization of the public space and the recent
trend of media conglomerates exercising increasing control over social and cultural
events etc.

The principle concern of this approach is media plurality and diversity, and the
threat that a monopolist media poses to it. Researchers like Ben Bagdikian, have
noted with concern that, ‘no imperial ruler in the past history have multiple media
channels that included TV and satellite that can permeate entire societies with
controlled sights and sounds’\(^3\). Deregulation, privatization has resulted in
concentration of the media industries in fewer hands. Research in the field of
‘sources’ has many sponsors. Ben Bagdikian has shown the trend of concentration
of media industries. Graham Murdock noted that ‘any adequate analysis of
distribution power and the process of legitimation must necessarily include an
analysis of the mass media’\(^4\). Jurgen Habermas noted with concern the
encroachment of public sphere from an increasingly commercialized mass media
leading to shrinking of public sphere. Among the notable research done, Noam
Chomsky and Edward Hermann pointed how the very first ‘news’ filter is ‘the size,
concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass
media firms’\(^5\). The study of ‘sources’ of media’s content necessitates the
application of a wide range of analytical approaches and a research of media institution usually takes a historical approach. It also requires a study of the various social and political system within which the media institutions operate. But the importance of this approach emerges only in comparative studies, 'where shifts in national policies and support systems linked to changes in production practices'16. A political economy approach seeks to interrogate issues like concentration of media ownership; investment trends in media; the merger of entertainment and infotainment; marginalization of citizen and the emergence of the viewer/consumer etc.

At the micro level, the study of the source examines the organizational or institutional contexts in which media professional operate. Media professional function under the larger social, cultural, and political constraints and they do have relative 'everyday autonomy' which imparts them with some level of autonomy in fashioning the content of the media. So source production research may also scrutinize the interplay between the agency or creativity of media professional and the structure of constraints under which they operate. Production/source research approach helps us to understand the context of the text, for e.g., Jay Cantor in The Hollywood Television Producer: His Work and his Audience shows that the
creative potential of TV producers is often compromised by ‘the fundamental structure of American media industries rooted in capitalism, supported by advertising, organized by oligopoly, and structured as factory labour’\(^7\). E. Jensen, G. Braxton and D. Calvo showed the way ethic groups threatened boycott to exercise control over media production. In 1990, W. Boddy in his *Fifties Television: The Industry and its Critic* show the TV executives managed to secure their economic interest through legislative and judicial decision making leading to changes in production practices that in turn influenced TV aesthetics.
**Message/Content**

Content is at the heart of the relationship between those who produce media's content (the media industry) and those who consume media's content (the audience/viewer/spectator). The content has therefore been the core issue of media studies for over 70 years now. Why is content so important? Because, much of what we know of the world today is second hand information mediated through many levels. Media content shapes our perception about our world, providing us with the scripts necessary for us to negotiate everyday meaning. And media content shapes and frames our understanding of the world we live in. Even in a truly hypothetical democratic society where the media is equally distributed amongst all the stake holders, and had been fashioned out of truly autonomous efforts, media’s content will remain a matter of concern. Study of the messages concerns area like representation of race, gender, level of violence, sexual appeal, pornography in the messages, commercialism,
cultural values, genre, issues of censorship and freedom of expression, ideology and even the way messages are interpreted. Though this should essentially be a part of the feedback approach.

The unequal distribution of power in a society is reflected not in ownership patterns but in the content of the media itself. In true Derridian terms, the process of ‘othering’ the ‘Other’ is sustained through the mediated efforts of the media, where the privileged groups defines meaning and exclude the ‘Other’ permanently, creating a rigid social hierarchy. Perhaps this part of the communication process has gathered the most attention, since inquiry in the field is restricted not just to the way representation is done or meaning is embedded, but also the tools that are to be used for ‘deciphering’ and ‘deconstructing’ the content. Important contribution to the way meaning is created both in quantitative and qualitative terms, has been made by Klaus Krippendorf, Bernard Berelson, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, and Stuart Hall among others.

The postmodern approach and its newer contestations that meanings couldn’t be simply read ‘off the message’ led to the introduction of tools of structuralism and post-modernism, because they claimed to study both the observable and the latent meanings of messages. Since the postmodern approach regards the audience as
active agents in constructing meaning, then it goes hypothetically that there could be as many meaning as there are audiences. Scholars like Kitzinger and Fenton point out that the postmodern approach has in some cases undermined the research done in media text through tools like content analysis. As Kitzinger mentions:

'We said that particular images of women-bound and gagged in pornography magazines, draped over cars in advertisements, caricatured as mother-in-laws or nagging wives in sitcoms - were oppressive and downgrading. The deconstructionist insistence that texts have no inherent meanings leave us unable to make such claims'.

In 1974 Stuart Hall famously presented the encoding/decoding process whereby it was suggested that the media’s message be examine both from the production as well as the reception end. Hall’s works in the field remind us that the mass media ‘do not simply reflect ‘reality’, they are actively involved in constructing it’. And as in Derrida’s contention, the reader is an autonomous being, who can interpret a message contrary to the way expected by the producer/writer/author. Of the tools used in this approach is the content analysis which is no longer restricted to the ‘counting of phenomena’. Newer tools have developed overtime. Content analysis itself has come to be divided in two approaches- the quantitative content analysis
which has its roots in positivist social science approach and the Qualitative content approach that introduce frame analysis, semiotics, discourse analysis etc. The competence of the content analysis approach to find meaning came under pressure from various quarters who pointed out that the approach was inadequate for use in media message analysis because it broke the message in parts and refused to recognize the message as a discourse/single whole. The research approach towards media’s content concerns primarily itself with deconstructing social hierarchies and representational politics; examining differences between social reality and media representation; the way readers produce meaning from ‘text’; and meaning and text at the service of ideology.
Channels

Mediums and channels of communications have also been subjected to interrogation. The character of the medium influences the content and style of the media content. What one sees or reads or hears is ultimately decided not by the communicator but by the availability of the medium. In a more practical approach, advertisers often spend a lot of time in deciding upon the medium of their advertising campaign. Different mediums will have different uses. Different types of audience will be accessed through different mediums. A literate audience can be approached through magazines, newspapers, journals, etc. A literacy-deficit audience/readership can be accessed through the radio and TV.

Perhaps the most important research in the communication channel/medium has been done by Harold Innis who regarded communication technologies as the principle elements in the development of ancient empires. Innis’ extensive work on communication technologies implied an influential role for the medium itself. Innis put forth the view that the medium of communication laid the foundations of empires, and the degree to which they could regulate themselves.-The stone tablets
being heavier to carry allowed for greater autonomy of far flung areas within large empires, and led to the development of various strata of hierarchy. The introduction of papyrus, and paper led to well-knit empires with highly centralized modes of operations. Orders could easily be passed on from the ‘centre’ to the ‘periphery’. ‘The written record signed, sealed and swiftly transmitted was essential to military power and the extensions of empire. The rise and fall of empires was tied to their communication technology and transmission mode.

Perhaps the most well-known inquisitor of the medium part of the communication process was Marshall McLuhan, who put forth the view that the medium was the message and that mediums alter psychic environment and impose unique patterns of perceiving and thinking that controls us to an extent we scarcely suspect. He argued that the print media by privatizing the reading experience individualized the media activity; while cinema, TV, Radio and the electronic media as a whole re-introduced the collectivization of media experience, leading to a global village scenario.
The medium decided the structure of human social organization, by affording opportunities for social interaction. Marshall McLuhan also introduced the concept of the cold media and the hot media. The cooler the medium the more information must be provided by the audience. His conviction that the medium has more influence than the message itself led him to comment the now oft-quoted comment—the medium is the message. Marshall McLuhan argued that in each era the medium used to record message determines the character of that culture.
Receivers

Lastly the area of communication research has also sought to find out the receivers, the effectiveness of the media’s message and means through which meaning can be rendered extractable, to the consumer/reader/audience. The use that we make of the media and its message are of prime concerns to the media organizations. Quite early on, the advertisers, public relations professionals were interested in the ways meaning was absorbed and acted upon. Any enquiry about the efficacy of the media would involve study at the receiver’s end of the mass communication message. The sources have to know about the choices, preferences of the consumer of the messages, and the ways gratification is achieved, if at all. Herbert Blumer ‘first provided an explicit frame work in which audiences could be exemplified as a new form of collectively made possible by the conditions of modern societies’11. The media research approach can be divided into two paradigms: the Quantitative paradigm and the Qualitative paradigm.

The Quantitative paradigm introduced the concept of the ‘Effects’ and the ‘Uses and gratifications’ angle in audience’s research. Effects concerned the
consequences of media’s messages on the audiences/viewers/readers, whereas the Uses and gratification methodology sought to find out the role media played in everyday life. Since media’s messages involved finding out the efficacy of the messages and the audience’s receptivity to it, it elicited interest from the media industry, particularly the advertising and the public relations industry. Quantifiable data like TRP ratings, readership surveys collected through methodologies like experiments, surveys and questionnaires allowed the media industries to ‘tweak’ their messages to allow for greater absorption and receptivity by the audiences. On the other hand the Qualitative paradigm became interpretivist in its approach seeking to find ways audiences constructed meanings for themselves. This approach refused to look upon the audience as passive recipients of media’s messages. On the contrary, this tactic brought the audience from the periphery to the centre of media audience research methodology. It looked upon the audiences as active partners in the creation of meaning, who are ‘capable of resisting and reconstructing media texts’\(^\text{12}\). Stuart Hall highly influenced by semiotics introduced the Encoding/Decoding model whereby the message is encoded by media professional in one way but can be variously decoded by the audience, which is placed in a set of ‘cultural, economical, historical, ideological, organizational,
political and social context' and actively participates in generating meaning, which is some cases may be contrary to the intended meanings 13. The Encoding and Decoding approach led to Audience Ethnography approach, a much wider enquiry interested in examining the uses of new media technologies in a domestic setting, strongly influenced by a feminist perspective. Lastly the constructionist/discursive approach has shifted the focus from audience psychology to audience sociology.

As Perrti Alasuutari notes,

'The third generation entails a broadened framework within which one conceives of the media and media use. One doesn’t necessarily abandons ethnographic case studies of audiences or analyses of individual programmes, but the main focus is not restricted to finding about the reception or ‘reading of a programme by a particular audience. Rather the objective is to get a grasp of our contemporary ‘media culture’ particularly as it can be seen in the role of the media in everyday life both as a topic and as an activity structured by an structuring the discourses within which it must be discussed’ 14.
References:

7. Ibid pg. 65
9. Ibid Pg. 128
13. Ibid. Pg. 129