Chapter Two. Importance of Media’s Content
Media content is culturally and socially constructed and determined. And it contains clues to the makeup of the social structure. Media content shapes our understanding and perception of the reality. Media content provides us with the many scripts necessary for us to negotiate and make sense of the social contexts in which we find ourselves in our everyday lives. Media content shapes our views and opinions and attitudes about others. Graham Murdock presents a fascinating explanation of the emergence and the importance of the media in modern times. He points out that the media and its emergence is tied up with modern capital and the idea of inclusive forms of governments or representative democracies. Media and the modern means of communication were necessary accessories with which governments and business corporations could make themselves viable and secure public affirmation.

To maximize profits in the age of industrial capitalism, mass production had to match with mass consumption. Advertising agencies and the PR firms came into the fore to ‘design’ media content that would invent consumer desire and translate wishes into wants and purchases. Governments running on public opinion,
universal franchise offers and variety of political parties all competing for the same vote bank wishing to form governments had to compete aggressively for public support and try to ensure that ‘public opinion’ was reflected in their priorities. The public media thereof became the place where the competition for sales and votes were played out 3. The content or text of the media has been under scrutiny for quite some time. Denis Mc Quail points out that there have been four distinctive stages in the way media’s content has been looked upon, starting with the excesses of the Yellow journalism era: the media war between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. American intervention in Cuba was all too fresh in the beginning of the 20th century. These events coupled with advertising’s intrusion into the media, and the use of propaganda in the war efforts of the First World War led scholars to construct the media into an all-powerful and consuming entity.

McQuail points out that the period from the 1900 to 1940 was marked by an over-estimation of the powers of the media. It was supposed to be an all-powerful entity 4. But the second phase saw devaluation of the media’s role to influence decisions. Klapper found out that there was no direct relationship between ‘media stimulus and audience response’ 5. He summarized that, ‘Mass Communication [did not]
ordinarily serve as a necessary or sufficient cause of audiences effects, but rather function[ed] through a nexus of mediating factors. In the third phase, traceable from the 60s, the view of the media as a powerful social entity that could impart long lasting influence on the audiences made a comeback. It was pointed out that the research on the potency of the media was limited to measuring short term effects on individuals.

Media’s influence on society and its institutions were ignored. Lastly in the 80s, ideas of encoding and decoding was formulated which imparts substantial latitude to the media’s message. It brings down media from its pedestal and treats the audience as an important partner in the way media’s message is absorbed, consumed, and interpreted. The only common view in all these phases is that no phase has completely rejected the media’s role in imparting at least some influence. Studies in all these phases have not completely rejected the media’s role in the social state of affairs.

Denis McQuail points out no less than eight reasons why media’s content (which includes Advertisements or TV Commercials) is coming under increasing scrutiny
Advertising on the other hand, came under analysis first to find out the potential effects of advertising on people and to find out the efficaciousness of advertising messages. 'Does advertising work?' was the first research perspective into advertising. And if it does, than how much does advertising influences or persuades people to act in certain ways? The second important reason for studying advertising is to find out the ways through which appeal to the audience is made. Media's content has been subjected to scrutiny with regard to the way petition is made, emotional or otherwise. For example Applebaum & Halliburton have shown that advertising often appeals by invoking the sentiments of loving care, nostalgia, friendship and togetherness, romance, fashionability, individuality, etc. Whereas, Polly and Gallagher have reported that when advertising appeals to sexuality, fears, status, youth, it promotes pornography, anxiety, envy, social competitiveness, and disrespect for family elders respectively.

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The Internet in spite of its promises continues to be highly restricted in its reach. Its level of penetration, especially in Third world countries is abysmally low. Newspapers and magazines work within the domain of adequate literacy. Television (and by extension a TV commercial) on the other has a much wider reach and doesn’t demand literacy. TV also brings together text, photo, and moving pictures. Advertising thus is a fertile ground for studying the way this representation is done. A study of representation would involve the content of the media, its sign systems. Media content can tell us about unequal relationship of power. A substantial amount of work has been done in the way people, communities, sexual minorities, ethnic groups and races find place in the media in news, and in commentaries.

All forms of advertising be it a display Ad, a flying banner, a radio jingle or a TV commercial have one aim: transmit some information about goods commodities or services to those who would like to buy or acquire them. But the process of transmitting this information about a product, a commodity or a service isn’t as simple as it sounds. It involves study of the market conditions, demand for a
product or a commodity, the presence of other competitors, viability of the advertising scheme etc. And at another level it involves the creation of the advertising message itself that would be broadcast, or aired or printed or posted for the prospective consumer to read, hear, or see.

But advertising campaigns don’t just sell commodities they also sell images, symbols of status of affluence by associating it with the product etc. As Sut Jhally argues anthropological evidence shows that goods are simultaneously communicators (about social ideas and power) and satisfiers (of human needs)\(^\text{10}\). Material goods satisfy human needs: physical and psychological. Goods are the means through which social distinct is fashioned and perpetuated. We are known by the ‘company of things’ we keep.

Advertisements have become the way through which a given society imagines itself in its pristine form: unadulterated and perfect. Advertisements therefore become the matrices of wants and desires and their satisfaction. Advertising endows goods and commodities with symbolic meaning. As Theodore Levitt says civilization is man’s attempt to transcend his ancient animality: this includes both
art and advertising. But if goods have a symbolic meaning it is largely because advertising gives them one. Goods do not spring from the factory fully possessed of their ability to communicate. It is advertising that makes goods 'communicators'.

A commodity that fulfills a material need is transformed into a communicator of social status. And advertising is the means of creating social meaning and social status. The content of an advertisement may not fully reflect reality but neither do they present a completely fictionalized account of everyday life. Images saturated advertisements can be a happy hunting ground for those looking for the study of representation because the geometry of advertisements can reveal a lot about cultural politics or the 'politics of culture'. The study of advertising becomes all the more necessary 'not because what advertising people do with images, but because the practice of advertising is so deeply implicated in the general contemporary movement towards both 'marketization' of public life and the 'imagification' of the market'. The genesis of the transformation of a commodity from a satisfier of human want into a communicator of social status stems from within and is part of human nature.
‘We were not suddenly eager to unload a surplus of crappy products.

We have created a surfeit of things because we enjoy the process of getting and spending... Our love of things is the cause of the industrial revolution, not the consequence. Man (and woman) is not only homo sapiens, or homo ludens, or homo faber but also homo emptor.\(^{14}\)

Sahlins\(^ {15}\) in his book *Culture and Practical Reason* seeks to explain this desire to create differentiation through material objects as ‘bourgeoisie totemism’. Sahlins argues that just as in a savage society social differentiation was done by identifying people with certain natural species; a modern society does the same by identifying people with manufactured objects. The difference being that while in savage societies the totem is considered sacrosanct and is rarely if ever consumed. In a bourgeoisie society the act of consumption is supposed to endow the consumer with the same qualities that the consumer lacks and the object possesses. Consumption in this case, is expected to impart the qualities of the commodity directly to the consumer.
A modern society in sharp contrast actively encourages consumption and or possession of the totem. The totemic order is thus maintained by consumption and exchange of objects and commodities. Why are man-made objects better in imparting meaning then natural species? Sahlin says, ‘the systematic variation in object’s features is capable of serving, even better than the differences between natural species, as the medium of a vast and dynamic scheme of thought: because of manufactured objects many differences can be varied at once’16.

A modern society may have recovered from its beliefs in ancient totemism, but the idea that objects or ‘things’ can transmit their own qualities on to its owner still survives and forms an essential element through which advertising messages are coded and then transmitted globally. Advertising is therefore the modern art of an ancient practice of totemism albeit modified and restructured. The modern society has simply substituted manufactured objects of species, with exchange and consumption acting as the means of communication of the totemic order 17. ‘The bourgeoisie totemism in other words, is potentially more elaborate than any wild (savage) variety, not that it has been liberated from a natural-material basis, but precisely because nature has been domesticated’18. Advertising in this way fulfill
the ancient human need of appropriation and hoarding.

So a commodity or a good that has no other utility except to satisfy a human material need get transformed into something as ephemeral as idea of self-identity and creates meaning of social status. This transformation from a satisfier of material needs into a communicator of status is where advertising comes in.

The idea that goods don’t just signify utility but also symbolic codes has been attempted by Jean Baudrillard, who argues that even emotions and abstract ideas have exchange values in the age of advanced capitalism. Objects lose any real connection with their practical utility and instead come to signify an infinite number of abstract qualities. In a post-industrial world, it is imperative for advance capital to continue creating not just new objects but also new meanings for objects. It is the only way advance capitalism can sustain itself. Therefore advanced capitalism, through advertising keeps on creating symbolic meaning for objects.

This meaning is ever-changing and reaches a stage where ‘the sign no longer denotes anything at all. It approaches its true structural limit which is to refer back only to other signs’ A sign becomes a referent to another sign. In this reality
becomes the place of manipulation. The monopoly of the means of production gives way to the monopoly of the code. This whole new language of codes which means one thing in one situation and another thing in another situation is assiduously built up by the forces of advertising. Objects lose permanent meaning and it becomes virtually impossible to assign a definite connotation to an objects.
References:
3. Ibid. Pg. 41
7. Ibid. Pg 341
12. Ibid. Pg 89
16. Ibid. Pg. 178