CHAPTER III

Media Effect Studies in the West and in India: An Overview

Even before the spread of television there was serious thinking about the effects of media. From the beginning of the 20th century along with newspapers and magazines, the electronic media, viz., cinema and radio, began to exert great influence on the minds of the people. They were thought to have great power over people. Studies were conducted to find out how much influence they had on various groups of people. Later, TV appeared on the scene. TV was considered the most powerful medium not only because of the time people, especially children, spend before it but also because of its effect on the behaviour of people. It inspired a series of research on the effects of media in general and of TV in particular.

Most of the research on media effects was done in the West where the spread of media was rapid and the effect strongly felt. Mass media would, it was felt, create a mass society, and a mass culture. In the 1960’s, the Western society, especially the American, experienced a lot of violence and there prevailed a general belief that this violence was somehow related to the violence depicted on TV. Both the industry and the Government were forced to finance research projects on the effects of TV.

In India, before the arrival of TV, cinema and radio were very popular even among the villagers. Cinema was the most popular entertainment. It provided the people with escape from the drudgery of daily life and the heroes and heroines of cinema turned into legendary figures. There were not many attempts to study its effects on society. Radio was state-owned and it was development-oriented. Studies were conducted by various
agencies to assess the impact of radio on development. Though TV was introduced in view of its potential for development communication, it soon turned out to be an entertainment medium and its spread was more in cities than in villages. Though concerns have been expressed on the negative effects of TV on children and on Indian society and culture at large, research on the topic is not known to have been undertaken on a large scale. Here an attempt is made to present a brief history of media effect studies done in the West and in India.

A. Media Effect Studies in the West

In the West research studies on media effect have been varied and numerous. To trace their history the researcher follows the scheme of Denis Mcquail who distinguishes four phases in the history of media effect studies.

1. The first phase: the theory of all powerful media

This theory was in vogue from the beginning of the twentieth century until the late 1930’s. Media were credited with considerable power to shape opinion and belief, to change habits of life and mould behaviour. Such views were based not on scientific investigation but on the observation of the tremendous popularity of the media. In Europe, advertisers, war propagandists and dictatorial states were using the media to their advantage.1

Of particular significance was the propaganda carried out during the first world war through media. It was, to some extent, successful and created the impression that mass media were very powerful. The assumption

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was that cleverly designed stimuli would reach every individual member of mass society via the media, that each person would perceive it in the same manner and this would provide the same response from all. In the years after the war, there existed a general belief in the great power of mass communication. The media were thought to be able to shape public opinion and to sway masses towards almost any point of view desired by the communicator. It was later termed as the 'magic bullet theory', hypodermic needle theory, etc.  

2. The second phase: the theory of weak media

The theory of powerful media was put to test in the period beginning from the 1930's and ending by the 1960's. The series of Payne Fund Studies in the US in the early 1930s marked the beginning of this era of research. Attention was turned to the effect of persuasion through media, effect of political campaign and to the possible harmful effects of media in respect of delinquency, prejudice and aggression. As evidence and theory suggested new variables were taken into consideration. Initially researchers tried to differentiate possible effects according to social and psychological characteristics. Later, motives of the audience in attending to media were investigated.  

Most researchers of this era used an experimental social-psychological approach. It was a sort of one-directional hypodermic needle approach. It however, resulted in studies giving contradictory findings about media power. It was P. Lazarefeld and his colleagues and students who were in the forefront of this type of research. In the early 1940s they

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3 D. Mcquail, op.cit.; p. 329.
presented findings that forced researchers to reconsider the role media play in the lives of the people.


The research resulted in some kind of disillusion with the power of the media. Joseph Klapper in 1960 summarised the research findings to that date in his book 'The Effects of Mass Communication'. According to him, the socio-political effects of the media are weak; the process of selective exposure, selective perception and interpersonal influence equip audiences and their interpersonal networks with the power to determine the short-term and long-term effects.4

Joseph Klapper concluded, “Mass communication does not ordinarily serve as a necessary or sufficient cause of audience effects but rather functions through a nexus of mediating factors.”5 Media effect studies of this period thus showed that media operated within an existing social structure and that the socio-cultural factors took primacy in shaping the opinions, attitudes and behaviour of the audience.


5. Quoted in Mcquail; p. 329.
3. The Third Phase: TV - A Powerful Medium

As mentioned in the first chapter, television was introduced in the United States in the 1940s and by the year 1950, 70% of households had acquired TV sets. By 1960, almost 90% of households had one or more TV sets. People were fascinated by the new medium on the one hand, but unnerved by its prospective impact, on the other. There was the widespread belief that TV was a powerful medium. Even otherwise, the interpretation that media were impotent had been called into question by some researchers. They argued that the effect-study should not be confined to short-term effects on individuals but broader social and institutional effects should be considered. All these developments led to the opening of a new phase of research which had its emphasis on the effect of TV on children.

a. Study of Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince

Major landmarks of the research of this era are mentioned here. The first research project that deserves mention is the one undertaken by Hilde Himmelweit, A.N. Oppenheim and Pamela Vince and sponsored by Nuffield Foundation at the instance of the BBC. They identified several potential effects such as displacement - the time TV viewing took away from other child-activities; programme content - TV contents' effects on children's knowledge, school performance, outlook and values; family life - how family interactive quality was affected and TV's impact on the emotional reactions of children. The researchers compared the responses of an experimental group exposed to TV with that of a control group not exposed to it. They drew a sample of 908, 10 and 11 year olds and 946, 13 and 14 year olds across four areas: London, Bristol, Portsmouth and Sunderland.
Another 376 children from Norwich were also interviewed before and after the introduction of TV in their community.

The researchers found children spending 11 to 14 hours a week viewing TV. Viewing time was inversely related to intelligence, active lifestyle and active parental modelling. TV’s impact on children’s outlooks and values was mostly marked within dramatic presentations which evoked an emotional response from them but could not be made a subject of discussion with parents or friends. There was no evidence that viewing made children more aggressive, and there was no evidence for beneficial effects either. School work of bright children was affected, so was the quality of family interaction.  

b. Study of Schram, Lyle and Parker

The trio Schram, Lyle and Parker of Standford University did a similar study in the USA. Their goals were “to understand better the conditions under which children go to TV and the conditions under which TV has an effect on them.” There were 11 studies altogether done in five different communities. The study series encompassed 5991 students, 1958 parents, hundreds of teachers and other knowledgeable persons.

The findings of these studies were parallel to that of the British study. The youngest of the American children were spending 14 hours per week viewing and sixth graders were watching TV for 28 hours a week. There were deep cuts in time spent for other leisure activities like movie-going, radio listening and playing.

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Children with more conflict in their family and peer relationships watched TV more heavily than those having little conflict. The researchers found little or no evidence of harmful behavioural effects. Children experiencing lack of love, acceptance and security were found to be withdrawn into TV viewing. Correspondingly, children with an aggressive predisposition were more likely to find, remember and carry away TV’s aggressive scenes and messages.  

**c. Study of the US Surgeon General’s Scientific Advisory Committee**

The US witnessed unprecedented violence in the 1960s which included the assassination of its great leaders John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. There was much concern on the growing violence in the society and on the alleged role TV played in inducing such violence. This situation prompted senator John O. Pastore to ask the US Surgeon General for appointing a Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behaviour.

This Committee conducted several experiments, made in-depth study and submitted its report. Surgeon General Jesse Steinfield in 1972 concluded:

> The experimental findings are weak and are not wholly consistent from one study to another. Nevertheless, they provide the suggestive evidence in favour of the interpretation that viewing violence on TV is conducive to an increase in aggressive behaviour, although, it must be emphasised that the causal sequence is very likely applicable only to some children who are predisposed in this direction and TV is only one of the many factors which in time may precede aggressive behaviour.

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7. Ibid.
d. The natural experiment conducted by Tannis M., Macbeth and her colleagues in Canada

The study was conducted in a Canadian town just before TV was introduced there. The study was repeated two years after the introduction of TV. Two other towns were also selected for comparative study, one town having only one channel, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's national channel and the other receiving in addition to CBC, all the US channels, ABC, CBS and NBC. The town that did not have TV was given the pseudonym Notel, the town having one channel was called Unitel and the third one was called Multitel.

In Phase I, Notel School children watched TV for 0 hours per week, Unitel children 23.5 hrs. and Multitel children 29.3 hrs. In Phase II the analogous figures were 20.9, 21.0 and 26.9. It was also found that the Notel children were higher in aggression than children in the other two towns after TV was introduced in Notel. TV might have broken down the social constraints that controlled children's aggression initially. 9

The study also indicated that TV viewing had some negative influence on children's creativity and imagination. 10

e. Longitudinal studies

M. Lefkowitz, L Eron, L. Walder and L.R. Huesmann launched their study in 1960 by rating 3rd grade children in Columbia county, New York for aggression. In 1970 these children then in their teens were traced and

10. Ibid., pp. 152-154.
their responses collected. 735 of the original 875 subjects had been contacted and 427 of them completed the follow-up procedures. The percentage of children who could be reinterviewed was less in the case of those who rated high in aggression. The researchers found a strong correlation between family mobility and child aggressiveness. Huesman took another longitudinal look at these subjects as 30 years olds and reported that the earlier correlation between high television viewing at age 8 and high juvenile delinquency at age 19 had become a correlation with high criminality at age 30. 11

Aletha C. Huston and John C. Wright conducted a longitudinal study from 1981 through 1983 following two age groups of children, one group 3 to 5 and the other 5 to 7. The major purposes of the study were to identify patterns in children’s television viewing and to investigate how those patterns were related to family environmental influences and to children’s cognitive skills and social behaviour.

Between ages 3 to 5, children watched an average of 19 to 20 hours of TV per week. It dropped to 15.5 hours per week by age 7, largely because children entered school. The younger children watched more child informative programmes than older children. The younger ones were also exposed to considerably more adult programmes. Children who watched a lot of TV at one age were found to be frequent viewers at later ages.

Highly educated parents enjoying high status in society and having high income watch TV less and their children also tend to be low in TV viewing. Children view most in families with parents who are less educated and having low occupational status. So also children of better educated

parents watch a good amount of educational programmes, children of less educated parents spend more time watching entertainment programmes.\textsuperscript{12}

f. Field experimental studies

Researchers have conducted a number of experimental studies to assess TV's influence on the aggressive behaviour of children. In such experiments involving television two or more groups are assigned by the researchers to a particular TV diet for some period and their behaviour is compared with that of an untreated control group that has no TV diet during the same period. Tannis M. Macbeth mentions a number of such studies like the one conducted by Steuret et al (1971) involving pre-school children, a field experiment conducted in a summer nursery school programme by Friedrich and Stein (1973), a study conducted by Feshbach and Singer (1971) in seven residential schools and institutions in the US, a study done in a minimum security penal institution for juvenile offenders in the US by Park et al (1977), and a study conducted by Leyens et al (1975) in an institution for delinquent youths.\textsuperscript{13}

The experiment conducted by Albert Bandura merits special mention. The children of the experimental group were first frustrated by being taken away from a room full of attractive toys. Then they were shown a video clipping where a man (model) shows four types of aggressive behaviour each accompanied by verbal aggression. This sequence of physically and verbally aggressive behaviour was repeated twice. Then the children were divided into three groups. There was also another control group.

\textsuperscript{12} Aletha C. Houston and John C. Wright, Television and Socialisation of Young Children, in: T.M. MacBeth op.cit.; p. 39.

\textsuperscript{13} Tamis M. MacBeth, Quasi-Experimental Research on Television and Behaviour in: Joy K. Asamen and Gorda L. Berry, op.cit.; pp. 139.
model was shown as being rewarded. The second group saw the film at the end of which the model was shown as being reprimanded. For the third group, the film ended without the model either being rewarded or punished.

Children in the model rewarded and neutral groups showed a considerable number of imitative behaviour, children in the model punished group displayed little imitation. Control group children also displayed few or none of the behaviours. The conclusion was that justified or rewarded violence had more impact on children than unjustified violence.\textsuperscript{14}

The research studies cited here are not exhaustive but indicative. These studies were premised on varied assumptions, followed different methodologies and resulted in less conclusive findings. It is evident that TV has some effect on people. But this effect cannot be explained in terms of stimulus and response; a particular TV content may not produce the same response from all the viewers. Between the stimulus and the response there are a number of intervening factors such as personality factors, family environment and other socio-cultural factors. Viewers are not to be taken as passive receivers of the TV messages. Thus the studies of this era made researchers to adopt a new and more balanced approach to media effect studies.

4. The fourth phase: Negotiated media influence

Today nobody holds that media are impotent. But the effect is contingent not so much upon the media as to the audience. The understanding today is that the audience negotiate a meaning from the media message. The new approach to media effects can be termed as 'social constructivists. As Mcquail puts it,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{14} Victor C. Strasburger, Adolescents and the Media: Medical and Psychological Impact, SAGE Publications, New Delhi, 1995; pp. 22f.
\end{quote}
In essence, this has been the development of a view of media as having their most significant effects by constructing meanings and offering these contracts in a systematic way to audiences, where they are incorporated (or not) on the basis of some form of negotiation into personal meaning structures often shaped by prior collective identifications. Media construct social formations and history by framing images of reality in a predictable and patterned way. The audience construct for themselves their own view of social reality and their place in it, in interaction with the symbolic constructions offered by the media.\textsuperscript{15}

The present study is premised on the assumption that the audiences having their own meaning structures construct meaning from the media messages which are made according to the meaning structures of the communicator.

B. Media Effect Studies in India

Systematic studies on the effect of media are quite few in India. Media effects have not been apparent on all sections of society and in all parts of the country. The illiteracy rate being very high, the influence of print media was confined to a small group of educated people. Cinema was, of course, a very popular medium and the heroes and heroines had influence not only on the imagination of people but also on their lives. Some of them played a major role in the political life of some states like Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh. But not many studies have been undertaken to scientifically assess the impact of cinema on the political, social and cultural spheres.

Radio and later television have been and still are state-controlled. They had always avowed social objectives; to act as catalysts of social change, to contribute to development, to provide education to the people.

\textsuperscript{15} D. Mcquail, \textit{op. cit.}; p. 331.
The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting put forward the following among others as objectives of public television in India: a) to act as a catalyst for social change, b) to promote national integration, c) to stimulate a scientific temper among the people, d) to disseminate the message of family planning as a means of population control and family welfare, e) to stimulate greater agricultural production by providing essential information and knowledge.\(^{16}\) Radio and TV were considered as the handmaids of development. So the effects of Radio and TV were looked at from the viewpoint of development.

In the 1980s there was an unprecedented expansion of the TV network in India, and towards the end of the decade TV broadcasts got nation-wide reach. Leaving aside the declared social objectives the national channel, Doordarshan, turned commercial. Later there was a proliferation of private TV channels and the process of commercialisation was complete.

The TV scenario in India today may not be much different from that of the USA. But scientific studies on the effect of TV on society are not undertaken on a regular and systematic basis.

1. Impact of media on society

Here attention is drawn to a few studies on the impact of print media, cinema and radio on the society especially on the rural society.

a. Study by Paul Hartmann and his colleagues in three villages of Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Kerala

The assumption of the researchers was that all communication was conditioned by the social, economic and political structures in which it

occurred. So instead of asking how the media influenced knowledge, attitudes or behaviour they asked first how Indian village society worked and then how media communication fitted into the village life. 17

The researchers found that those who attended more to media had been more open to information. Those with more media exposure were found to have more liberal attitudes to women. This indicated that mass media had the ability “to influence social attitudes and thereby to promote, or at least reinforce social change”.18

Newspapers were found to be more effective in information transmission and fostering of attitudes of social and political significance. Radio had more reach but was used mainly as an entertainment medium but played some role in creating wider social awareness. Film was found to be predominantly a youth medium and primarily viewed as entertainment.19

b. IIMC Studies on Radio

The Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi, carried out some studies on radio listening in rural areas. The studies revealed that radio was an important source of information for opinion leaders in rural areas. It was found out that radio played an important role in the national elections of 1971, it had a negative effect in 1977 elections because of its loss of credibility during the Emergency. Radio was also found to be effective in persuading villagers to adopt high yielding varieties of seeds

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18. Ibid., p. 22.
19. Ibid., pp. 25ff.
and fertilizers. The high yielding varieties were popularly known as 'radio-seeds' and the fertilizer-mix as 'radio-khad'.

c. Study of Joseph Velacherry in Kerala

The study was an attempt to understand the impact of mass media on the society of Kerala. It focussed on the social, economic, political and cultural effects and influences of exposure to mass media such as radio, newspaper, films, magazines and books. The study was undertaken in 1983-84 before the arrival of TV in Kerala.

The study revealed that radio was seen mainly as an entertainment medium. The main impact of exposure to radio was the general awareness about the affairs in the state and the country. But information obtained from radio did not lead to change in attitudes or behaviour due to several economic political and cultural constraints. Newspapers not only provided information but also raised the level of awareness on social issues. Increased awareness would in due course give rise to the formation of interest groups which would exert pressure on the political system. According to Joseph Velacherry, films exerted considerable influence on attitudes and behaviour of individuals. Films mediated by several socio-cultural factors influenced the ethical values of the audience.

2 Impact of TV: Studies in India

a. Evaluation of SITE

Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) was a one year project undertaken in 1975-76 primarily to experiment with television

22. Ibid.; p. 190
through satellite communication to broadcast programmes to six rural clusters which included 2400 villages. Its objectives were to improve rural primary school education, provide teacher training, improve agriculture, health and hygiene and nutritional practices.

The social evaluation report on SITE prepared by ISRO in 1977 has this observation to make: “The observed fact that the school enrolment or the drop-out rate was not affected by the introduction of TV in schools proves that these factors depend primarily on social and economic parameters and not on the attractiveness or otherwise of the school curriculum; the children do not have an independent choice in the matter. So, unless circumstances are changed so that parents do not have to make use of child labour for economic reasons, TV in schools is not going to affect enrolment or drop-out rate.” In other areas like agriculture and health there was some gain that was not statistically significant.

b. Study of ‘Hum Log’ by A. Singhal and E.M. Rogers

Hum Log was a Hindi soap opera broadcast by Doordarshan for 17 months in 1984-85, having a total of 156 episodes, each lasting 22 minutes. The stated objectives of the programme was to promote pro-development social values while providing entertainment.

Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers conducted a study on the impact of this serial. They content-analysed 149 episodes out of the total 156 episodes, conducted an audience survey of 1170 adult respondents residing in three areas of Delhi, Pune and Madras, analysed 500 viewers’

24. Ibid.
25. Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers, op. cit.; pp. 93ff.
letters out of about 400,000 letters written to Doordarshan and to the actors and actresses of the programme.

The researchers found out that the main reason for the immense popularity of the serial was that most of the viewers could identify themselves with its characters. But it could not achieve much by way of influencing the attitudes of the viewers. One of the original objectives of the serial was to put across the family planning message to the audience. But the family planning content had to be diluted on the adverse reactions of the viewers. As mentioned earlier, Bhagwanti was conceived as a negative role model for gender equality, but viewers especially, women viewers who identified themselves with this traditionally-minded character viewed her as a positive role model. One can conclude that the serial was only reinforcing the traditional values of the society.

c. Study of T. Mrunalini on the impact of TV on early childhood behaviour

The study was conducted among children of two to eight year olds in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. The emphasis of the study was on the affective dimension. The objectives of the study were 1) to find out the child's preferences for various TV programmes, 2) to know the impact of the economic background and the development of affective behaviour due to viewing of TV, 3) to know the impact of TV on a child's behaviour in the school environment, 4) to find out the effect of TV on emotional behaviour of children.

The researchers arrived at the following conclusions: 1) Viewing TV varies with the age group of the child. As they grow up they watch more TV. 2) Most of the children prefer viewing programmes with fighting scenes. Children imitate these fighting models and are attracted to the destructive
behavioural patterns on TV. 3) Children with middle class background are found to be light viewers when compared with the children of higher and lower economic background. 4) There is an observed negative impact on children attributable to TV viewing. 5) The trend of negative impact is established from the age of 4 years and reaches the peak by the age of 6 years. 26

d. The impact of TV advertising on children

This study was conducted by Namita Unnikrishnan and Shailaja Bajpai in Delhi in 1992-93. The sample consisted of 730 children belonging to the age group of 5-15 years. The main objectives were to study the viewing habits of children and their reactions to advertising and how advertisements affected their attitudes and behaviour.

One of the findings was that children lacking in parental care are more affected by TV. 27 Another finding was that 65 per cent of the children in the 8-15 years age group feel they needed the products they saw on TV. 28

e. Study of J. Velacherry on the impact of TV on Kerala culture

In a research project which this researcher was associated with, Joseph Velacherry who made a study of the impact of media in Kerala, undertook another study in 1996 on the impact of TV. He revisited the three areas, viz. a village near Kozhikode, a village near Thiruvalla and

28. Ibid., p. 334.
Aluva, a town in central Kerala which were the units of his earlier study in 1983 and tried to understand the influence of TV on the life and culture of the people. He included in this study three other urban areas - Kozhikode, Kochi and Kottayam - to make the sample more representative.

The influence of TV advertisements, of violence and sexuality depicted on TV, the influence of TV on socialisation and on religion and moral values were the topics of enquiry.

The respondents generally expressed anxiety over the influence of TV on the life and culture of society; especially, with regard to advertisements, sex, violence and consumerism. But in real life, the influence of TV was found to be less significant. It seemed that people were taking defensive measures against the not so wholesome influence of TV.29

The research studies conducted both in the West and in India do not conclusively prove that media have direct and definite influence on individuals and on society and its culture. That does not mean that they are powerless. The studies perhaps draw one's attention to the intervening factors that condition the media effect.