CHAPTER IV

Theoretical Perspectives on Media Effect

The assumption behind this study is that the effect of media on children is mediated by the family which is the chief socialising agency. This calls for a reflection on how people perceive media reality, how their cognitive structure which conditions perception develops and how the cognitive structure is related to the social structure. Thus the theoretical perspective has got three strands: one strand of mass communication theory, another of learning theory and a third of social theory.

A. Mass Communication Theory

As pointed out in the previous chapter, in the first half of the 20th century media were considered as very powerful and it was thought no one could be outside its all-pervading influence. Of all the mass media, TV was the most powerful which, it seemed, would have overriding control over human minds. Michael Novak put the effect of television in these words:

Television is a moulder of the soul’s geography. It builds up incrementally a psychic structure of expectations. It does so in much the same way that school lessons slowly, over the years, tutor the unformed mind and teach it how to think.¹

TV was viewed as one of the chief socialising agents and it appeared that it would replace traditional socialising agents like the family and the school. George Comstock wrote: “Television has become an unavoidable and unremitting factor in shaping what we are and what we will become”.²

² Ibid.
In the beginning all attention was turned on to the media, to the communicators, to be precise. It was thought that any one could bring people to his view-point by communicating through the media. Audiences were considered as a mass of passive receivers.

This view was the result of the apparent success of war-time propaganda through the media. The recent research has demonstrated that media audience are not passive but active interpreters of media texts. The meaning of a media text is something that active audience construct rather than something that is prefabricated by media producers.  

1. Encoding and decoding

A media text is a message constructed according to certain codes. A message is a meaning that has been coded. Meaning is not transferable; it can only be evoked. It is coded using certain conventional signs which are capable of evoking the meaning in the receivers.

The receivers or the audience in turn decode the message and understand the meaning. The audience are active interpreters and they may not always take in the meaning intended by the communicator or media producer. Different audiences have different backgrounds and defining experiences. It is likely that they interpret the same media text differently. So we can say that a media text is polysemic.  

It was semiologists who emphasized the power of encoded text. According to them the communicator chooses certain signs to encode a definite meaning. The receivers who decode the text are bound to accept

4. Ibid.
that meaning. Communicators can encode messages for ideological and institutional purposes and manipulate media to that end. This theory credits media with immense power which they may not, in fact, possess.

'Reception Analysts', following Stuart Hall, challenged the basic principles of semiology which presumed that meanings were produced according to the choices made by the encoder. They held that receivers were not obliged to accept the messages as intended by the encoder. For Hall, a TV programme is a meaningful discourse encoded according to the meaning structure of media producers but decoded according to the different meaning structures and frameworks of knowledge of differently situated audiences.

Does it mean that the meaning as decoded and understood by the receivers bears no correspondence with the meaning as intended and encoded by the communicators? Though each receiver constructs meaning from the media text all receivers generally construct the same meaning from the same text when they share a common culture. They, then, share a similar set of construction tools and processes for interpreting the signs. Culture could be viewed as a system of signs which bind people into a cognitive community with a shared world view. Communication is possible only when the communicators and the receivers share the same semiotic resources. When the receivers share the culture of the communicators and read the media text in accordance with the code the communicators have employed they get the intended meaning.

Every media text will have a preferred meaning, a meaning intended by the communicator. It will also have in-built guidelines for interpretation

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5. *Denis Mcquail, op cit.; p. 53.*
by the receivers. The audience may read the preferred meaning or may not. They can always negotiate a meaning. For they approach the text with the 'meaning structures' or the 'cognitive structures' which may be traced back to their cognitive deposits or experiences.

2. Audience - Producers of meaning

It may be assumed that each viewer constructs meaning from a TV text. That need not be the one the TV programme producer intended. In support of this assumption two research findings may be pointed out.

One is the analysis of the British television magazine programme 'Nationwide' by David Morley (1980). He found that the economic issues discussed in the programme were interpreted differently by managers and workers. The bank managers whom Morley interviewed read the preferred meaning. The style of presentation of the issue was a perfect fit with the common sense view of the bank managers. On the other hand, the group of trade unionists he interviewed saw the economic coverage as entirely favouring the management. At the same time, younger management trainees also saw the coverage as ideological but found it as favouring as the unions. He concludes,

These examples of the totally contradictory readings of the same programme item, made by managers and trade unionists do provide us with the clearest examples of the way in which the 'meaning' of a programme or 'message' depends upon the interpretive code which the audience brings to the decoding situation.

The second is the study of 'Hum Log' a soap opera broadcast by Indian National Television channel, 'Doordarshan' in 1984-85. The serial

8 Denis Mcquail, op.cit.; p. 54.
9 David Morley, Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies, Routlege, London, 1992; p. 112
was intended to convey pro-social messages to the audience along with entertainment. Bhagwanti, a woman character was conceived as a negative role model for gender equality. But according to a survey conducted in 1987, 80% of the women viewers interviewed, considered Bhagwanti as a positive role model. The researchers concluded that the perception of women viewers suggested that modelling effects were mediated by the viewers’ prior attitudes and experiences.\(^\text{10}\)

To conclude, media texts are open and polysemic and hence the audience construct meaning in the context of their own cognitive structures.

B. Cognitive Structure and Piaget’s Theory of the Origin of Intelligence in the Child

The expressions such as ‘different backgrounds and defining experiences’, ‘different meaning structures and frameworks of knowledge’, ‘interpretive code which the audience brings to the decoding situation’, ‘viewers’ prior attitudes and experiences’ point to a mental structure in the audience which conditions their reading of the media text. This mental or cognitive structure makes the audience disposed to interpret the message in a particular way.

How this cognitive structure develops and operates is discussed in this section. Here the researcher closely follows Jean Piaget’s theory of the origin of intelligence in the child. Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist and educationist was one of the foremost thinkers of the 20th century. His research centred on human cognition - the process of understanding and

thought. Piaget envisioned the human mind as active and creative. He believed that people had considerable ability to shape their social world.\textsuperscript{11}

1. Cognitive Structure

According to Piaget, structure is fundamental to all living organisms. Every living being constitutes a totality which tends to conserve itself. It presents an organised structure, that is to say, constitutes a system of interdependent relationships which works to conserve its definite structure. It will always assimilate to itself the external elements it needs. But in this process it will not lose its structure. It always reacts to the actions of the environment according to that structure and in the last analysis tends to impose on the whole universe a form of equilibrium dependent on that organisation.\textsuperscript{12}

Intellectual organisation is the extension of biological organisation. As on the biological plane, on the intellectual plane assimilation and organisation go together. It is not possible to consider organised form as being anterior to assimilation or assimilation as being anterior to organisation.

Assimilatory activity engenders an elementary schema and then due to this nascent organisation assimilatory activity becomes possible. The schemata thus constituted accommodate themselves to external reality to the extent that they try to assimilate it and so become progressively differentiated. "Thus on the psychological as well as on the biological plane, the schematism of the organisation is inseparable from an assimilatory and accommodating activity, whose functioning alone explains the development of successive structures."\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} ibid., p. 389.
A schema is the potential to act in a certain way. For example, the grasping schema refers to the general ability to grasp things. The grasping schema can be considered as the cognitive structure that makes all acts of grasping possible. Schema is an element in the organism’s cognitive structure. The number of schemata available to an organism at any given time constitutes that organism’s cognitive structure. How an organism interacts with its environment will depend on the kind of cognitive structure it is having at the time.\(^{14}\)

The cognitive structures provide a framework for experience, that is, they determine what can be responded to and how it can be responded to. In this sense the cognitive structures are projected onto the physical environment and thus create it. In this way environment is constructed by the cognitive structure. It determines what aspects of the environment can even ‘exist’ for the organism.\(^{15}\)

2. Assimilation - Accommodation

The intelligence of children develops by a process of assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the process by which an organism responds to its environment in accordance with its cognitive structure. The cognitive structure sets bounds on what can be assimilated by the organism. On the other hand, cognitive structure is modified, expanded and differentiated with experience. Here the organism adjusts itself to assimilate the new element in its environment. This process is called accommodation.

Every experience a person has involves both assimilation and accommodation. Events for which schemata are already available are readily

\(^{14}\) B.R. Hergenhahn and Mathew H. Olson, op cit., p. 278.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
assimilated, but events for which the organism has no existing schemata necessitate accommodation. Assimilation roughly corresponds to knowing, accommodation can roughly be equated with learning.\(^{16}\)

When a person interacts with his environment, he sizes it up, evaluates it. There is a judgement involved in this act. And "to judge is not necessarily to identify as has sometimes been said, but it is to assimilate, that is to say to incorporate a new datum in an earlier schema, in an already elaborated schema of implications."\(^ {17}\) With repetitive assimilations the schema itself gets generalised. To the extent the new object resembles the old one, there is recognition and to the extend that it differs from it, there is generalisation of the schema and accommodation.\(^{18}\)

Thus, with experience the person goes on elaborating his schema. The schemata are created as needs and situations occur. Consequently, they partly depend on experience. On the other hand experience alone does not account for the differentiation of schemata since through their very coordinations the schemata are capable of multiplications.\(^ {19}\)

As this process progresses the schemata of assimilation increasingly become objective. "Now not only is this progress of assimilation correlative to that of accommodation, but also it makes possible the gradual objectification of intelligence itself."\(^ {20}\)

A crucial point to note is that the elaboration of schemata continue to reach a point where further elaboration is not very necessary, in ordinary circumstances, for a person to deal with his environment. As a person

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Jean Piaget, op. cit.; p. 410.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid; p. 146

\(^{20}\) Ibid; p. 413.
matures the cognitive structure tends to get solidified. It does not mean that there is no accommodation thereafter, but it becomes less necessary. "It should be clear, however, that early experiences tend to involve more accommodation than later experience because more and more of what is experienced will correspond to existing cognitive structures making substantial accommodation less necessary as the individual matures." 

According to Piaget, the intellectual apparatus of a child is fully developed by the time it reaches the age of 14 or 15. By this time his or her cognitive structure is in place. The person assimilates new datum of experience into the now developed cognitive structure. Experiences far removed from the cognitive structure are likely to be rejected, that is, not to be accommodated. He will read the media text and construct meaning from it in accordance with his cognitive structure. He is likely to reject media messages that do not agree with his cognitive structure which gets more and more solidified as he matures.

C. The Social Matrix of Cognitive Structure

A child interacting with the environment develops its cognitive structure. Its environment plays a major role in the formation of the cognitive structure. More than the physical environment, it is the social environment that has definite influence on this process, as Piaget wrote:

The human being is immersed right from birth in a social environment which affects him just as much as his physical environment. Society even more, in a sense than the physical environment, changes the very structure of the individual, because it not only compels him to recognise facts, but also provides him with a ready-made system of signs which modify his thought; it presents him with new values and it imposes on him an infinite series of obligations.22

21. B.R. Hergenhahn and Mathew H. Olson, op.cit.; p. 279
It is the social environment that moulds the cognitive structure of a person. Cognitive structure can be considered as the microcosm of the macrocosmic social structure.

Emile Durkheim would go one step further and say that cognitive structure is only another aspect of social structure. The first logical categories were social categories. It is because men lived in groups and thought of themselves as groups that they formed categories of thought. 23

Whether the cognitive structure of individuals is of social origin is not our prime concern here. But one can say that social structure is the matrix of cognitive structure. Children appropriate the social structure to themselves through the process of socialisation. Before going into this process, the working of the social structure itself has to be examined.

1. Social structure

Individuals follow certain norms in social life. Without these social norms social life is not possible. These are supra-individual norms to which individuals orient their conduct. Since the majority of persons in a social group follow these norms, their behaviour takes on a definite pattern. Thus these norms engender legitimate social order. According to Max Weber, an order acquires legitimacy to the extent that at least some actors believe themselves duty-bound, emotionally compelled or morally committed to follow the norms or rules of the social group. 24

As the members of a social group habitually follow certain norms and consider them as binding on them, those norms get institutionalised.

They become cultural standards against which the actions of the members are measured or compared. When most of the members pursue these institutionalised norms or value standards, there will be social order. For example, a father who values the well-being of his children beyond all else will realise this value in specific acts by adhering to norms of child-rearing prevalent in that particular culture.25

According to Talcott Parsons, the problem of order and of social structure focuses on the integration of the motivation of individuals with the normative cultural standards which integrate the social system. These standards are patterns of value-orientation and as such are a particularly crucial part of the cultural tradition of the social system.26

When individuals interact in a social system they orient their action to the common standards. These standards are, in fact, inherent in the interaction situation and provide stability for interaction. Such standards make communication possible by presenting the persons involved with the same interpretive code.

One’s orientation to a value standard may be due to various reasons. It may be an attitude of expediency at one pole, where conformity or non-conformity is a function of the instrumental interests of the actor or it may be that value standard has been internalised so that to act in conformity with it becomes a need-disposition in the actor’s own personality structure irrespective of any instrumentally significant consequence. When the actors share this value standard the social system gets stabilised.27

Parsons’s theory of value-standards as the integrating force of social system is the expansion of Max Weber’s theory of rational orientation.

25. Ibid. p. 119.
27. Ibid.
Weber speaks of two types of rational orientations. In the first instance, the individual acts in view of his own ends (zweck-rational). He has got expectations as to the behaviour of external objects and of other human individuals. Making use of these expectations as means he attains his own rationally chosen ends. In the second instance, the rational orientation is to an absolute value (wert-rational). The individual has conscious belief in the absolute value of some ethical, aesthetic or religious form of behaviour entering for its own sake and independent of any prospects of external success. Here persons regardless of possible cost of themselves act to put into practice their convictions. When action is oriented to absolute values it always involves commands or demands to the fulfilment of which the actor feels obligated.28

Absolute values are supra-individual values and are accepted as such by the members of a social group. Even when individuals act to achieve their own chosen ends they take into consideration the socially accepted norms. Based on this theory of Weber, Parsons developed his theory of social system. For Parsons,

An established state of a social system is a process of complementary interaction of two or more individual actors in which each conforms with the expectations of the other’s in such a way that alter’s reactions to ego’s actions are positive sanctions which serve to reinforce his given need-dispositions and thus to fulfil his given expectations.29

Society always maintains this complementarity of interaction. Value-standards internalised become need-dispositions in the individual. By conforming to these standards he gets personal satisfaction. It also


29. T. Parsons, Social System, op. cit.; p.204.
produces favourable reaction from others. “Therefore, conformity as a direct mode of the fulfilment of his own need-dispositions tends to coincide with conformity as a condition of eliciting the favourable and avoiding the unfavourable reactions of others.”

So, conformity with a value-orientation standard meets both these criteria; it is both a mode of fulfilment of his own need-dispositions and a condition of optimizing the reactions of other significant actors. In that case that standard is institutionalised. All the standards thus institutionalised in a society constitute the social structure.

But it does not mean that social structure is a finished product dictating the behaviour of individuals. Social structure provides conditions for the possibility of action and a guideline for action, but it is persons who produce and reproduce this structure by means of their activity. Social structure does not dictate to utterly compliant automatons, on the contrary, social structure requires intelligent agents to be realised. There is constant interplay between structure and action. Structure enables actions, actions produce and reproduce structures.

2. Process of socialisation

Socialisation is the process by which individuals internalise the value orientations and cultural patterns of a society. It enables them to effectively function in that society. Socialisation is a learning process that takes place in the interaction of the socializing agent and the socializee in complementary roles. Through this process the basic instrumental and

30. Ibid., p. 38.
31. Ibid.
expressive drives of the social system are built into the structure of individual personalities. The social structure is in a way appropriated by the individuals and made into a part of the structure of the individual personality. The value-orientations and sentiments become genuine need-dispositions of the personality.

Thus the internalised value orientations are a function of the value system of the society. Parson says, "... the combination of value orientation patterns which is acquired must, in a very important degree, be a function of the fundamental role structure and dominate values of the social system." 

Socialisation is a process of active learning, not a process of memorizing or mimicking or reproducing. Individuals must understand the values that sustain the social structure and the cultural patterns that make interaction and intercommunication possible, know how to employ them, apply them to new circumstances, alter them when situation changes and make them their own.

But the pattern of value orientations acquired in childhood becomes the core of one's personality, the basic personality structure. According to Parsons, among the learned elements of personality, the stablest and the most enduring are the major value-orientation patterns and these are laid down in childhood and are not on a large scale subject to drastic alteration during adult life. Parsons adds that the commonest apparent type of

35. Ibid, p. 227
36. Cf. Brian Fay, op cit, p. 66; see also Martin Hollis, op cit., p. 164.
37. T. Parsons, op cit., p. 208.
exception is that explained by ambivalence in an earlier orientation system. In such a case, he says, there may be dramatic changes of overt behaviours.\(^{38}\)

That means if the socialisation was not very effective in childhood and the person did not properly assimilate the value orientations of the society, he might be affected by other value orientations presented to him later, especially through mass media. It would follow that less socialised children are liable to be more affected by TV.

D. Conclusion

Audiences actively construct meaning from media texts. Each member of an audience brings his own interpretive tools to the decoding situation. These tools are provided by his cognitive structure the foundation of which is laid in early childhood. A child interacting with its environment assimilates whatever is necessary to its survival. This assimilation is done in a structured way and it generates forms which controls further assimilation. It is this assimilation-accommodation-activity which forms the cognitive structure of a person. Cognitive structure controls perception and the reading of media texts. The cognitive structure is a function of the social structure of the group a person belongs to. Cognitive structure is formed through the process in which the child internalises the major value orientation patterns of the social group. It is these value orientations that pattern the social structure. Persons internalising these value orientations and patterning their behaviour accordingly maintain the social structure.

Persons who internalise the basic value orientations of a society will have a cognitive structure patterned after its social structure and the cognitive structure ensures that they interpret the media messages in

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
accordance with the meaning structures the society maintains. So a well-socialised child is likely to reject the media messages that fall outside the purview of those meaning structures. Therefore, children from well-socialised families are likely to be less influenced by TV, as stated in the hypothesis.