MEDIA EDUCATION, REGULATION AND PUBLIC POLICY IN INDIA

Keval J. Kumar, Ph.D.
Director, Resource Centre for Media Education and Research, Pune.
kevalkumar@hotmail.com

Early this year the Government of India's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting banned the transmission of two satellite/cable television channels for a period of three months each: AXN, Sony's channel for action movies, and FTV, the fashion channel from Paris. This was perhaps the first time in the history of Indian broadcasting that a satellite channel had been banned, without any prior notice or warning, and even more surprisingly, without any public discussion of the law that the two channels had infringed. Apparently, the two channels were flouting the guidelines of the Programme Code of the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act of 1995. The Act provides detailed guidelines on obscenity and violence in programming. Sony and FTV did not challenge the ban, nor did any public interest or civil rights group. The English language media protested vehemently against the ban in their features and editorials, but the Ministry stuck to its guns. After the period of the ban expired, the two channels were promptly on the air again, back at their old game of testing the obscenity law as represented in the Programme Code.

On earlier occasions, cable operators used to be requested by State Governments or political groups or even Hindu fundamentalist groups to stop transmitting the Pakistani television channel, PTV, during times of war and conflict. Most cable operators did oblige but there were others who openly challenged the request.

India does not as yet have a media regulatory body like OfCom (Office of Communication). Each mass medium or information and communication technology (ICT) has its own regulatory authority: the press is monitored by the Press Council of India, telecommunications is regulated by TRAI (Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of India), cinema by the CBFC(Central Board for Film Certification), advertising by the ASCI (Advertising Standards Council of India), but broadcasting media, though operating under the AIR Code and the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act (1995), do not have similar regulatory or monitoring bodies. After the ban on AXN and FTV Indian broadcasters have got together to evolve a non-governmental self-regulatory mechanism.

Public Policy on Broadcasting and other Media
The Indian mass media today comprises over 300 TV channels (reaching 112 million households), 50,000 newspapers and magazines (with a readership of over 250 million), around 300 radio stations, a thousand feature films in 18 languages made every year, and a plethora of print, electronic, digital and telecommunications media. According to the latest FICCI-Price-Waterhouse Cooper Report (2007), the Indian media and entertainment industry is worth over two hundred billion dollars and is projected to grow at the rate of 18-20% per annum.

State policy on broadcasting has been witness to major changes over the last two decades. Doordarshan, the national television network with 22 channels, and All India Radio, the national radio broadcaster, are now managed by an autonomous corporation known as Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Trust). This means that it is an independent public service broadcasting service, less subject to state interference but still funded by the national exchequer. However, the Prasar Bharati rarely asserts its autonomous status and continues to function as a unit of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting

The mushrooming of private cable and satellite channels in English and the Indian languages since the 1990s has taken the whole entertainment industry by surprise. This unprecedented growth has been given a new impetus with the state authorities offering uplink facilities to both domestic and foreign networks, and even permitting domestic networks to have their own earth-stations. But most importantly, the impetus has come from digital compression and the dramatic crash of satellite costs, in the opening up of the sector to foreign direct investment (FDI) and the new opportunity of media companies to go to the public for raising capital.

The Cable Television Networks Rules (1994) and the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act (1995) were amended to Cable Television Networks (Amendment) Rules 2000. The new rules have made it mandatory for all cable operators – over 30,000 of them in the entire country – to re-transmit at least two Doordarsahan channels (the national, and metro channels) and one regional language channel in the prime band. Most cable operators gave little attention to these channels since they were free-to-air and did not fetch any revenue as the private satellite channels did. Further, cable operators were to be held responsible for programmes that were offensive as well as for any advertisements of tobacco and alcoholic beverages. Clause vii (2) of the new Rules prohibits all advertisements which promote 'directly or indirectly, production, sale or consumption of cigarettes, tobacco products, wine, alcohol, liquor or other intoxicants'. Also banned are infant milk substitutes, feeding bottles or infant foods. But cable operators ask how it is possible for them to stop overseas channels which carry such advertisements.

The amendment regulates or prohibits the transmission of any programme or channel if it is necessary to do in the interest of the 'sovereignty or integrity of India or security of India or friendly relations of Indiana with any foreign state or public order, decency or morality'. Central and state government authorities can seize equipment or prohibit any programme or channel if it is not in conformity with prescribed programme and advertising codes. The draft Broadcasting Bill (2007), revisits these codes.

The Bill proposes the setting up of a Broadcast Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI). However, the actual regulation of programme content has been left to the broadcasters themselves. Each broadcaster is required to categorize content on the basis of theme, subject matter, treatment, language and audiovisual presentation. Content will be categorized into U (Unrestricted) , U/A and A (Adult) – as is the case with content in cinema. Adult content will be scheduled only after 11.00 pm, and U/A content (for those above age 12) only after 8.00 p.m. The BRAI will oversee the work of content auditors appointed by each channel/network.

The official bans on AXN and FTV, however, are nothing in comparison with the unofficial attempts by fundamentalist groups (Hindu, Muslim and Christian) across the country to enforce their beliefs and cultural values through sheer muscle power. Such groups threaten to disrupt law and order if their demands are not met. So, rightist groups of Gujarat threaten theatre owners when they screen 'Parzania', an anti-genocide feature film set against the backdrop of communal riots in February-March 2002, or when art students of the Baroda University (in mid-2007) are rounded up and put behind bars for experimenting with religious themes in their art work.

Another area of concern is the growing popularity of social networking sites such as www.orkut.com , www.myspace.com and www.youtube.com . The user-generated content of these web portals is worrying the Indian government, intelligence services, nationalists and also civil rights groups. Separatist groups of North-East India use these portals to disseminate anti-Indian propaganda, while other groups disseminate hate-material on respected national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. Leaders of the religious right have also been targeted. In recent weeks, Shiv Sena activists have attacked cyber-cafes in a Bombay suburb and owners have been asked to stop accessing such portals, and the authorities have been urged to put a halt to these portals. The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team which has the authority to block offensive sites has been approached by the Bombay police. Complaints have also been lodged with Google, the company that operates the portal, but Google's stock response is: Orkut works on a hosted platform which allows users to create content. Google does not proactively monitor the content, unless it is flagged. Once flagged, we will review the content against the terms and conditions mentioned on the website. We will pull out the content if it violates these'. Media Education teachers in India have had to grapple with such issues.

Media Education: The Early Years
Media Education had its beginnings in India in the early 1980s. The pioneers, most of whom were part of media institutes established by the Catholic Church, were largely influenced by the efforts in Media Education in Australia and the U.K. The work of Canavan, Horsfield and Masterman was most influential. Much of the active support came from UNDA, the international association of Catholic communicators (now called SIGNIS), with headquarters in Brussels. The association is affiliated to UNESCO. So, in a way, UNESCO provided the inspiration and the support for most efforts in Media Education, especially in the developing world. (Interestingly, UNESCO has now begun talking about the need for 'media and information literacy' rather than Media Education). The MacBride Report which argued for the establishment of a new world information and communication order (NWICO) was of course a powerful influence.

But there were also 'nationalist' reasons for advocating media education during the early years of growth. In Scotland, it was the resistance to the media imperialism of England which helped a critical approach to find favour among government and school authorities. Media Education quickly became a school subject in the education system of Scotland, and teachers themselves led the movement. This was also the case in Canada. The national resistance to the media from the United States found expression in the media education

movement. Montreal and Toronto, of course, developed their own different approaches but what was common was their resistance to the media from the South. Latin American educators too had little love for the United States media. In India, it was not surprising to see that the States of the South pioneered the Indian movement in media education. What they resisted primarily was the domination of the North Indian language, Hindi, and the North Indian culture centred in Delhi and Bombay. This anti-imperialistic stance was also in some way responsible for the origins and growth of media education in Australia, the Philippines and South Africa. It appears that subject peoples and subject nations have been converted to the movement much earlier than those parts of the world that dominated the media. So, it should come as no surprise that the United States was one of the last countries to join the media education bandwagon, though it must be admitted that pioneers of media education like Edgar Dale (1940) were from the United States.

The mass media during those pioneering efforts in Media Education in India were dominated by cinema and the press, with television beaming only one channel, the government-run Doordarshan. The media were not seen as a political or moral threat; also, they could easily be controlled as exemplified by the Censor Board for films, the AIR Code for radio and television, and the Press Council of India, the regulatory body for the press. The satellite invasion of Indian television in the early 1990s challenged the government control of the media. It led to cross-border television and to multiple channels beamed from Hong Kong, Russia, London and elsewhere. Soon, Rupert Murdoch (Star Network), Ted Turner and Time-Warner (CNN, CNBC) the BBC, MTV, NBC and a host of international players firmly established their footprint across the sub-continent. ABC-Asia Pacific (from Australia), DW-TV (from Germany), TV5 and FTV (from France), CCTV (from China), and numerous American channels for kids, music, movies, travel, nature, history and lifestyle bombarded the Indian viewer. National business groups launched satellite television channels in different Indian languages across every region and state.

Political parties too followed suit, launching their own channels to propagate their own ideologies. By mid-2007, most major political parties in North and South India could boast of their own TV channels. Thus, the fundamentalist Hindu party, the BJP, the Marxists of Kerala, the DMK and AIDMK of Tamilnadu, the Congress Party, and even the Catholic Church had their own TV channels. Meanwhile, the dramatic growth of the economy, the rapid rise in literacy especially in rural areas, and the improvements in transport and other infrastructure, has given rise to what Robin Jeffrey(2000), an Australian political scientist, calls 'India's Newspaper Revolution', as also the phenomenal growth in mobile telephony (at the rate of 6.5 million cell phones sold every month), access to the internet through a network of cybercafés and 'e-choupals' and the expansion of private commercial FM radio channels, are witness to the 'communication revolution' in India (Singhal and Rogers: 2001).

Media Education in School and Out-of-School
It is only in the southern states of Kerala, Tamilnadu, and Karnataka that Media Education has become a part of the school curriculum; in states like Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra it is taught outside school hours; in most other efforts in Media Education, NGOs, Social Action Groups, some women's groups, some members of SIGNIS, have taken the lead.

Media Education kits have been put together for teachers in these states (Cf. Gonsalves: 1996; Scrampical and Joseph: 2000; Joshva and Kurian: 2005). It is unlikely that schools from other states of India will introduce courses in Media Education in the near future. At the college and university levels, there is little Media Education; the priority in most courses is to train professionals for the various media, especially television, cinema, the press and the internet. Over 60 universities and a hundred private media institutes offer professional courses in advertising, public relations, and media production to meet the needs of the phenomenal growth in television, FM radio, the press and cinema. Critical education in the media finds no place whatsoever in such professional education.

As Julian McDougall notes in his recent book *The Media Teacher's Book* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006, pp. vii-viii), 'the media learner twenty years on (after Len Masternman's *Teaching the Media* (1985)) operates within a different set of cultural and technological discourses, and equally the media teacher resides in a very different educational paradigm.' McDougall suggests that 'audience should be the starting point for Media Learning, and audience theory now includes attempts to conceptualize such notions as interactivity and new conceptions of audiences in computer gaming, for example (in which the audience member is also an active participant)'. In India, computer gaming has only now taken off as a media industry, though interactivity has spread rapidly in other media such as television and FM radio.

So, what kind of Media Education is relevant in the context of the current media scenario in India? Though there have been ample developments and growth in the 'new media' (such as the internet, mobile telephony, cable and satellite TV), the traditional media (like television, the cinema and the press) continue to dominate the Indian mediasphere. The unabashed commercialization and politicization of the various media suggests that there is urgent need for a critical evaluation of the mediasphere at all levels of public education. Brave attempts like that of the UNESCO-supported website www.thehoot.org (launched by the veteran journalist B.G. Verghese – who was a member of the MacBride Commision) is only a beginning. Voluntary groups and some committed individuals as well as organizations like SIGNIS have also made other attempts at conducting courses in Media Education outside school hours. Few schools include such courses as part of the formal school curriculum. However, a national movement in Media Education (except perhaps among Christian communities) continues to be a distant reality.

Some newspaper publishers, under the pretext of doing 'media education' have entered schools to market their products. Such is the attempt of *The Times of India*, one of the foremost national dailies,(with a circulation of over a million copies every day), to market the paper in the schools of New Delhi, Bombay, Pune and Bangalore. The experiment is termed 'Newspapers in Education' (NIE), and is taught during regular school hours, not by school teachers but by young men and women carefully recruited by the Response Department (read 'Advertising Department') of the publishing house. The newspaper is used to instruct children about history, geography, science and current affairs. Children are required to buy copies of the paper in school; copies of other papers are not available in school nor are they referred to in any way by the 'visiting' teachers. In the city of Pune, parents have protested against their children being asked to buy copies of the paper in

schools but to little effect; rival city dailies have got into the act too. They have offered to publish supplements with drawings and articles by school children, each issue of the supplement devoted to different schools. Another Times of India innovation in marketing is 'Medianet', the practice of selling editorial space in newspapers (especially in the city supplements) to Public Relations agencies.

Decline in International Interest
At the international level there has been a definite decline in interest in Media Education. As the President/Chair of the Media Education Research Section of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) from 1997 to 2006 I have sensed this decline, not only in the number of abstracts submitted to the Section over those eight years, but also in the topics and themes taken up for research by the participants. The majority of submissions continue to be from the developing world, particularly from South America and Asia. There has been a mere sprinkling of submissions from North America and Europe. The submissions – around 18 each year – have shifted their focus (and this should surprise no one) from old to new media, but more significantly, from Media Education to professional education in computing, multimedia and the internet.

At the World Summit on Media Education held in May 2000 in Toronto, over 1300 delegates participated, but it was evident even then that the numbers could not make up for the decline in the political fervour of the pioneers. One Australian pioneer frankly admitted that they had reached a point of exhaustion. The Media Education Section of the IAMCR continues to receive around 18 papers every year for its annual conference, though one must quickly admit that not all those deal directly with media education. At recent IAMCR conferences in Taiwan (2005) and Cairo (2006), for instance, most of the papers read were on the professional teaching of information technology rather than on media education.

Community-Centred Media Education
At the Toulouse Colloquy in 1990 I pleaded for an alternative definition of Media Education, stressing the need for a community-oriented approach vis a vis an individual-oriented approach. I argued that developing countries needed to develop their own approach to critical media education, in terms of their information needs, media experiences and cultural experiences. The community's local needs and available facilities had to be taken into account (Cf. Kumar: 2002).

Much of the focus in media education in India, however, continues to be on the mass media (the 'old media'). The 'new' interactive media such as satellite radio and television, computing, computer games, the internet, mobile telephony and other digital devices are rarely touched on. In Indian courses in media education, for instance, the focus so far has been on the local press, the mainstream Indian cinema, and advertising. The transnational media and the transnational elements in indigenous media are not usually discussed. The vital role of advertising and public relations in media programming also does not get any attention. Media economics is completely overlooked. Further, the stress has been largely on the 'deconstruction' of texts in the press, the cinema and television, with very little attention paid to music, telecommunications, computing and the internet. The focus will

now need to shift to national and multinational media conglomerates that are shaping the form and substance of practices and texts of the multifarious media industries.

Further, in earlier experiments a primary concern was government ownership and control over broadcasting, and the kind of effect this had on programming and policy. With the privatisation of television, radio, telecommunications and computer technologies in many Asian countries, the focus will need to be shifted to the media moghuls who have taken over international broadcasting, film production and distribution, telecommunication services, computer networks, and information databases. The covergence of the various media in recent years as well as their 'globalization' (read, multinational hegemony of a handful of media moghuls) has changed the very dynamic of each medium; this new dynamic has yet to enter media education classes. The 'new' media education in Asia will have to take these changes into serious account.

The whole approach to the teaching of media education in India needs a new radical re-thinking. New strategies need to be evolved so that a critical interpretation of the old and the new media both as technologies and as sources of information and media content become an integral part of education at all levels – school, college and university. Discrete courses in media can be taught at higher levels of education, but up to the secondary school an integrated approach works more efficiently. More importantly, such an approach at the school level, is more likely to be accepted by educational authorities as part of the training in literacy. For this, media education will have to be introduced in the schools of education where courses in educational technology are mandatory. Until then short media education courses outside school hours should be continued.

As in other countries where media education has become a national movement, the objective of the pioneers and promoters in India too has been to launch courses in as many schools and cities as possible. Further, there is little concern with the theory and research in the subject. This has meant that we have taken our cue from theorists and researchers from the developed countries. Even in countries where media education is mandatory in schools, teachers have not been too concerned about theorising or doing research. Manuals, textbooks, workbooks and media kits have proved to be a greater priority. One does not see much concern for education for citizenship and democracy. Nor is there any attempt to connect media education to 'national development'.

Going Beyond Grunwald?
We have certainly come a long way from Grunwald. The UNESCO Declaration on Media Education, by representatives of 19 nations meeting at Grunwald in1982, exaggerated the 'undoubted power of the media' and the role they could play in the process of development, and as 'instruments for the citizen's active participation in society'. It called for 'political and educational systems to recognize their obligations to promote in their citizens a critical understanding of the phenomena of communications'.
The reasons for doing Media Education today largely remain unchanged though there has of course been a huge scale change, particularly where the proliferation of media and the globalization of media content are concerned. Convergence of the various media technologies has made content available on a host of platforms; this has led to the further commercialization and politicization of the media. Control and regulation, especially of

the 'new' media has become problematic because of the global scale of access and reach. National governments would like to control and regulate them but there are few international laws that assist them. The technology for blocking content on both the old and the new media is easily available, and search engines like Google can be pressurized to toe a given line (witness the case of Google bending to the demands of the Chinese government). However, few democracies like India would like to be seen restricting the freedom of speech and expression of their citizens, even where the threat to national security and to law and order exists, as in the case of separatist movements in Kashmir and the North-East. But religious and political fundamentalist groups offer far greater threats to human rights and the freedom of the media. What role Media Education can play in this new media environment where there is the constant fear of coming under attach from these fundamentalists, is extremely limited. How to maintain this balance between the democratic freedoms and the threat to them from such pressure groups and lobbies, who unabashedly take the law into their own hands, is the vital challenge of the media educators of tomorrow. Thus the community, especially the minority and oppressed community, remains at the heart of any media education programme. For, it is the community (even the electronic community) that is the target of attack of these new terrorists. There is, therefore, the imperative need to go beyond Media Education, to mobilize forces to build up a media users' movement at the local, national and international levels to re-appropriate the media so that they serve the public interest. Media activism has thus to become an integral part of Media Education; a political project rather than just an academic or vocational course where the primary goal is the creation of 'critically autonomous' individuals.

REFERENCES

Bazalgette, Cary, Evelyne Bevort and Josianne Savino (2002): *New Directions: Media Education Worldwide*, London/Paris: BFI/Clemi/UNESCO.

Dale, Edgar (1940): *How to Read a Newspaper*, Columbus, OH: Ohio State University.

Gonsalves, Peter (1995*): Exercises in Media Education*, Bombay: Tej-Prasarini.

Kumar, Keval (2002): 'Redefining the Goals: Reflections from India' in Bazalgette et al., pp.153-156.

Jeffrey, Robin (2000): *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian Language Press 1977-99,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Kumar, Keval J (2007) *Mass Communication in India*, Bombay: Jaico Paperbacks, Revised Ed., 3rd Revised Ed. .

Kumar, Keval J (1995) *Media Education, Communications and Public Policy: An Indian Perspective*, Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House.

Masterman, Len (1985): *Teaching the Media*, London: Routlege.

McDougall, Julian (2006): *The Media Teacher's Book*, London: Hodder Arnold.

Raja, Joshva and Jerry Kurian (Eds.)(2005): *Media Education: A Guidebook for Teachers*, New Delhi: ISPCK.

Scrampical, Jacob, Jude Botelho and Ray Kancharla (Eds.)(1997): *Media Education in India: Emerging Trends and Perspectives*, New Delhi: NISCORT.

Scrampical, Jacob and Leela Joseph (2000): *Teaching Media Education*, New Delhi.

Singhal, Arvind and Everett M Rogers (2001): *India's Communication Revolution: From Bullock- Carts to Cyber- Marts*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.