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# Media: Moolah Not Morality

Mass Communication

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## ABSTRACT

*As media grows and expands in its reach, the influences generated by it have become profound. In the brave new market-driven world of media, the commoditization of media content has become a norm. And when it comes to women, the media content reveals patterns and problems that are illustrative of the media's desensitization towards issues of women in general and her projection in media in particular. The problems with the style and substance of the media relating women raises many questions about the ethical dilemmas and value systems of the society in which competitive media thrives.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Dazzling. Defiant. Devious. These are catchwords for the contemporary Media. Creeping into the vitals of human existence, it is turning out to be all-pervasive. To the extent that all predictions about its puissance are falling short of its present prowess. Contrary to McLuhan's dictum that message is the medium (McLuhan M. , 2001), today the medium is the master. Even Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* – the disease of change –could not be prevented (Tofler, 1984). No matter how we try to pace our lives, the society as a whole seems to be trapped, unable to capture the unshaped media.

The 'invincible predominance' over public opinion and psyche often displayed by media has no parallels. From Gulf to Kargil or Afghan war, and Diana, Lewinsky affair or nearer home Aarushi murder case– media has turned rapaciously calculated. That which even much touted *Soldier's Diary* or peeping-tom books like *Unlimited Access* by Gary Aldrich couldn't do. All this speaks of the possible media absurdity which is rapidly grabbing the world of opinions and ideas. However, in the process, media has ever profaned its very purpose. Not only it flunked out in its role as a catalyst for positive change, it has also resorted to means which are highly baneful for a healthy milieu in any society.

Some years back at Beijing, the fourth UN World Conference on Women adopted *A platform for Action* to force gender issues onto the global agenda. The success of the conference to a large extent was attributed to the world media. Unusually, the media for the first time exhibited an unprecedented thrust in its spot coverage, news and views alike. Analyzing the areas of dissent and controversy, and pointing around positive patches, media went all out to disseminate each and every deliberation at Beijing (Fourth UN World Conference on Women). Indian media, too, conducted itself creditably. It reported the proceedings and marked out the areas of future course of action vis-à-vis women issues, as outlined in the *Platform for Action*. Perhaps a sense of fatigue or tedium induced by the deluge of copy preceding and leading up to the Beijing event set in. Or else editors just felt that it was time to switch back to meatier and profitable pastures. Whatever the reasons, the media dried up considerably on issues relating to women and an immediate fall-out was that most of major Indian national dailies withdrew their gender pages.

**CURRENT SCENARIO**

Contemporary newspapers present a grim and dismal picture when it comes to women's issues and news. The content is either negligible or compressed and truncated to just a few columns, mostly in the inside pages. More nauseating is the growing trend in media to portray women as victims. Some recent studies of news stories show that sex and sensation is the primary motivation behind the reportage. The study entitled *A Pressing Matter,* of four main English dailies in India finds that women's issues accounted for little over two percent of the total news items in one of the dailies and even less in the other three. The 'sensational' stories relating to women, which were invariably crime stories, got between 52 and 63 percent of news coverage.

The findings are more telling in a book *Women, Democracy and the Media* (Bathla, 1998). Of the five major dailies included in the study, the books finds out only 8 out of 584 editorials (1.4 percent) were on women's issues. This speaks volumes about the media's so-called prioritization. The brass tacks is that media can only 'exploit and enlarge' the real plight of women. It's not meant for alleviating the same. The author has done empirical study of gender representation in media in an attempt to find deep socio-cultural explanations for numerical data. Establishing the integral connections between democracy and the media and demarcating a space for women within this public sphere, author draws to our notice the fallacious nature of a popular impression: that the press has played an important role in highlighting gender issues like violence and rape. In fact, author contends rather convincingly, that the national press has actively contributed towards perpetuating patriarchal cultural and political practices by "silencing" the women's movement and making its various concerns "invisible" (Book Review).

The situation all over the world is grim, in this regard. Despite the small shifts noted in some contemporary analyses, by and large media content still reflects a masculine vision of the world and of what is important. The very fundamental nature of this vision means that women's portrayal in the media will not be improved by increasing the number of women journalists, or by getting rid of the worst excesses of sexism in media content. What it actually requires is a social and political transformation, in which women's rights – and women's right to communicate – are truly understood, respected and implemented both in society at large and by the media. In effect, whether or not a 'critical mass' of women working in the media can make an imprint on media content is a secondary question to the need for wider and deeper social change (Gallagher, 2002).

**COMMODIFYING WOMEN**

Strangely enough it is media, the so-called protagonist of 'women's cause', which is brutally jettisoning the very survival of women in a society whose 'tastes' it panders and programs by commodifying none else but women! It is appalling that a reputed newspaper house like *The Time of India* (TOI) too resorts to such gimmicks to boost its sales, and perhaps its elitist image. The paper publishes a regular update on fashion and entertainment which has sneaky-coloured photographs depicting models and actresses in the barest minimum of clothing. And when they are 'dressed' it is more often than not in 'see-through' pieces. That such reading material is meant for the 'specific elite' may have many takers. But then what percentage of *TOI* readers would actually be seen in the kind of 'apparel' promoted and 'style' propagated. One fails to understand the logic behind publishing such regular stuff that passes-off in the guise of daily razzmatazz, as means for jacking up the circulation.

In a bid to be counted among the elite club, *The Asian Age,* also comes up with columns that serve as entertainment titbits about the lifestyle of the rich and the famous, the bold and the beautiful, and whose underlying theme is unquestionably 'erotica', even as it is cushioned by tags of food fads, home tips, agony aunts *et al*. The newspaper publishes denigrating and outrageous photographs even on the front-page. Its Olympics coverage was nothing short of soft-porno. No doubt, *The Asian Age* does present a wide range of news,

views and analysis. Yet, to prove itself different and to break away from the traditional staid mould, it seems to have joined the ranks of those out to legitimize the commodification of women.

**CONCLUSION**

It's all too easy to dismiss such analysis yet another instance of 'middle-class mentality and morality'. Ironically, the media, particularly the print media, is dependent on this very middle class for its survival as it forms an important constituent of any developing nation. The media does owe a responsibility to the middle-class in order to ensure its own mental health. More so for any nation whose sense and sensibility has not yet reached the pits!

The debate that how media at large portrays women is all too clear and hackneyed that it's neither worthwhile nor fruitful to go on any further. Needless to mention, the world media lives by the maxim–"where commercial success is assured, spiritual bankruptcy is ensured." The only irony is that justification, theories, arguments and propaganda are put forth in defence of the indefensible.

The alluring yet fallacious premise that the 'taste' of people has changed over a period of time is just plausible. Who builds opinions of peoples the world over, who moulds the 'taste' of public and who conditions their thinking that they begin to take a thing, wrong in principle, as irrevocable set pattern that knows no boundaries and has no religion—it's all crystal clear.

Perhaps, the votaries of all this baseless argumentation would do good to take a closer look at the powers that control the media all over the world. Commerciality not philanthropy; *moolah* not morality is what governs the world of media, whatever the frequency of its being hot-gospeller and prurient!

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