



CONVERGENCE OF MEDIA AND POWER OF AUDIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Reality shows have become so popular genre among the audience last two decades due to its interactive and participative nature. Convergence of media through internet and the gadgets like Computers, laptops, tabs and smart phones have facilitated the audience to be more active and interactive . Access to gadgets and programs of their choice have made viewers feel they have power in their hands. While the audience feel that they have power to share, vote and promote we need to ask whether this is a true power or agenda of the media and advertisers. This paper traces the genesis of concept audience power and analyses how in reality media achieves its 'agenda' by overpowering the audience in the guise of active participants. The study has used mixed methods such as observations of production process in the sets, tracking reality shows in Television and audience interactions through social media. This paper concludes with recommendations on the need for media literacy in formal and non-formal institutions to promote more informed, literate and critical viewers of Television program for a 'coscientised' society which is the true power of the audience.

Key words: reality show, media convergence, audience power

Introduction

The concept of audience keeps changing according to the changing times, development of media and growing communication technology. We are moving from the era of expansion to era of convergence where one media is being used in another media platform. Television media which came as an extension of radio and integrated other mass media finds a transformation now owing to the omnipresent internet and growing newer gadgets. Internet has become the convergent point of almost all media. Traditional mode of watching Television programs is getting eroded. Television medium which was confined to space and time goes through a new phase thanks to the services of internet and the multiple modern gadgets of communication like personal computers, laptops, tab and smart phones. This changing scenario is finding a change in the concept of audience itself.

Television Reality shows have brought new dimension to the Television viewing. Proliferation of reality shows in the last two decades have transformed Television medium which was considered as one way communication in to more a participatory and interactive medium. Internet, electronic and digital gadgets have facilitated audience participation and interaction. The Reality Television audience actively involve by selecting, using, sharing, voting and promoting programs and persons. They feel that they are in a vantage position in determining the course of the program. People feel access, facility to interact and opportunity to participate at various level have made them powerful. The question is do the audience gain the real power just because they are able to have access, select and interact with the media?

This study is aimed at tracing the evolution of the understanding of audience power and to clarify whether the audience have the true power over the media. The study has used the observatory method done in observing the production process in the studio set, watching selected shows especially Super singer both Junior and Senior and Big Boss season 1 and season 2 Telecasted in Tamil in Vijay TV and monitoring information exchanges in the you tube and social media.. The paper also has used the secondary sources by reviewing the literature relevant to interactive television, social media and the power of audience in the context of media convergence.

Television audience: *power or powerless*

Ever since the media researches began, there has been a constant debate on whether media has power over the people or the audience over the media. To put in the words of Eastman as ‘a permanent tug-of-war between the media industry seeking to manage audience behaviour and people seeking to satisfy their media needs’ (Eastman, 1988). According to Katz (1987), there is a swing in every ten years in the perception at media and audience. Review of literature reveal at least three schools of thought have contributed to the understanding of audience power : Media effect approach, Uses and Gratification approach and Cultural analysis approach. While Media effect approach was more media centric emphasising on the media power and the powerlessness of the audience and the latter two were more audience centric accentuating on the power of the audience.

Powerless audience : Media effect perspective

In the initial stages of media research there were efforts to the power of the media in relation to its audience. Theories of the media effect school such as magic bullet, hypodermic needle, bucket theory, magic multiplier and diffusion of innovation theories believed in the stimulus response approach to media –audience relationship where media was projected as the powerful stimulant having direct and immediate effect(response) on the audience and the audience as passive receivers of the message. Other theories in the same media effect school maintained that the media had impact but with the differences. Lazarfeld argued that the media did not have a powerful effect but rather had only minimal or indirect effect. Joseph Klapper’s contention was that ‘mass communication ordinarily does not serve as the sufficient cause of audience effect’ (Ciaren Mc Cullagh, 2002) but only had ‘reinforcing effect’ on the audience. Through the cultivation theory George Gerbner brought in the concept of cumulative effect of the media on the audience. Gerbner tried to prove that people who go through same media content consistently over a period of time were likely to be influenced by the content she or he had watched. The belief and the behaviour are likely to reflect the content one was exposed to. According Gerbner, *“This constant exposure to the media content cultivates specific values, beliefs, attitudes and desires in people. These newly preconceived notions shape their perception of the world and they ultimately influence how others perceive them”*(George Gerbner& Gross,1976)

Seymer Feshbach Singer (1977) reflected totally differently from the other media effect theories saying that media diffuses and purges aggressive behaviour in the audience. The disagreement among these researches may be on the level and way of effect of media had on

the audience but generally the underlined understanding was that media had the power to influence the audience.

Powerful audience –Uses and Gratification perspective

It was Uses and Gratification school of thought which turned the whole audience- media relationship topsy-turvy emphasising on the power of the audience. Proponents of Uses and Gratification theory said ‘ask not what the media do to people, ask what people do with media.(Katz,1959). According to them “ People bend the media to their needs more than the media over power them”(Katz, Gurevitch & Haas,1973). The audience don’t blindly buy what is been asked to or behave the way media wanted them to. The audience rather have the power to choose and they consciously select what to see.

Uses and Gratification approach first disclaim the position of the media effect researchers and challenged on the homogeneity of the audience assumed by the media effect approach. They defended that the audience are heterogenous and many a times this heterogeneity comes through their power to choose. McQuail explains the heterogeneity of the audience by categorising the audience in terms of time, space of using the media, also how they vary by their interest, taste and involvement.

Katz described the power of audience as people who are “*aware of their needs, evaluate various channels and content available to them, assess functional alternatives, and finally, select the media, interpersonal channel, or other activities that they believe will provide the gratification they seek, which may be in the form of selection, attention, and use*” (Katz et al., 1974). For Eisenhower active audience presupposes utility, intentionality and selectivity. The audience choose the program that has utility to them (Eiseshower Wang,1977) and reject the ones not so useful to them and they do so it consciously or intentionally. Uses and Gratification researchers believed that the people exercised their power by choosing the programs that gratified their needs and rejected one that did not gratify. .

Audience power – Cultural analysis perspective

The cultural analysts stressed upon the power of audience by their ability to choose, read and interpret a media text. While Uses and Gratification proved the heterogeneity of the audience by time, space, taste and involvement, cultural analysis researchers like Stuart Hall and Fisk argued that there is no homogenous reading of a media text. Each individual reads and

interprets in his/her own way by their ability to read and interpret in a different way. This multiplicity of reading and interpretation of the text which leads to variance in audience perception are rooted in culture one represents from. According to Fiske (1987), media material is only a raw material and the power to generate meaning and pleasure out of the raw material is in the hands of audience which he calls it as 'semiotic democracy'. (Fisk, 1987) Hence diversity is not produced by the media but rather by the audience. Fisk explains that the people develop power to construct meaning different from those proposed by the structure of domination.

Power or Pseudo power.

While confronting the media effect approach, the position of uses and gratification and cultural analysis is valid that the audience are active, selective and have the capacity to interpret is valid. However, it is important to see whether these are valid enough to prove that the audience exercise the true powers.

Capacity to select and use media alone cannot be the determining factors to decide the power of the audience. The access may be provided and uses may be facilitated by the media because of the media agenda. Moreover, we cannot claim that all individuals exercises his or her freedom to choose and use the media. Selection and use of media need not be always voluntary. Living environment may also influence one to use and follow certain channel or program. According to Katz, family members, peers and neighbours do influence the use of media. Hence continuous use of the same content or media can arise out of self motivation or through others. Self motivated goal may desire for self gratification or motivated to use certain media or content due to the pressure by the surrounding. The individual may accept due to desire for social acceptance and social participation or due to fear of being rejected. (Livingstone, 1990)

Many researchers have proved that the audience are not actively selecting all the time but keep watching what others are watching or just switch it on as a matter of habit than expressing need.

Audience participation and interaction

Audience who watch reality shows perceive power in them when they participate in programs at various level. The audience experience power when 1. They have access to use the gadgets, program or channel of their choice when they want, 2. When they participate

as a studio audience 3. They express their views through social media and internet services, 3. When they convey their liking and disliking in the social media platform and 4. When they are invited to vote and promote.

The reality show audience assume to have gained power by mere participating, voting promoting reality shows. In reality, this is a pseudo power where in the audience is made to believe that he / she has power. The viewer is in a mythical conscience (Paulo Fereire, 1974) that he or she is deciding the destiny or course of the program. Unfortunately the audience live in a 'false conscience' (Anotonio Gramsci,1971) assuming to be powerful. They are unaware that this is designed and operated according the channel's agenda which was determined long back. The 'participating' audience have not realised that the real power is not in operating remote or use smart phone to access the program any time or vote and promote the favourite participant. Unless they realise that it is not the machine of power but a hand cuff of slavery created by the media, they will remain compliant to the media agenda. The 'media agenda' (Mc Comb & Shaw,1968) is to keep them remain a loyalist to the channel, make the audience compete with each other . The more people compete and fight by writing comments or campaigning in social media in support of or in condemning, a better for the channel. Ultimately the people are converted in to a market or product and channel sells the audience to the advertisers.

Audience as power or a product

The corporate companies view audience in terms of numbers to whom their product can be marketed via Television programs. The Television channels see viewers as a commodity to be sold to advertisers and Television media mediates between the audience and the marketers. TRP and other audience measurement devices and techniques are important for the media to measure the number of people who watch. (Eunice Ivala 2007). Hence it is not it is not the product that is been sold to the audience through advertisements rather media sells the audience to the advertisers or commercial people. (Dallas Smith, Len Masterman, Ien Ang ,2006, John L. Lullivan,2012). When media sells 'time' to sponsors, it is not abstract that is being sold but the time of particular audiences (Sut Jhally,2014).

Audience as co-producers

Knowing the popularity of the Reality shows and involvement of the audience there are individuals who start independent you tube channels to comment, forecast about the

Television reality shows. Television channel does not try to stop or take to task these programs or programmers though information provided by these You tube channels are unfounded and misleading the audience. Instead, as Robin opines that the media also considers the audience as the co-programmers and co- producers. Hence whether you tube channel or comments or voting the channel is enthused to see such response. Interactivity through social media, interpersonal communication and involvement promote what any amount of advertisements cannot do.

The audience has not realized that participation is orchestrated for the commercial interests. Jean Marie McBride cites from Benedict (2013), “*broad casters have gained much information from social media data, including: responses to promotional campaign events, viewership behavior.....*”(Jean Marie McBride , 2015). Benedict also calls the audience as ‘prosumers’. While they consume the program they also promote the program out of their interest. This has been encouraged by media and the advertisers. According to Quintas-Froufe and Gonzalez –Neira, “ *the combination of social networks, second screens and TV has given rise to a new relationship between viewers and their television, and the traditional roles in the communication paradigm have been altered irrevocably*”(Quintas-Froufe and Gonzalez-Neira, 2014)

Audience the critique

The real power lies with the audience when they reach the critical reading and understanding of the dominant media, its ideologies and its media text. But in practice most of the audiences have absorbed the dominant ideologies and have developed the ‘culture of silence’, don’t question the media text. Thus they watch and react the way dominant media want them to. Stuart Hall has explained that audience respond in three ways. One, the audience do the dominant reading of the text i.e they read the way dominant media has encoded the text. Two, the audience read and interpret and negotiate in understanding the given text. This is where they bring in their familial, social and cultural experience and negotiate in generating meaning. Third, they resist, oppose and reject the dominant and hegemonic text. Moreover Fisk says that the audience bring in their own frame of reference to read and interpret. This provides the opportunity for alternative ways of understanding the media text. As the audience have the freedom to interpret the individuals have ‘opportunities to resist alter and re-appropriate’ (Radway,1984) the media text.

Though Stuart Hall and Fisk say that the audience have power to read and interpret, the question is raised from some of the same cultural analysis theoreticians that we cannot over estimate that all who watch television are capable of oppositional reading or alternative reading. Livingstone has cautioned against taking position that all alternative reading will be oppositional or radical and raises a question that how many of the viewers are capable of doing oppositional or alternative reading?(Ciaren Mc Cullagh,2002).

Livingston explains that alternative reading does not come easily .It is the exposure, ongoing critical thinking or political experience and type of education one goes through shapes up someone to do alternative reading. They should be belonging to a school which has an alternative perspective.(Livingston,1990). Hence Lewis and Ketzinger(1997) express we cannot overstate that all the audience are equally capable of alternative reading of the text. Moreover as Livingstone says alternative reading of text need not be always radical or oppositional. Hence ‘Aberrant, alternative or resistant readings’ of media material are more exceptions than a norm. As Elridge, Kitzinger and Williams (1997) put it, “most of us most of the time go along with what the media tells us to be the case”. (Ciaren Mc Cullagh,2002:167).

Thus we are taken back to the view of media effect theories on the power of media. The audience do select the channels or programs that would satisfy their need, but media understands the culture of the people, understands the collective psycho social and cultural needs of the people and addresses these needs to keep the audience as permanent market. To put it in the words of Scott J.Weiland and Kaitlyn Dunbar,(2016).*“It seems reasonable that if the producers of the reality television are attempting to meet the needs of the viewers, it may be possible that they are manipulating their programming, if their unaltered content is not meeting such needs”* .

Conclusion

Accessibility of media technology, opportunity to choose and use media and participation of ordinary people in the talent hunt, participation as studio audience, voting and deciding the winner of the contest cannot be the determinants of the power of audience. With all these ‘powers’ the viewer still may remain a slave or ‘prisoner’. The audience remain as what PauloFreire calls it a magical or mythical conscience or false consciousness(Antonio Gramsci,1971).Rather all these can be the agenda of the media to keep the audience as clients

or markets for promoting the markets. What Stuart Hall calls it as oppositional reading of the media text or Paulo Freire (2005) as critical consciousness cannot come overnight. Only through constant training of mind, exposure to critical thinking people will develop the knowledge and skill to critically analyse or critically reject the media text. When the audience of any society or culture reach such stage we may claim the audience have gained power. For this media literacy has to be integrated in all possible platforms of learning be it formal or non formal and be it religious or secular.

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