

## Media and the ‘Mediated’ Imagination

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**Abstract :** *The Paper titled ‘Media and the ‘Mediated’ Imagination’ deals with the impact of the media and its representations on our perceptions of individual and collective identities. It analyses how the media has been turned to a powerful social and political force capable of constructing personal and social imaginaries. The media today operates within hegemonic power structures and is supported by the global technology and managed by the corporate world. The paper observes that in the present globalized socio-political context, the media has fabricated newly imagined global neighbours thus distancing us from the intimate real neighbours. It has also brought in monolithic concepts of national and cultural identities. The paper also tries to see the changes that have occurred in the conception, production and reception of the mediated representations.*

**Keywords:** *global imagination, global neighbours, mediated representations, homogenization, monolithic identity*

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### I. Introduction

Today the media ‘mediates’ our imagining of the world we live in, our own place in the world, our relations to others and ultimately, this imagining shapes our private and public lives. This is skillfully done by the media through representations which can be described as “the process of producing meanings through the creation of symbolic forms and content” (Orgad 15) [1]. Within the political and hermeneutical structures of media texts, representations reproduce knowledge, ideology, and meaning. Globalization and a proliferation of new media platforms have added complexity to the issues and effects related to representation. The processes of representation in the present global media environment are implicated in complex and contested power relations over the stories told and the spectacles shown.

### II. Imagining The World And The Global Neighbours

Coming under the sway of hegemonic power structures, supported by the global technology and managed by the corporate world, the media has been turned to a powerful social and political force capable of constructing social imaginaries. And it has acquired newer ideological stances and representational tactics with regard to the construction of virtual worlds and intimacies around us. Imagination, commonly understood as a private act, is nourished by external sources that invite individuals to imagine the world in certain ways. When we look at the images, narratives, voices and information that are found in the media today, we see that these images and information invite us to think and feel about a world that is characterized by rapid processes of globalization and homogenization.

Operating within the political power structures of the global economy and international politics, the mediated representations create a representational ideology which is focused on the creation of a global imagination. The images and information we receive through the media force us to conceive of a global world through identification with the global neighbour. Naturally, we are distanced from our intimate and near neighbours. The mediated global neighbour becomes more familiar to us than our next door neighbour. The combination of global media and digital media has created new forms of “visibility” characterized by contestation. When the visibility creates new forms of “mediated intimacy at a distance” (Thompson 219) [2] the media viewers may increasingly feel that they know and can relate to far away “others”.

It is significant to note that representations of distant “others” are often “victims” who have suffered natural disasters. These representations, seen mostly in the descriptions of calamities, wars, etc. become increasingly intimate. For example, while victims of a 1755 earthquake in Lisbon were portrayed in European discourses as being “far away,” the lyrics and imagery of the 1985 “We Are the World” celebrity benefit song attempted to erase distance (and difference) by collapsing far away Africans into “ourselves” (“we are the world”) and by showing only the celebrities on camera. In a follow-up version benefiting Haitians after the 2010 earthquake, a new celebrity video empowered Haitians as agents through their inclusion in the lyrics and visual imagery. In spite of all its philanthropic and humanitarian concerns it should be observed that the distressed Haitians become a spectacle, and suffering is packaged as a commodity to be consumed. When we compare accounts of the 1775 Lisbon earthquake and contemporary ones, like the 1985 “We are the World” and its 2010 adaptation for the Haiti earthquake, we note a radical transformation in how the other is imagined and shown as

individuals in close ups making us, “God’s great big family”. Likewise, in the present media, personalization has become the central way to connect with distant others, encouraging the viewer to develop “mediated intimacy” with far away people, places and events.

### **1. Global Imagination and Monolithic Identity**

While acknowledging the potential value of this intimacy, we should also be aware of its pitfalls and threats, since it can misrepresent the identity and context of the other. This mediated intimacy should not necessarily be lamented as inauthentic or as a mere expression of narcissism. But this intimacy is very fleeting, since we are momentarily called upon to become intimate with the other, and then it’s gone, because of the way the media environment is constructed.

Another danger is related to the transformation of the polyphonic and diverse voices as a single voice and representing imaginings of the world as a monolithic, coherent identity. We are made to see ourselves as part of a nation or as part of a world; to conceive the self as unique, and at the same time as a representative site through which to understand all others. Conceived as a “symbolic space characterized by social imaginaries (carried largely in mediated representations), which people around the world share, but which they simultaneously compete and struggle over” (Orgad 46) [1], the “global imagination” becomes a site of contestation or struggle. For example, the proliferation of international news channels such as CNN, Reuters and the like has challenged the dominance of national news in representing the nation, they also invite viewers to imagine the world as a single space with a coherent identity. On the other hand, thanks to new media technology, we find a contrary trend. Minorities and disadvantaged groups are capable of having their own interventions to the existing media even though mainstream media is so hegemonic and unified. With growing access to digital formats such as YouTube videos, blogging, news comment sections, and other interactive media, individual voices have emerged to challenge stereotyped coverage of marginalized regions and peoples, fracturing the discourse of a unified world. Thus it is also a site for voicing the polyphonic, diverse voices.

### **2. Imagining the nation**

Today the media can no longer remain local/national as it has turned into a profit-based service. The media creates representations of the nation that are very different from those presented through national platforms. Valerie Alia observes that the internationalization of indigenous media audiencehood and media production have given birth to a New Media Nation (36) [3]. But it is to be observed that we tend to view internationalism as a technological more than a socio-political problem. The media barons and corporate structures cross geographic, organizational and other borders. Media conglomerates own newspapers, radio, book publishing houses, film production companies, web and internet resources, and other tools and outlets of local, regional, national, transnational and global communication. In such a scenario, the representation is to be global. In an instant-access, inter dependent world, no story is entirely self-contained. The so-called ‘national’ stories are to be international and spaces and spectacles are to be global.

So the media people have to write stories that are acceptable in many different countries and show spectacles that are relished everywhere. Consequently global and digital media create representations of the nation that are very different from those presented through national platforms. Case studies of global media coverage of riots, terrorist attacks etc. prove how they are presented as larger political and social issues, rather as global issues while they are really unique situations and happenings. Let us remember how Sept 11 attack was manipulated for safeguarding and justifying the imperial motives and how it was politicized. It was turned into a global attack and there were successive attempts to counteract terrorism at the global level. With regard to other nations, their unique problems, riots and unrest will be given a different version. In the present media environment, riots are no longer exclusive concerns of the nation, but they have international implications and impacts. In this context, is relevant to recollect how the demolition of the Babari Masjid and Gujarat riots were retold as different stories globally. Similarly, a riot or terrorist attack on Pakistan or Afghanistan today will be portrayed differently. As global and digital media contribute new perspectives to the stories told about the nation, audiences are able to see themselves differently; through such experiences, they are perhaps able to see others differently as well. “Modern technology has created of the world a small house, and human beings are locked together in the same tiny room where everyone is forced to share the consequences of one another’s action “(Merrill 3) [4].

### **3. Cultural Homogenization**

Media is the most effective tool of cultural and ideological imperialism as opposed to territorial imperialism. In *Media Ethics and Social Change*, Alia Valerie remarks, “In the name of expanding opportunity and a ‘new information universe’, the reality is that the media empires have narrowed the information universe” (70) [5]. This chauvinistic, international media universe and international social imagination bring in a lot of complex issues related to culture. Cultural homogenization and culture jamming promoted by corporate driven

media poses threats to communities and cultures that are marked by heterogeneity. Through the mediated representations homogeneity is established replacing heterogeneity. For example, Valentine's Day and New Year Celebrations are presented through global icons and symbols promoted by the media and corporate tycoons. Their marketing strategies highlight only the unified and the global. Distinct and indigenous features have no role in their marketing strategies. Even our tastes have become global. Ads celebrate only the singular and monolithic motives. Distinct and indigenous identities and intimacies are erased. Life style and culture spectacles have also become monolithic. Even the national art forms and folk art forms of different countries have been transformed into universal art.

### **III. Conclusion**

The mediated global imagination, thus has brought in new perspectives and perceptions in media and mediated representations. They have proliferated strongly into all walks of our everyday life and have influenced our understanding and experience of ourselves, others and the world. It has thoroughly deconstructed our concepts about personal and collective identities bringing in its wake a lot of cultural and political complexities. The mediated representations have also complicated the concepts about the nation. Thus the operations of the media are found to have a juggernaut impact upon all aspects of human life.

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