Leisure, learning and exclusion: Children's media encounters in India

*Indian media is booming and the industry is expected to continue growing at an average of 13.2 per cent a year until 2015, making it a 1,199-billion-rupee market. LSE's **Shakuntala Banaji** considers how the proliferating media environment impacts Indian children and their ways of learning.*

The media environment surrounding children in Bombay (currently known as Mumbai)[1] has grown breathtakingly since 1992. Several hundred national and international cable and satellite channels, broadband internet, social networking sites, MP3 players and mobile phones with cameras have entered middle-class homes. In small towns and villages the dispersal of satellite television is growing, though in remote rural areas computers remain a luxury for a tiny minority. However, the media environment of millions of children growing up in many (but not all) small towns and villages across the country remains limited: some radio or magazines, the occasional parent with a mobile phone, little access to television, rare sightings of a computer in a village school or NGO centre, no access to the internet or to cinema, and no chance to discuss or experiment with media making—access gaps that are frequently overlooked in writings about children in the Global South.

In this context of highly uneven access to media and other resources[2], discourses about children and media have remained monolithic and stagnant, falling into one of two paradigms. The first is a 'hypodermic' effects paradigm, which focuses on content in a negative or, occasionally, a celebratory manner. The protectionist stance that sees 'western' media as dangerous and having negative effects on 'Indian' ethics and culture is one example. The second paradigm ignores content and views all developments in Indian media and communications – particularly those associated with the ICT sector – as beneficial because they make India (apparently) more 'modern' and 'competitive', closer to so-called 'developed' nations. While a host of other positions do exist, these are rarely articulated.

Fieldwork

My fieldwork calls on the in-depth testimonies of children aged 10-14, and discussions with parents and teachers in large cities (for instance Bombay), in villages (for instance Barsu), in the Himalayas, and small towns (for instance Palakkad) in Kerala over the past 10 years. It also uses intermittent observations, textual analysis and secondary analysis of data released by large international organisations such as the ILO and World Bank, or NGOs working with children and media to contextualise findings. It aims to disentangle some of the rhetoric about values, global skills and ethnic identity from the realities of young people's media, family and social experiences[3].

Broad findings

The middle- and lower-middle-class children interviewed in Bombay have the most diverse experience of media. Most of them look up sporting websites and play games or conduct school research on Disney and Fox Kids; some have occasional unfettered access to the internet while parents are at work. Computers, usually situated in communal spaces, are seen as necessary by parents for skilling children to the modern economy. In the last four years, and in more affluent groups, children also possess mobile phones with internet connections paid for by parents, or hand-me-down phones with pay-as-you-go SIM cards. Television remains, by and large, and with the exception of trips to the cinema, the favourite form of entertainment.

Everyone in the sample agreed that they love to watch television, particularly unsupervised. The kinds of programmes watched vary from Hindi films, chat-shows, comedy programmes and serials (with quite grown-up themes) to films in English, and dubbed American, Canadian, Japanese and European programmes. *Spongebob Squarepants*, *Peppa Pig*, *Dora the Explorer* and the Indian version of *Sesame Street* appeal to younger siblings, while *Hannah Montana*, *The Wizards of Waverly Place* and *The Sweet Life on Deck* are favourites with older girls. The boys obviously engage with MTV and Japanese and Indonesian manga-style programmes dubbed in Hindi, but claim to prefer to watch cricket and films. While the children in Bombay talk knowledgably about aspects of teenage culture (both western and Indian) and speak in a sophisticated manner about issues as diverse as Facebook, relationships, sex, potential careers, bullying, advertising, fashion, national identity and adolescent crushes, television was thought to be generally viewed by their parents as a waste of time or dangerous.

Media and learning: The adults' view

My discussions with parents confirm that television was variously seen to compete with doing housework, looking after younger siblings and playing outdoors. But the most overwhelming complaint was that television made children lazy about their 'studies'. Given that many middle-class Bombay children are enrolled in competitive – and sometimes unaffordable – tuition outside school and subjected to dull, conformist school environments for much of the day, the colonisation of their television-viewing time by further study is the single largest bone of contention. The parents' and teachers' focus on rote learning of facts and skills for apparent future economic gain and their sense of media as 'insidious' curtails much learning. In fact, the concept of children having leisure time in which to relax is viewed by lower-middle-class adults in particular as something 'negative' to be discouraged.

Childhood innocence and adult protection? Rhetorics and realities

Meanwhile, in the village and small town environments sampled where films and the internet were notably absent, a depressing paradox with regard to sexuality and youth representation became apparent. Though it was clear that girls were being prepared for marriage from the age of 10 by being made to do huge amounts of domestic and other labour and told they would be married, and while many were actually married and removed from school by the age of 14 or 15, the overwhelming majority of them had no experience of sex education. They also had little chance to experience representations of relationships and sexuality on screen. When asked questions in this regard, understandably, they evinced embarrassment and some fear, some explaining that they were 'not yet married', as if that was the point at which they would learn (suddenly and painfully) about even mild physical contact with a partner. Given that many of them had never been to the cinema or used the internet, and that some lived in such poverty that the mid-day meal provided by the school was their only source of nourishment during the day, occasional unsupervised television viewing was highly valued. They enjoyed looking at pictures in occasional vernacular magazines or listening to songs on the radio. However, learning – ironically about literacy, 'good' behaviour and life-skills – was linked more to television than to school. Many children referred to television's potential for teaching 'different languages' and 'about nature' as one pedagogic justification they used to persuade parents to allow them to watch non-vernacular content.

Future directions for research and policy

This brief description of environments and findings leaves room for wider debates about social class, gender reform, education, family life, pedagogy and media in India. It suggests that media education, for most adults, is a low priority, while media censorship, which for many campaigners and academics is such a high priority, might do with far less attention. This snapshot also points to painful gaps and absences in the lives (and in writing about the lives) of children in the Global South. They are frequently homogenised into the figure of the urban, media-savvy or media-endangered child-consumer or treated as victim-statistics. This emphasises the need for including the detailed views and concerns of children from different classes and locations in any debates about the spread of mass media and media literacy across South Asia, Latin America and Africa.

About the Author

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Footnotes

[1] At the author's request, Mumbai is referred to as Bombay in this post.

[2] For a more nuanced discussion of all these geographical locations and different classes of youth within them, see Banaji, S. (Forthcoming: Summer 2012). A Tale of Three Worlds: Young People, Media and Class in India. In Hensler, C. (ed) *Generation X Goes Global*. New York/London/New Delhi: Routledge.

[3] More detailed discussions of these findings and further evidence from the data appear in a chapter in Banaji, S. (2010). Adverts make me want to break the television: Children's responses to the audiovisual media environment in India**.** In Banaji, S. (ed.) *South Asian Media Cultures: Audiences, Representations, Contexts*. London: Anthem Press.