

IN SEARCH OF VALUES IN THE MEDIA: CAN COMMERCIAL AND SOCIAL INTER- ESTS BE BALANCED?

The mass media have come a long way in recent decades. Satellites, cable television, optical fibres and networking capabilities have exploded. The media industry — with a specialized cadre of producers, directors, writers, actors, technicians, financiers, lawyers and scholars—has come of age. The production qualities of today's media programmes are superb, the drama is more intense, and the laugh lines pack more punch. And, why not? Enormous profits are for grabs.

However, along the way, something seems to have gotten lost. Social and moral values are fast fading, and depictions of gratuitous sex and overt violence on the media are on the rise. Not just in the U.S. or in India, but worldwide. Words which the media characters freely use today, might have been unthinkable just about a decade ago. Sexual innuendo is a hot media currency.

Why is "Married With Children", a T.V. sitcom (situation comedy), one of the longest running sitcoms on U.S. television? It features a carping, unsuccessful couple and their witless, oversexed teenagers. Why is the mass media stooping to such low levels? Because advertisers and programme sponsors want to attract the largest possible audience. That's how their advertised products get the most mileage. Programmers, dependent on the support of advertisers and sponsors, feel compelled to produce programmes that people will watch. Is media reflecting social trends? Or is it shaping them? Or is there an inseparable symbiotic relationship between the two?

An average U.S. household consumes TV for over seven hours a day. In developing countries such as India, where TV is rapidly expanding, the novelty effect of cable TV is pushing household viewing time beyond those of the U.S. So a substantial part of a household's time is

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spent in front of the tube. How can the TV content *not* have a profound effect on those who consume?

Is it time to pause, think, and evaluate the role of media in instilling values in our society? Is it time to rethink how social and moral values can be restored in the media? Most importantly, is it time to find practical, workable ways in which to balance the all-powerful commercial interests of the media with our social interests?

The key question to address is can media be commercially profitable *and* socially responsible? Can media producers *not* degrade the moral content of their message and yet make a profit? In other words, can popular and profitable media programmes be produced that enhance notions of propriety, fairness and non-violence?

The answer is yes. Media producers must think about producing what can be called entertainment-education programmes. These programmes entertain and also educate. Much like Aesop's Fables or *Panchatantra* stories which have been around us for thousands of years. Media programmes based on this philosophy can generate large audience, preserving the media's commercial interest. The educational component is designed to uplift the human spirit, preserving its social responsibility. The educational content need not be preachy or didactic.

In recent years, there have been several conscious attempts to produce entertainment-education media programmes in developed and developing countries. For instance, soap operas designed to promote maternal and child health, and rock music songs to promote sexual responsibility among teenagers. Research evaluations of these programmes have shown that mass media can be entertaining educational, and profitable at the same time. A "win-win" configuration for programme producers, policy-makers, audiences, and moral authorities.

To address this seemingly growing chasm in mass media's commercial versus social roles, the ultimate responsibility about media's content must lie with both the producers as well as the consumers of the media. Are we ready to do our part?