

Book Review:

Saeed, Saima (2013). *Screening the public sphere: Media and democracy in India*. New Delhi: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-81244-3

Reviewed by Sudeshna Devi¹

Saeed's book is a recent contribution to the growing literature on media and democracy. The author opines that media has a vital role to play in making democracy work. The central concern of the book is to understand the relationship between media-democracy-development, the focus being on the role of media in social democratization, freedom and human development. The book starts by building up a social theory of media; the four elements being citizenship, public knowledge, criticality and power. In turn, these concepts are borrowed from their proponents namely, T.S.Marshall (Citizenship), Immanuel Kant (Public Knowledge), JurgenHabermas (Criticality) and Michael Foucault (Power). According to the author, the effectiveness of media is actualised when the above mentioned four elements are accomplished. This study attempts to map out how the current day media, especially the electronic media fares in accomplishing these four crucial elements.

Part I of the book traces the theoretical underpinnings of the four elements of the social theory of media. Ranging from Marshall to Foucault, this section draws heavily from social and political theories to build up a social theory of media. The last part of this section provides a detailed account of the research tools used for collection of data. Three research methodology techniques were used for the collection of data of the study. Firstly, the content analysis technique was used for evaluating the proportion and prioritization of programmes in four news channels in India namely, NDTV 24x7, AajTak, DD News and DD National. Within these channels a quantitative analysis of 112 hours of TV news content and qualitative analysis of some selected stories/programmes/bulletins was done. The systematic sampling strategy was adopted for selecting the content that was to be analysed from the four news channels. The starting date was selected at random and from there a rolling schedule of four days

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for four channels was evolved. Consequently, the 1st April (Sunday) of 2007 was given to NDTV 24x7, the 2nd (Monday) to DD News, the 3rd (Tuesday) to AajTak and 4th (Wednesday) to DD National. This completed one week of sample. After a gap of 15 days, week two of the rolling schedule was started. This time NDTV was on Monday, DD News on Tuesday, AajTak on Wednesday and DD National of Thursday. In this manner, in order to track each channel for an entire week in rotation, seven such sets, falling every 15th day was taken. This resulted in a fairly representative sample spanning with two weeks of April, two weeks of May, two weeks of June and one week of July. The primetime band of 6pm to 10pm including commercial breaks was recorded for content analysis. Secondly, the technique of interview schedule was used for collecting data from viewers residing in National Capital Region (NCR). A sample of 150 respondents was drawn using the Socio-Economic Classifications (SEC), on the basis of education, income, occupation and the residential locality of the respondents. The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) and National Readership Survey (NRS) were the chief considerations in drawing up the sample for the interview schedules. Accordingly, 30 respondents in upper class colony of Greater Kailash, Delhi and from some top call centres in Faridabad were selected. Another 30 were interviewed in middle class residential areas of Zakir Nagar, Batla House, Shaheen Bagh and Ashram. The remaining respondents were selected from two slums of Shahzada Bagh Colony (Inderlok) and Badli, both in Delhi. Thirdly, Questionnaires were used for collecting data from media experts like journalists, employees of government news organizations, filmmakers, media academics and NGOs. Out of 100 questionnaires administered through e-mails only 26 were returned duly completed.

Part II of the book looks at the issues of ownership patterns and nature of content of news channels in India. An overview of the history of broadcasting in India forms the first part of this section. The advent of television in India was rooted in the Nehruvian view of national integration and nation building in the aftermath of the partition tragedy. Mass media was adjudged as a key instrument for promoting development in India. The government believed that communication for development was an effective tool for promoting nation building. Initiatives like the SITE and Kheda experimentation were steps in this direction. For this to be achieved, communication had to be strictly under

government control as private ownership of communication technology would promote consumerism. But by 1980s, advertising was started in Doordarshan to recover costs. This started the trend of commercialization of Doordarshan which ultimately culminated with the entry of private satellite channels post 1991. Chapter 8 of this section discusses the ownership patterns of news channels from 1991-2012. Almost all the major national and regional news channels are owned by corporate houses that have diverse business interests. Money from other ventures is being poured into media sector by such business houses. This corporatization of media generates questions like what is the nature of news content produced by private players, what impact does private ownership have on journalistic practices, how does government broadcast deal with the commercial media? The content of private news channels has become entertainment oriented. The increasing commercialization of media is blurring the line between news and entertainment. This is evident in the growing proportion of entertainment related stories in conventional news bulletins itself and the large chunks of entertainment programming in serious 24x7 news channels. Entertainmentization of television news has come at the cost of withering of development reportage. The politics-journalism-corporate nexus revealed through the Radio tapes has also severely dented the image of private news channels. The uncritical support of media to Anna movement (which the author feels was corporate funded) has also robbed media of its critical role of being people's guardian.

Part III deals with the analysis of broadcasting in the service of the public. Despite its lacunas, the author makes a strong case for the existence of public broadcasting. According to the author, it is only public broadcasting that can provide a forum for social inclusion and development, and, most of all, the empowerment of the marginalized minorities. Public service broadcasting can be a better alternative to private media if it fulfils the four elements i.e. Citizenship, Public knowledge, Criticality and Power of the social theory of media. The government owned news channel Doordarshan has been faulted due to stricter control of content, lack of innovation, dependence of government finance etc. It has been robbed of its autonomy by successive governments since independence, to fulfil their political agendas. A strong, independent, public service broadcasting is the need of the hour.

Part IV examines the widening deficits between what content ought to be produced and what is being produced by new channels. The news content generated is often saturated with entertainment and high doses of infotainment. This defeats the very purpose of news as informing citizenry. Instead of enhancing more citizen knowledge and civic participation, news now has become a spectacle. This commercialization of news has led to paradigmatic shifts of the four elements of the social theory of media- from citizen to consumer, from public knowledge to public entertainment, from criticality to mythification and horizontal power sharing to vertical power flow. Such debasing of media is hindering its power to play a more proactive role in the development of the nation. In such a scenario, the author charts out a more active role for the public as citizens who must seek accountability and assert their information rights.

Thus, to conclude, one can say that the book does make as strong case for a more citizen oriented media. Filled with a large body of painstakingly collected data, the book should have been edited better as there appears to be lot of replication in many chapters. While it does make a useful contribution to the debate on media and democracy by including audience responses, it falters in parts in its overarching effort of encompassing a lot in a limited space and time. However, this book does make it to the reading list of those who work on the media, democracy and audience reception studies.

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