

# I

## LIGHT AND SHADE

### Reflections from Media Sociology

In looking at the subject of the media and the women's question, some findings from media sociology offer a helpful framework. For example, media studies have shown that:

\*\* The values of media people determine the content and the "slant" of media output.

\*\* Media content gives a partial view of reality. Its stereotyped depiction of anti-establishment groups and individuals in turn influences the attitudes of audiences to these groups and their movements.

\*\* The mass media tends to preserve the status quo rather than stimulate social change.

\*\* Audiences are selective in their consumption of media output, generally accepting messages which reinforce their beliefs and rejecting or ignoring those propagating contrary values.

\*\* "Perceived" meanings of media messages may often be very different from the *intended* meanings.

\*\* Anti-establishment groups are aware that they must consciously use the media so that their viewpoint too gets adequate representation.

These are just a few facts thrown up by media studies, relevant to the women's question, as will be illustrated in later chapters.

The need to start from sociological concepts is threefold: One, it helps us understand that the characteristics exhibited by the mass media on the women's

question are similar to those displayed in the context of other disadvantaged groups and social movements. It would, therefore, be misleading to look at the media's distortion of the women's question as some sort of conspiracy against women alone.<sup>1</sup>

Two, it reminds us of the limitations of the mass media as a tool for social change. The mass media can only be one of several simultaneous strategies to be used for creating awareness and spreading consciousness. However, though the mass media tends to *follow* changes in opinion and rarely initiates such changes, it does become a useful tool at a stage when the activities of the movement have established their legitimacy.

And three, understanding media sociology can help us not only use the media more effectively but also recognise our own shortcomings in projecting the aims of the movement — for example in the area of communicating with the non-converted.

Below are some pointers culled from a wide range of writings on the sociology of the media and communication in general. They are stated here without elaboration and without citing parallels from the women's question. They are also relevant to the women's question, the highlighting of which will be taken up in the chapters to come.

### **The “Communicators”**

\*\* The picture of the social world which the media presents is a partial one — it is not only incomplete but it also presents social reality from particular, and different, political vantage points.

The media has often been described as a “mirror held up to society”. If at all the mirror analogy is to be used, then the media must be seen as a hall of mirrors — each medium reflecting social reality from different perspectives. This is as true of the left-wing press as of the right or centre, as true of the minority press as of the majority press.<sup>2</sup>

\*\* The media acts as “agenda setter” by bringing up subjects for discussion. The subjects that the media chooses to report are selected largely through force of habit and a “mutual reinforcement process”. Stories from a particular source, no matter how routine, are almost sure to be published. Custom and habit get ingrained and as new areas of society develop, they have to fight to get their story told in public simply because it has never become a habit to send reporters to cover their activities.<sup>3</sup>

\*\* The personal values and social background of media people affect selection of content and interpretation of the needs and interests of the audience. Members of the media professions tend to subscribe to dominant political and social values. Thus, the mass communication process is more likely to sustain rather than challenge the existing power structures in society.<sup>4</sup>

## Media Content

\*\* "Folk devils" is the phrase coined for the media's depiction of "outsiders" whose behaviour threatens dominant social norms. By the devices of exaggeration and stereotyping, by wrenching such behaviour from any societal context that might help to explain it, and portraying it as a manifestation of the irrational, these groups are depicted as being a threat to the social order. Such presentation of "deviant behaviour" reflects the use of "ideological filters" by media professionals.<sup>5</sup>

\*\* Media's images of "deviant behaviour" may result in ill-informed public attitudes, social policies, perhaps even legislation.<sup>6</sup>

\*\* The placement of news on an important or subsidiary page, the length, heading, choice of language are familiar devices for inserting a political or emotional interpretation of news into its actual reporting, powerfully suggesting a specific response to the news.<sup>7</sup>

\*\* "We expect to find editorialising in the features of a newspaper, and are prepared for it, but inevitably some degree of editorial influence also creeps into straightforward news columns." What a paper leaves out is as significant as what it puts in. Headlines are important as a first introduction to a news item. Every newspaper, when it reaches the reader, is the result of a whole series of selection as to what items shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy etc.<sup>8</sup>

\*\* The media marks particular people and events as more significant simply by reporting them. For, "what is noted is by definition notable."<sup>9</sup>

## The Audience

\*\* "People tend to select the parts of an argument they agree with, ignoring parts they object to, or putting them down as lies. They also tend to select newspapers whose opinions conform with their own views. The mass media thus help to reinforce whatever opinion readers or listeners already hold."<sup>10</sup>

\*\* One of the effects of the mass media on audience is termed "narcotising dysfunction."

"Exposure to a flood of information may serve to narcotise rather than energise the average reader or listener. As an increasing amount of time is devoted to reading and listening, a decreasing share is available for organised action. The individual reads accounts of issues and problems, and may even discuss alternative lines of action. But this rather intellectualised, rather remote connection with organised social action is not activated."<sup>11</sup>

\*\* The mass media has also been used to try and promote socially desirable attitudes. Generally it is found that "monopolisation" is a necessary condition for achieving this goal. That is, if a set of progressive values and images are presented by the media, they will have the effect of persuading only if contrary images and values are *not* also presented. To the extent that opposing sets of values are simultaneously offered, the net effect is negligible.<sup>12</sup> (This is found also when the media, in order to be objective, gives both sides of a question,

to allow audiences to “decide for themselves”. The resultant ambiguity and the audience response or “selective perception” reinforces rather than changes prevailing beliefs.)<sup>13</sup>

### On “Using” the Media

In the West, media studies have examined the negative way in which the media has depicted trade unions, ethnic minorities, blacks, working class youth etc, by stereotyping them and presenting them as “problems” (like “the immigrant problem”) or labelling their behaviour as anti-social and irrational. News values operate in such a way that such groups “make news” only when they resort to negative or destructive behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

However, organised radical groups now realise that such media depiction can be countered only by active initiatives from their side; that organisations accustomed to media hostility must begin to use mass media more strategically, towards getting adequate and positive coverage.<sup>15</sup> In addition, radical groups have also responded by creating their own parallel media.

“Alternative journalism, an independent but contemporary development, grew from a dissatisfaction with the viewpoint and subject matter of the traditional media. The alternative journals point out flaws in society that the press, through long acceptance, has tended to disregard. These journals are distinguished primarily by their more radical approach. Aimed at the minorities, the poor and the young, the alternative press found it collected a readership among middle class intellectuals.”<sup>16</sup>

#### *Putting the media to use*

“The advent of new communications technique and patterns, particularly television, may have proven to have had precisely the contrary effect of that suggested by some of the classical views of the ‘increasing massification of society’. Namely, the rise of militant and active minority movements — the poor, blacks, students, civic action groups — who, because they found themselves, as it were, ready for it, discovered in the constant search by the mass media for newsworthy material a platform that they had hitherto lacked for the expression of their grievances. “Despite the important negative aspects of the mass media in so far as they are the tools of commercial interest or political manipulations... democrats, consumers’ associations, defenders of the ecological balance, pacifists, militants in the civil rights movements, have made wide and frequently successful uses of them for their respective causes in more open societies.”

— From *Mass Society*  
by Salvador Giner, 1976

It is suggested that access to media occupations will help change media depiction of groups who have been portrayed in a negative or distorted way. However, this is not so simply or easily achieved.

"Research is needed to determine whether or not ethnic or other minority group status makes an individual a more effective communicator about minority affairs. Research is also needed to determine the extent to which a member of a minority group would be able, once employed in the media, to control significantly the content that the organisation produces."<sup>17</sup>

## Media and Society

Sociologists suggest that there is a "reciprocal" relationship between media and society — a two-way process by which media content influences society and society influences the media.<sup>18</sup> It is also suggested that the process is "circular" and therefore it is not always possible to separate cause from effect.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps this explains why the media, while frequently distorting the feminist viewpoint, also seeks to cash in on it, sensing that the new feminist ideas do evoke a good reader response and that, being a vehicle for progressive ideas, enhance the media's own image and the image of its controllers.

Thus, with the help of media sociology, in subsequent chapters we will look at the the media's coverage of women's issues in response to the activism of the Decade, as contrasted with its earlier neglect on the same issues; the media's distortion and subversion of the women's question as embodied in its hostility to feminism; the nature of the media's interaction with the movement and the movements' own efforts to use the media; the unpredictability of audience response to media content and its apathy to exposures of injustice and atrocities; and, and bandwagon phenomenon of the media riding the feminist wave.

## References and Notes

1. As one progressive journalist writing on a variety of issues, including women, remarks, media's attitude to the women's question is part of an ad hocism which characterises its attitude to *all* issues, whether it is environment, or drought, or atrocities by landlords against bonded labour.
2. *Media and Society*, Milton Keynes Open University Course in Social Sciences, 1977.
3. *Mass Communication and Human Interaction* by Robert Murphy, 1977.
4. *Communication* by Denis Mcquail (*Aspects of Modern Sociology* series) 1984 edition.
5. *Media and Society*, Op. cit.2.
6. *The Audience*, Milton Keynes Open University Course in Social Sciences, 1977.
7. *Communications* by Raymond Williams, 1976.
8. *Mass Communication* by Alan Hancock, 1970.
9. Quoted in *Teaching the Media* by Len Masterman, 1985.
10. *An Introduction to Mass Communication: Problems in Press and Broadcasting* by Martin D. Carter, 1971.

11. & 12.

'Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organised Social Action' by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in *Mass Communications*, edited by Wilbur Schramm, 1960.

13. *The Media in Britain* by Jeremy Tunstall, 1983.

14. *The Power of the Media*, Milton Keynes Open University Course in Social Sciences, 1977.

15. Len Masterton, Op. cit. 9.

16. Robert Murphy, Op. cit. 3.

17. *Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective* by Charles A. Wright, 1975.

18. *The Power of the Media*, Op. cit. 14.

19. Robert Murphy, Op. cit. 3.