

## **Media and Religion: Aberrant decoding of coverage of religion in two Hindi newspapers - 'Rajasthan Patrika' and 'Dainik Bhasker'.**

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### **Abstract**

Media is a communication outlets or tools that are used to deliver information to its intended audience. Media impacts people differently. A variety of information on various issues concerning society is delivered through media daily 24x7. However, each message has its own audience. Similarly each medium has its own audience. Newspapers and magazines as media orient themselves to the educated class. Radio and TV, though serve all classes people, they are oriented towards the un-educated or less educated.

Mediated communication involves a sender transmitting a message to a recipient, who in turn decodes and interprets that message in his her own field of experience. This means there are multiple points in the communication process where misinterpretation and distraction are possible. There are a number of barriers to effective communication and these are potential interruptions of the flow of information are referred to as "noise". Communicative problems (i.e., noise) can be categorized into three groups: channel noise, semantic, and efficacy of the message to deliver the intended meaning.

It is the semantics that is of great concern for communicators. Every communicator of message be news or advertising, is interested in the audience understanding the message with its intended meaning. Many studies have been under taken to understand as to how media impacts its audience. But the larger question is it is not the media impact a communicator is interested in, but it the impact of the message.

This involves a major area of research where in media research tries to understand as how the given message is decoded by the audience. Umberto Eco, proposed the concept of 'aberrant decoding' in his article published first in 1965 in Italian and in 1972 in English. Aberrant decoding or aberrant reading is a concept used in fields such as communication and media studies, semiotics, and journalism about how messages can be interpreted differently from what was intended by their sender. But the key application of the concept is to the contemporary

mass media. The variety of cultures and subcultures that receive mediated message means that it must inevitably be subject to a variety of aberrant decoding(s), if it is to make sense to the variety of cultures receiving it.

The proposed paper deals with the aberrant decoding of media coverage of religion in Indian mass media. For the purpose of research two Hindi newspapers – ‘Rajasthan Patrika’ and ‘Dainik Bhasker’ is selected. The selected news on religion as reported is given to a panel of academics drawn from different fields like, literature, sociology, psychology, law, management etc., for judging the news based on a rating scale.

**Key words: Semantics, Aberrant decoding, Content analysis, Culture and religion, Media coverage.**

### **Introduction**

Aberrant decoding is a concept used in fields such as communication and media studies and journalism to understand as to how the media messages are interpreted differently from what was intended by their sender. First the concept was proposed by Umberto Eco\* in an article published first in 1965 in Italian and in 1972 in English. Every communication act requires that the messages must be encoded into a set of signs by the sender. These signs must then be transmitted and decoded by the receiver to understand the contained messages. The code system must be shared by both the sender and the receiver in order for the communication to succeed. For example, Fiske sates “that thoughts must be encoded into words, transmitted through air, and then be decoded back to thoughts. Often the sender has a certain meaning to convey with his message, hoping the receiver will interpret it correctly. This right interpretation can be called the preferred decoding or preferred reading. When the interpretation of the message is different from what was intended, this can be called aberrant decoding”.

According to “Eco, aberrant decoding were rare in pre-industrial societies, when most communication occurred between people who shared the same culture. He lists four classes of exceptions where aberrant decoding could have happened:”

- People who did not share the same language.
- People trying to interpret the meanings of past cultures. For example, medieval people looking at Roman art.
- People who did not share the same belief system. For example, Christians looking at pagan art.
- People who came from different cultures. For example, white Europeans looking at Aboriginal art.

According to Danesi “Aberrant decoding can occur in a more widespread range of situations, as wrong interpretation of a media product or text whose incoming message is not the one intended by the creator of the product or text.”

Particularly the concept of aberrant decoding has application to the contemporary mass media. India being a multicultural society the variety of cultures and subcultures that receive mass mediated message means that it must inevitably be subject to a variety of aberrant decodings if

it is to make sense to the variety of cultures receiving it. Besides, different religions receive the same message as put forward by mass media differently and are interpreted differently based on the individual religious beliefs. As a result, Eco suggests, mass media texts tend to be closed. That is they prefer one particular reading over other possible ones: his theory of aberrant decodings suggests that this closure is more likely to be effective for those who decode the text according to the dominant codes used in the encoding.

Religious noise refers to impediments to successful communication between people of different religions and cultures. Cultural noise include differences in language, values, traditions and non-verbal cues and other intrapersonal and interpersonal cues.

Religion is discussed widely in media. Secularization does not seem to calm down the debates about religion. Religious elections, politicians' personal beliefs and negative portrayal of various religious groups are all examples that can influence the media picture and mobilize supporters and opponents far beyond religious circles. Religion as a topic includes everything from "feel good"-spirituality to debates about the place of religion in public life. The media's portrayals are influencing and shaping public perception of religion, beliefs and secularism.

The audiences also participate actively in shaping media debates about religion and secularism. The web offers several forms of digital religion. Religious institutions are actively using various media, but in return are also being influenced by media, as they have to adapt to media logic and behaviour. This mediatisation of religion plays a central role in the research on media and religion at our Department.

A recent report into the place of religion in public life presented a gloomy picture of the relationship between media and religion. Recent attention to mainstream media reveals that relations between religion and media appear to be breaking down. There are a number of failings with how religion is represented in the mainstream media, many well documented. The media needs to be held accountable for incorrect stories about particular religious groups. An Independent Press Standards Organisation like Press Council of India needs to be tougher and make sure that corrections and retractions are given weight equal to the original erroneous article.

### **Review of literature:**

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) and the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life revealed that U.S. press coverage of religion in 2010 had most of the stories about events and controversies related to Islam. This study examined news coverage in a broad range of mainstream media sources, as well as in blogs and on Twitter, from January to December 2011. The study findings reveal that religion accounted for 0.7% of all mainstream media coverage studied in 2011 and Islam became a bigger part of the media's focus on religion. Six of the top 10 religion stories in 2011 were about Islam.

Barney Zwartz (2016) in his article on media and religion has analysed the coverage of various religions by the media in Australia. He expresses his concern about lack of space given by the media for coverage of religions and believes that religion has an enormous influence on society and its values. Zwartz believes that religion can be a tremendous force for good or ill and should be given more importance by the media.

Salman Al-Azami (2016) in his book *Religion in the Media: A Linguistic Analysis* has talked about an interdisciplinary approach to language, religion and media using an audience-response study. He reveals how the three Abrahamic faiths - Christianity, Judaism and Islam - are represented in mainstream British media. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis, Al-Azami has considered that media use their power of language to influence the audience's perceptions of the three religions through newspaper articles, television documentaries and television dramas. Azami considered people's views in face-to-face interactions compared to comments on online newspapers.

Prof. Liesbet van Zoonen in her paper *FOUR APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF MEDIA AND RELIGION* suggests different ways to study media and religion. She states that the different approaches are Similarity (Media and religion involve similar processes of mediation between the self and the sacred), Distinction (Media and religion are distinct 'fields', the one affects the other), Mediatisation or convergence (Religion has become a thoroughly mediated experience) and Articulation (the way media and religion are related to each other is not stable, nor predictable and depends on audience uses and interpretations). It is a really helpful and reliable work for media scholars.

Sanchari Halder (2016) in her article *Aberrant Decoding in PK* finds the concept of aberrant decoding in the Bollywood movie *PK* by Rajkumar Hirani. She has found the protagonist (Aamir Khan) who portrays the character of PK misinterprets everything around him as he is an alien. He comes to earth and different religions and believes confuse him. So he decodes the meaning according to his own understanding.

Margaret Coffey (2013) in her article looks at India's media and at whether political parties and religious bodies should be restrained in their ownership of media outlets. She states that media had a role of inciting violence during the Gujarat and Mumbai riots. She also suggests an Improved and properly enforced regulation to restrain the media from making any future contribution to social unrest. Civil society organisations such as religious bodies also have a contribution to make.

### **Methodology:**

The proposed paper deals with the aberrant decoding of media coverage of religion in Indian mass media. For the purpose of research two Hindi newspapers – 'Rajasthan Patrika' and 'Dainik Bhaskar' is selected. The selected news on religion as reported is given to a panel of academics drawn from different fields like, literature, sociology, psychology, law, management etc., for judging the news based on a rating scale.

Six humanistic concepts in communication such as clarity, believability, authenticity, trust, empathy and competence were considered for analysis of the religious reports from the two newspapers. Finally ten news items based on religious reporting was selected for the study. A panel consisting of academics, professional and common readers of newspaper were selected for judgement on a five point rating scale. Besides, the selected news items were judged on eight factors – similarity, fair treatment, shaping of the story, misrepresentation, conflict interest, media portrayal, media influence and role of media in religious reporting.

### **Five point scale:**

SD stands for strongly disagree; D- Disagree; SwA- Somewhat agree; A- Agree; SA- Strong agree

Data analysis and findings

### **Analysis and findings:**

#### **Clarity**

s.no.	News Story	SD	D	SwA	A	SA
1	Ram janambhumi Yogi statement	2	1	4	3	
2	Jagannath yatra	1	1	3	3	2
3	Communal harmony		1	1	7	1
4	Jain guru mangal pravesh	1		4	3	2
5	Shivaratri jhanki			4	4	2
6	Independence day and janamshtami		1		5	4
7	Haj yatra	2	1	2	4	1
8	Amaranth yatri hamla			2	3	5
9	Siddhiviyayak mandir share		1	4	3	2
10	Model nikahnama muslim		1	2	3	4

The study indicates that people trust the religious reporting by print media. News about the attack on amaranth pilgrims was most clear to the respondents and 5 respondents strongly believe it to be most clear news among the chosen news stories. Whereas the news about statement of UP CM Mr. Yogi was found to be unclear and ambiguous by 4 respondents. News about janmashtami was found clear by 5 and communal harmony was clear to 7 respondents.

#### **Believability**

s.no.	News Story	SD	D	SwA	A	SA
1	Ram janambhumi Yogi statement	1		6	3	
2	Jagannath yatra	1			8	1
3	Communal harmony		1		5	4
4	Jain guru mangal pravesh	1	1	2	5	1
5	Shivaratri jhanki	1	1	1	5	2
6	Independence day and janamshtami	3			4	3
7	Haj yatra		1	2	3	4
8	Amaranth yatri hamla			2	6	2
9	Siddhiviyayak mandir share			4	4	2
10	Model nikahnama muslim		1	2	3	4

Almost all news stories were found to be believable by the respondents. Jagannath yatra and communal harmony news stories were agreed to be believable by respectively 8 and 5 respondents. News about the attack on amaranth pilgrims was believable to 6 respondents and 6 respondents somewhat agree that ram janambhumi news was believable.

#### **Authenticity**

s.no.	News Story	SD	D	SwA	A	SA
1	Ram janambhumi Yogi statement		1	4	3	2
2	Jagannath yatra	1		2	4	3
3	Communal harmony	1			4	5
4	Jain guru mangal pravesh	1		3	3	3
5	Shivaratri jhanki	1		1	5	3
6	Independence day and janamshtami	3			4	3
7	Haj yatra			4	1	5
8	Amaranth yatri hamla			1	5	4
9	Siddhiviyayak mandir share		1	2	4	3
10	Model nikahnama muslim			3	3	4

As far as authenticity is concerned, people find religious stories suitable. 5 respondents strongly agree that haj yatra news was authentic. Stories about attack on amaranth pilgrims and shivaratri jhanki were found to be authentic by 5 respondents. Whereas the news about statement of UP CM Mr. Yogi was found to be somewhat authentic by 4 respondents.

### Trust

s.no.	News Story	SD	D	SwA	A	SA
1	Ram janambhumi Yogi statement	1	2	4	2	1
2	Jagannath yatra	1		3	3	3
3	Communal harmony		1	1	2	6
4	Jain guru mangal pravesh		1	3	4	2
5	Shivaratri jhanki	1			6	3
6	Independence day and janamshtami	1		1	4	4
7	Haj yatra	2		2	2	4
8	Amaranth yatri hamla		1	2	2	5
9	Siddhiviyayak mandir share			4	4	2
10	Model nikahnama muslim		1	1	3	5

Story about communal harmony was most trustworthy for 6 respondents. Stories on model nikahnama and attack on amaranth pilgrims were also trustworthy for 5 respondents. 6 respondents agree on shivaratri news to be trustworthy. Whereas the news about statement of UP CM Mr. Yogi was found to be somewhat trustworthy by 4 respondents.

### Empathy

s.no.	News Story	SD	D	SwA	A	SA
1	Ram janambhumi Yogi statement	1	1	2	3	3
2	Jagannath yatra	3		1	4	2
3	Communal harmony		1	2	2	5
4	Jain guru mangal pravesh	2	1	1	4	2
5	Shivaratri jhanki	2	1	1	2	4
6	Independence day and janamshtami	2		2	3	3
7	Haj yatra	2			5	3

8	Amaranth yatri hamla			1	4	5
9	Siddhiviyayak mandir share	2	1	1	5	1
10	Model nikahnama muslim			4	2	4

Empathy is the factor which is required most while reporting religion and this factor was found strongly in amaranth attack and communal harmony news story by 5 respondents. Also 5 respondents agree that the news on haj yatra and Siddhiviyayak mandir share were empathetic. 4 respondents strongly agree for factor of empathy in shivaratri news whereas news about jagannath yatra and Jain guru mangal pravesh had empathy according to 4 respondents.

### Competence

s.no.	News Story	SD	D	SwA	A	SA
1	Ram janambhumi Yogi statement	1	1	1	6	1
2	Jagannath yatra	1	2		5	2
3	Communal harmony			1	6	3
4	Jain guru mangal pravesh		2	3	3	2
5	Shivaratri jhanki	1	2	1	5	1
6	Independence day and janamshtami	1		2	3	4
7	Haj yatra	2		2	4	2
8	Amaranth yatri hamla			2	5	3
9	Siddhiviyayak mandir share			3	5	2
10	Model nikahnama muslim			3	4	3

Competence factor was strongly found in janamashtami news by 4 respondents. 6 respondents agree that Ram janambhumi Yogi Statement and communal harmony were competent news. 5 respondents agree that news about the attack on amaranth pilgrims, Jagannath yatra, shivratri and Siddhiviyayak mandir share had competence.

s.no.	Statement	SD	D	SwA	A	SA
1	Similarity in terms of representation of religion in media.		2	2	5	1
2	Fair treatment in media representation of different religion.	1		3	6	1
3	Shaping of the story driven by cultural norms.		1	3	4	2
4	Misrepresentation of certain religions as reported.		6	1	1	2
5	Conflict of interest in media representation of religion.		2	6	1	1
6	Media portrayal of religion in influencing public perception of religious believes.	2	1	2	4	1
7	Influencing religious institutions by media reports.	2	3	3	4	1
8	Media plays a central role in projecting and shaping media debates on religion and secularism.	2	1		4	3

Reporting on religions is found similar in Rajasthan Patrika and Dainik Bhaskar by 5 respondents and 6 people agree that media fairly represents different religions. 4

respondents find the religious stories shaped by cultural norms. 6 respondents denied the statement that religions are misrepresented by media. Conflict of interest in media representation of religion is also somewhat agreed by 6 respondents. 4 respondents agree that Media portrayal of religion can influence public perception of religious believes. Media reports Influence religious institutions is agreed upon by 4 respondents. 4 respondents agree that media plays a central role in projecting and shaping media debates on religion and secularism.

### **Conclusion:**

The study undertaken has revealed that people trust media reporting on religion for routine and day-to-day events. They also find the information in the media conveyed efficiently. But as far as different religions and cultures are concerned, cultural noise causes difference in understanding of people for media messages. Religion as a topic includes everything from "feel good"-spirituality to debates about the place of religion in public life. The media's portrayals are influencing and shaping public perception of religion, beliefs and secularism.

The study finds that style of reporting on religions is similar in different print media and the representation of different religions is also fair. The study also finds that religious reporting is usually driven by cultural norms of the society, hence religions can be misrepresented by media because of the conflict of interest. Public perception of religious believes gets influenced somewhat by the representation of religion in media. Media not only plays a central role in projecting and shaping media debates on religion and secularism, but also it shapes the cultural roots of a society. Media reports set the image of a certain religion and in turn, influences the religious institutions also to play a certain role in the society and democracy. The media needs to be held accountable for incorrect stories about particular religious groups. An Independent Press Standards Organisation like Press Council of India needs to be tougher and make sure that corrections and retractions are given weight equal to the original erroneous article.

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