Future Prospects for Media and its Audience Post COVID-19

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Abstract

The outbreak of Coronavirus has changed the world forever. The pandemic has left an indelible mark on the economy, jobs, lives, and the environment. Even the Media landscape has changed. Be it layoffs in media jobs, downsizing of organizations, or closing of operations by various media houses, the media has been facing the heat too. Also, it is affecting and changing the audience for worse. The sole objective of the study is to assess present circumstances to speculate future trends in media and how the media audience will be affected by it. For this purpose, the researcher had used Secondary Data Analysis to review literature related to Future of Media and Society (including articles and books) to map the trends that would define the future. The study revealed that trends like Presence of Modern Hermits, Captive Audience, Malleable time, Growth of Fantasy in Media, and Mean World Syndrome are on rise and would majorly shape the future of media.

Keywords: *Hikikomori, Captive Audience, Fantasy, Mean World Syndrome, Retro*

INTRODUCTION

The lockdown implemented due to Coronavirus left people stuck at home. They were fighting the monotony of life through various media engagements. Media usage during this period was at an all-time high. A study by Global Web Index revealed that 80% of people in the USA and UK were consuming more content since the outbreak with television and online content (videos on YouTube and TikTok) being the major chunk of their media diet.

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Almost 68% were seeking news and updates related to pandemic over any other activity. Meanwhile, the millennials i.e. the present generation kept themselves busy by listening to music or by playing games, or searching for cooking recipes online. Even in India, throughout the lockdown, TikTok remained the country's most downloaded app (before its ban by the government) as people sought distraction as well as an escape from reality.

Even media content was not all the same. There were some changes such as a decrease in number of pages of newspapers due to less advertising push arising out of less consumption and production, reruns of old television serials and increase in the telecast of fantasy and mythology-based programs like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat*. With such developments as a base, a different future will rise up that is far different from what humans would have anticipated and it will be discussed in detail in upcoming sections.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For compiling the various trends related to the future of media, the researcher reviewed several relevant literatures. Books such as "Future Minds: How the Digital Age Is Changing Our Minds, Why This Matters, and What We Can Do About It" and "Future Files: A Brief History of the Next 50 Years" by Richard Watson were used as a reference for this paper apart from few other research papers, website, and journal articles.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The objective of the study was to assess the changes in the media industry and media audience that were observed after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and use this information to predict the future. For this purpose, Secondary Data Analysis was utilized in which books, research papers and articles related to the topic were reviewed to make meaningful inferences.

EXPECTED TRENDS AND OUTCOMES

Modern Hermits- In today's time when the whole world is facing a pandemic that is putting a tremendous pressure on the health system, economy, society, and nations; it is important that we learn about Japan's "Modern Hermits" (Gent, 2019). They are the youths who don't want to socialize and prefer staying at home sometimes even for years at a stretch. They order the basic necessities like food, personal hygiene and other utilities online and even "Work from Home". They are also known as Hikikomori. There are millions of youths

who are living such life and this lifestyle is not just limited to Japan but is gaining popularity among other developed nations. On conducting research, it was found that these youth had an inclination towards the Internet, Anime (Cartoon) and Video Games which was one of the main reasons that made them a loner. Their parents partially share the blame for this situation as they bought whatever their kids demanded (indoor games/toys or entertainment accessories) to keep them busy as they were unwilling to allow their children to go outside fearing increasing crime, pollution, etc. Further, they rarely intervened in their child's media consumption. When these children became adults, they developed a liking for staying at home and did not want to leave home. Due to this, they were addicted to their gadgets, gaming or social media.

In near future, as there is an increase in both the parents having a job, they might compensate for their busy schedule by buying their kids media technologies to keep them occupied and also get time for themselves. But what would start out in childhood as helplessness of parents or an arrangement for convenience, will soon become a habit for the kids when they reach adulthood. Thus, in the coming years, as more and more "developing" countries proceed in the "developed" category, the population of Modern Hermits will increase. A developed nation would mean greater and better distributed income for the citizens, which in turn would allow parents to buy whatever their kids wish for. One of the outcomes of this would be effects on relationships as children or youth addicted to technology such as smartphones will become distant from their parents. Thus, one mode of communication i.e., smartphone would prevent another mode of communication i.e., face to face communication (Inference from Displacement Hypothesis) which is, in fact, the real and also a healthy form of communication. (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007)

Captive Audience- Due to Coronavirus, people were home-bound for few months straight, which led to a rise in captive audience. (Jones, 2020) It is the audience which has very less or no other appealing option apart from watching or consuming media content. Such an audience arises when situations such as the present pandemic make people stay at home. An increase in crime, fear of terror attacks, pollution, and epidemics will force people to stay indoors and over a period of time it will become a habit for them to consume media heavily. And when it becomes a habit, things will change drastically.

The Malleable Time- While asynchronous media content has been around for a while but in times of epidemic it becomes even more relevant as people don't need to go to the office, school, or university for the time being. There is no sense of time, no fixed routine or pattern. Thus, people are consuming media content throughout the day. Be it playing a

game or binge-watching web series, consuming media seems to be the favorite pass time of people around the world. But once the epidemic will be over, people may continue the habit of watching content (episodes) all at once (those who didn't already binge-watch earlier). (Dixit, Marthoenis, Arafat, Sharma, & Kare, 2020) There's a high possibility that they may become impatient and would start believing in "Carpe Diem" (i.e. to seize the day) and would want to unravel the suspense of the program they are watching. The days when programs were synchronous had their own advantage as there was a fixed time to watch it. If you miss it, chances are that you might never see it again. But some may argue that the thought of missing an episode is worse. Still, we must remember those sleepless nights that a web series' lover eagerly spends to complete those episodes probably at a marathon speed so that he could discuss the plot of the series with his friends. It seems that a synchronicity/flexibility of media and ability to watch "anything anytime anywhere" in fact would turn from being a boon to a bane.

Rise of Fantasy- Recently the government decided to telecast *Ramayan*a on Doordarshan during the coronavirus outbreak. (Business Today, 2020) It was meant to give people hope, spiritual vibes and relief amidst crises. This move became a masterstroke as the serial gained record breaking TRPs and registered the highest audience (7.7 crore viewers) for a serial around the world and created a world record. The special feature of the serial was that it was mythological and it was re-telecasted. As during times of pandemic no new films or serials were being shot, old serials and films were being broadcasted on television. Around this time, Rockstar released data on sales of GTA-V (a video game). This game created history in the world of media and entertainment in terms of revenue by earning $6 billion which was more than the highest earning films of all time, i.e., *Avatar* ($2.790 billion) or *Avengers* ($2.797 billion). Interestingly both these films were also fiction and fantasy based. (Strickland, 2013) Why would fantasy become a hit in times of pandemic? For this, we need to understand "Mean World Syndrome" (discussed in next section). People want to escape reality (on the basis of Uses and Gratification Theory) as reality is harsh and they have no control over it. They are losing hope and faith and they look for alternate reality i.e. Virtual Reality, a reality where they feel powerful, less depressed, and can vent their frustration and anger.

Mean World Syndrome- As more people increased their media consumption during the pandemic, chances are that they will continue media usage with same intensity even after the crisis is over. Thus, more media usage would put more users under the Heavy media usage category (concept proposed by George Gerbner) and thus, they would be more prone to Mean world Syndrome (a type of cognitive bias). (Straughan, 2021) This happens because,

the more we watch media, the more the reality of the world will be framed and shaped by what we see (using the concept of "framing" given by Erving Goffman). The rapid changes in society like- floods, terror attacks, cybercrimes, and technology downsizing workforce will demoralize people in general as they will be worried about food, job, and security and will be confused about how to cope up with the crisis. Media instead of pacifying them would instead sensationalize and exaggerate crisis at hand. With no control, they will become indifferent to and dejected with reality. It will also develop distrust among people. Every stranger will be seen as a pedophile, xenophobia will increase across nations and communal tensions will rise and thus the world would start to seem "mean". This would further push people to isolate themselves from society and become anti-social. Such developments are worrisome as whatever progress human beings have achieved till date has been possible only due to socializing, sharing and exploring.

Decline in Trust- Trust in institutions such as judiciary, legislation, executive and media post-COVID-19 might be at an all-time low. One of the reasons for a decrease in faith will be coverage by media. Media credibility will decrease due to insensitive coverage of crisis or issues, sensationalism and exaggeration, irrelevant or biased coverage where celebrities are given more space than issues of the public, spreading fake news or propaganda, too much negativity, and creating too much panic or fear. One or the other reason out of these may push people to abandon watching the news altogether. More people would want a Media Detox or at least Social Media/News hiatus to avoid negativity. (Geiger, 2022) One might wonder how much truth this statement holds. But isn't it true that some viewers stopped checking the coronavirus update and news after a few weeks of the outbreak as they were sick of watching the same fear-mongering headlines? The preference for news of Amitabh Bachchan getting infected with Coronavirus over Assam floods further proves this point.

Myopic Thinking- Blame it on hurry-scurry urban lifestyle, technology, or media, but too many stimuli are out there in the world. These stimuli occupy the majority of our senses and also cause a major distraction leading to shorter attention spans. But can we blame the media for this? Yes, partially because even media is imitating this fast lifestyle by hurling countless amount of media content and that too at a breakneck speed. This is giving rise to TMI (Too Much Information) and TMC (Too Much Content) era. (UPENN, 2015) While the media should have provided the much-needed relief from the daily excess of overwhelming senses (that creates noise) but instead it even bombards advertisements along with content in order to earn and maximize profits. This explosion of content might lead to a loss of rational thinking and empathy, and might also increase desensitization and narcissism among media users. For those who disagree, here are some examples to prove how media is altering the

brain and emotions- selfies and selfie sticks, Instagram filters for beautification, yearning for likes and comments, unnecessary outrage over an issue on Social Media, and passive activism on online platforms. Incidents in past such as that of Mass Hysteria, Fake News, and Mob Lynching do show that Social Media always acted as a catalyst. And in the future, such incidents might increase in frequency.

The Return of Retro- Calamities, automation, and rise in crime would make people reminisce old times when the world was less complicated and technology was not overpowering humans. People would start having a liking for obsolete technology that would remind them of a simpler and happier past. If you are regular on social media you would have seen posts or memes related to the "90s era" and how great and better it was than present times. (HIndustan Times, 2018) Too much technological progress would give rise to neo-luddites who would want to shun or decrease use of the technology and move to "manual". The revival of songs, films and fashion in present times and its reception shows that people love the past and are nostalgic about it. As the world becomes more "mean" (as discussed earlier), people would want return of old times in big way. There might be a return of old era media gadgets like flip phone, landline, Radio, Music Cassettes, CDs and Camera Reels. We might also see people renovating and redecorating homes in old fashion; buying antique furniture and other commodities/accessories; retro themed parks, restaurants and parties; and resurgence of Vintage Video Games.

CONCLUSION

The paper suggests that trends such as rise of Modern Hermits, Captive Audience, return of old era, move to Manual and Mean World Syndrome will be the highlight in near future. While such trends would have come gradually but events like global warming, virus outbreaks, terror attacks, man-made and natural disasters have sped up the process of arrival of these trends. So, cautioning restraint while consuming and using media apart from media literacy is the only way, masses can avoid its negative outcomes. Also, human resilience has time and again come handy, be it financial crisis, natural disasters or fatal disease or ailments. And so there is no reason that we shouldn't count on it again. The trends that are described in this paper are highly possible and not just exaggeration as climate experts claim that this might not be the only pandemic that we face. Just like Spanish Flu or Bubonic Plague, the humanity will continue facing such life-threatening challenges in the coming years. With a rise in global temperature, viruses would survive, thrive and spread at tremendous rate. Also, clearing of forests would expose humans to new species of wildlife and the virus they carry.

The progress that humanity has achieved has been possible due to outgoing, exploring, and social nature of the human beings. But virus outbreaks such as COVID-19 is aiding outlook of a life that is somewhat opposite from our ancestors. People can't be entirely blamed for this as no one needs to be an explorer like Columbus today, as most of the regions in the world have already been discovered. The whole world is better connected than ever leading to the fulfillment of dream of "Global Village". But such progress is surely making people lethargic as they don't want to go out because everything is available at a touch of mouse/screen. For instance, outgoing nature of people makes them go to restaurants and try out various delicacies but once they get used to ordering online, they might drop the idea of going out to eat altogether due to reasons like hygiene or fear of infection. Considering such developments, it seems that Work from Home, Home Delivery, Online classes for kids etc. might be the only future and alternative for us.

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