Practising Journalism

Values,
Constraints,
Implications

Editor
Nalini Rajan

22

censorship ké peeché kya hai? *

k.p. jayasankar and anjali monteiro

the man who would not mistake
his wife for a hat[1]

C ensorship makes four basic propositions, all related to *meanings*:

1. One structure is always attached to one meaning. No man can possibly mistake his wife for a hat; after all a wife is a wife and a hat is a hat, and that's that. Certainty should be privileged over all ambiguities. Reason is in and such madness, out.

2. Meanings (and hence, language) are *instrumental*. They are *used* by men who have no right to mistake their wives for hats. These wise men (and censors, if you could call them so) pour their ideas into transparent words, like oil or sherbet or Coca-Cola into a bottle. As the bottle takes on the colour of the liquid, so do words neutrally take on the colour of the speaker's ideas. Censors can distinguish between *kokam* sherbet and Coca-Cola.

3. Meanings are within the *conscious control* of the speaker/ sender/user and they can be accurately *transmitted* to the

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* In the unlikely event of the allusion being lost, the title borrows from the 'infamous' film song from the Hindi film *Khalnayak:' Choli kè peechè kya hai* .... (What is behind the blouse ....). This is a revised version of a piece entitled 'Let a Thousand Meanings Bloom' that appeared in *The Economic Times* (24 November 1996).

[1] With due apologies to Oliver Sacks. The allusion here is to his *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1985).

listener/receiver/another user The man who mistakes his
wife for a hat could effectively transmit his ideas to a receiver.
4. If his message is effective, the receiver, in turn, might prob-
ably mistake (God forbid) his wife for a hat as well. In other
words, meanings have predictable impacts on the receiver
The censor plays God in averting such eventualities; (s)he is
the patriarchal filter of (erroneous and scurrilous) meanings...

Given the above, a censor could, to use an unfortunate tau-
tology, censor A man who mistakes his wife for a hat is poten-
tial censorship material. If his folly comes to light, he will be
consigned to the censor bins of society

hiranya-kasipu, macbeth
and humpty dumpty

Hiranya-kasipu obtained a *var* or boon from God Siva: he would
have control over all the worlds and would not be slain by *day* or
night, *inside* or *outside*, by *man* or *animal*. He was slain at *twi-
light* (neither day, nor night), on the *threshold* (neither inside,
nor outside), by Nar-simha (man–lion, neither man, nor ani-
mal). Having gained control over all the worlds, men and hats,
he, like the censor, rested on *his* meanings, *his* interpretations.
Death to the censor, in its many avatars, lurks in the interstices
of words, in the interline spaces of sentences and in the sand-
dunes of syntax.

Macbeth is a non-*swadeshi* example. He is equally pig-headed
about meanings and the woods of Birnam, and about his invul-
nerability· no man born of a woman can kill him until the woods
of Birnam come to Duncinane. This comes to pass. Yet another
censor bites the dust.

Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty is another hero in the
censor's pantheon: 'When *I* use a word, it means just what I
choose it to mean, neither more, nor less' He can 'explain all
the poems that were ever invented—and a good many that
haven't been invented just yet' A manager of meanings par ex-
cellence, he remarks: 'They've (words) a temper, some of them—
particularly verbs: they're the proudest—adjectives you can do

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particularly verbs: they're the proudest—adjectives you can do

anything with, but not verbs ....' And they all come to him for their wages and overtime, but not for long. After his fence-sitting stint, after his fall, all the king's horses and all the king's censors couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again! Let us refrain from the refrain about another one biting the dust.

table, *kokam* sherbet, coca-cola and other objects

Let us ask the censor to transmit the idea of the object 'table' to a being from outer space.[2] S/he is sure to start off with the idea that a table is a four-legged wooden structure with a flat surface. S/he will soon discover, like the men with wives and hats, that s/he will have to invent ways to account for the varied number of legs: for instance, 'n' (being the number of legs) could be any whole number (3.33 legs, definitely not) between zero and infinity Then comes the problem of not mistaking it for a stool, cot or a hat. Specify the uses? Write, play, eat, do nothing, collect bribes under, sleep on (why not?), cook, work, nothing unprintable, mind you, we're censors .... After having written a compendium running into several volumes, the censor rests happy· the table has been tackled in watertight terms, with all statistical variants and for all time to come. Then the alien has a close encounter with a 'water table', a 'statistical table' and a 'timetable' Des-table-ised, the censor starts all over again .... These are the wages of regarding language as a set of lexical entries that catalogue a 'world out there'![3]

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[2] K.P Jayasankar and A. Monteiro, 'The Plot Thickens—A Cultural Studies Approach to Media Education', in B. Tufte, T. Lavender and D. Lemish (eds), *Global Trends in Media Education* (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2003).

[3] The first powerful critique of a commonsensical approach to language originates in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Structuralism and semiology draw on his work to critically examine various systems of meaning and knowledge. The Saussurian position on language can be summed up as follows:

(i) Saussure designates language as a system (*langue*) of which the sign is the basic element. Langue is a system of differences: the identity of each sign is governed by its opposition to other signs, and not by its material condition; (ii) The speaking subject's relation to this system is

The word 'table' is a sign in a system of meanings, to which the alien has limited access; it becomes meaningful only in the context of a shared historical and ideological space. While common sense might tell us that we use words to name our worlds, to transmit our ideas, we have perhaps to turn this relationship on its head to understand how language structures the world for us, how wives remain wives, and hats, hats.

The implications of this for the censor's rule book are nothing short of profound. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. The censor mistakes the trees for the wood; (s)he regards it as a concatenation of discrete elements, making it possible to eliminate unhealthy species from the whole, to make it follow the dictums of her/his li'l black book. The time has come to rethink the differences between *kokam* sherbet and Coca-Cola, wives and hats.

Meanings are like eels, they slip out of your grasp. How will the censors deal with someone who chooses to read the unprintables in the Oxford Dictionary of English? They have been able to do precious little with film songs that play on double entendre. Dada Kondke, the popular Marathi filmmaker/actor has been their bane. During the Emergency, all newspapers were under a tight regime of censorship. *The Indian Express* responded by leaving its editorial column blank. The censors had a taste of

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one of compliance. The codes of this system do not obtain from the speaking subject. The subject does not 'use' language, rather language speaks through the subject; (iii) The sign is the basic unit of language, which attains its value due to the relations internal to it, viz., that between the signifier and the signified. The relation between a sign and a thing is fictional. Thus, langue is a system without terms, without a speaking subject and without things .... Structuralism denotes a break from the classical tradition in which language stays in mimetic harmony with the world, language as a representation of nature and the world. The sign with its internal relationship effects two shifts: 1. By conceiving of the sign as an interplay between signifier and signified, without any concrete historical materiality other than this relationship, it breaks off with a world outside. The world and the word do not share the responsibility of living up to each other. 2. The sign being a relational entity, within a system of oppositions implies a retrenchment of a subject. This is a shift towards 'signification', from an act of mere representation.

K.P Jayasankar, 'The Speaking Subject—A Preamble to Vedanta' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Bombay, 1989).

the gaping abyss of meanings. Can they control *shunyata* (emptiness) like they claim to do with men and hats?

A conversation with Kalyani:[4]

K: Does everybody die?
J: Yes ....
K. This stone here?
J: No.
K. Why?
J: Only living things die, the stone is not a living thing ....
K. What about our *living* room?

Kalyani listens to the story of Red Riding Hood. Kalyani's parents are eager to expatiate on a critique based on gender She discovers an 'ecological' slant instead: 'Why do you think the wolf is out doing naughty things? Because the wood-cutter (the hero of the story) is cutting down trees. The wolf has no place to stay ....'

How would the censor plug such oppositional readings? Do meaning filters work or should it be, to use a much maligned term, a process of 'empowering viewers/readers' to read between the lines'?[5] The answer, my friend, is blowing in the air waves ....

the 'impactors' who mistook their 'impactees' for blank slates

Any process of empowerment has to rethink the conception of the viewer as *tabula rasa,* a blank tablet on which the media write their messages. This brings us back to the issue of the man who mistook his wife for a hat and his impact on other men. The crucial question is whether one could talk about 'impact' at all, if by impact one understands a uni-directional behavioural change that can be predicted and controlled. If the media were so powerful as to corrupt anyone, why is it that, say, development messages do not 'corrupt' any one? How many of

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[4] Kalyani Monteiro-Jayasankar is the 13-year-old daughter of the authors. She was three at the time of the first conversation and almost five at the second.

[5] K.P Jayasankar and A. Monteiro, 'The Plot Thickens'

us would give up smoking after seeing anti-smoking media artefacts? It is simplistic to assume that we are Pavlov's dogs, salivating at the sound of the media bell! This preoccupation with the 'harmful' impact of our above mentioned man with wife with a mistaken identity on other men with wives and hats, sets up a hierarchy between the all-knowing, immutable censor as opposed to a malleable passive audience. All censors bracket themselves out of this mythical circle of 'impactees' and perceive these effects only on the 'powerless' beings like youth, children and the illiterate rural populace with their rustic headgear. These naive beings should not mistake their wives for turbans.[6]

Where does this land us? In a relativistic, censor-free semiotic paradise where a thousand meanings bloom?[7] Our purpose is not to celebrate a *laissez-faire* economy of meanings, but to question the oft taken for granted terms of the debate on censorship. Can we function with the conceptual crudity of the censors, who can not see beyond their noses, their hats, which makes possible the excision of an aesthetically pleasing kiss from a feature

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[6] At the heart of this is a set of 'dividing practices' See M. Foucault, 'Afterword: The Subject and Power' in H.L. Dreyfus and P Rainbow (eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* [Sussex: Harvester Press, 1986], which posits a normal, modern 'Us' versus a traditional, deviant 'Them' The whole enterprise of censorship as well as development communication privileges this relation of power between hats and turbans (A. Monteiro and K.P Jayasankar, 'The Spectator–Indian: An Exploratory Study on the Reception of News, *Cultural Studies,* 8(1): 162–82, 1994).

[7] 'The seminal work done by cultural studies theorists like Stuart Hall, David Morley and Ien Ang demonstrates that the emergence of dominant/popular cultural codes, values and ways of seeing is a complex phenomenon. The media are only one among many systems that play a role in reproducing the dominant culture. The meaning of a media text does not lie merely in the text itself, but emerges from its articulation in a social field, its interplay with other elements and its incorporation into *specific* practices. In other words, while there is an agenda of the text, there is also the agenda of the reader and the meanings constructed will depend on the discourses that are brought to bear in *specifc* reader–text encounters' There has been an ongoing debate within cultural studies on the question of the autonomy of audiences to construct their own meanings at variance with the agenda of the text. For instance, John Fiske (cited by D. Morley, 'Populism, Revisionism and the "New" Audience Research' in J. Curran et al. (eds) *Cultural Studies and Communications* [London: Arnold, 1996]), celebrates the notion of a 'semiotic democracy', where individuals situated within varying subcultures interpret media texts in polysemic ways. We do not fully endorse Fiske's view and would not romanticise the ability of readers to resist the agenda of the text consistently.

film on the grounds that the rule book says no, and the passing of song and dance sequences bordering on surrogate fornication, because the rule book does not say no?

We have traditions in India which allow us to read aloud, in family settings, verses from *Geeta Govindam* or *Soundarya Lahari*. Pornography is different from eroticism, because it makes only one single 'preferred reading'[8] of the text, privileging it over all other readings. A text like *Geeta Govindam*, with its explicit references to the erotic, transcends the logic of pornography It does not reduce its structures to one meaning, nor does it allow the reader to constitute him(her)self as a privileged voyeur This is what makes a *bhakti* reading of it possible. How can the censor, with his/her basic propositions, deal with the complexity of representation and reading?

The censor, by concentrating on the most obvious and visible forms of transgression, disregards the subtle ways in which the media reproduce norms of the dominant culture, be they related to gender, class or race. These, by the very nature of the relationship between media and culture, cannot be censored out. They belong to the realm of the 'normal' [9] They form the very fabric of the text.[10] It is perhaps the reproduction of these levels of meaning that is more insidious and lethal.[11]

We need to go beyond thumb rules, beyond the censor's simplistic propositions, beyond impactors and impactees, men and hats, to look at our media and culture as a terrain of struggle over meanings. The choices are not general and moralistic: they are specific and political. Beneath the *choli* of meanings, there exist many layers, the skin, tissues, muscles, pure pornography, or as a paediatrician in Goa put it, breast milk!

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[8] S. Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding' in S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P Willis (eds), *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

[9] R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

[10] One of the authors has functioned on the Regional Panel of the Central Board of Film Certification and has had the frustrating experience of being confronted with a film which did not have a single 'objectionable' shot, as per the censor board's guidelines, yet was totally obnoxious in its overall construction of gender.

[11] This relates to the point being made by Rustom Bharucha, who, in a seminal analysis of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?*, explores how the seemingly innocuous 'appears to the idiom most deeply related to the "banality of evil" in our times' (R. Bharucha, 'Utopia in Bollywood—"Hum Aapke Hain Kaun ....?"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 April 1995: 801–04).