



On the Record: Global Movement for Children

Issue 10: Competing with Bollywood

From the AP Editorial Desk

The Center for Advocacy and Research tries to moderate the disturbing impact of the media and entertainment industry on children

The Center for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) is a media research organization based in the Indian capital of New Delhi. The organization monitors print, television, radio, and advertising in order to document trends. It also advocates for an equitable and humane treatment of women and children in the Indian media.

CFAR organizes community-based viewer's forums to gauge the reaction of audiences to advertisements or television shows. It also connects audiences with government leaders and media professionals so that those who control and create the media are made to feel accountable to those who consume it.

Amongst low-income children, CFAR has consistently found that television is the most popular form of entertainment. At least eighty percent of these children have access to a television set and watch an average of three hours per day. Half of these children are watching cable television.



Neha attends a CFAR workshop. She notes that her young brother has been sent to a private school, but that she only attends public school.

Soap operas, cartoons, and horror shows are the most popular programs among Indian children, according to CFAR. Since economic liberalization was introduced in India, the number of channels available to Indian viewers has gone up rapidly. According to a UNESCO report ("The Killing Screen") Indians had access to only one, state-run television channel in 1992. Within six years the number of television channels had shot up to more than 50. The impact on children, say CFAR activists, has been profound.

Perhaps the most poignant examples come from the depiction of real life events, which are often blurred with fantasy especially in the minds of young people under seven years of age. Following the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States, Indian television stations continually replayed the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. After watching this, one child from a slum resettlement community on the outskirts of Delhi said: "We want a war. There should be a war now. We want to watch it. For us, it's like a film."

Similarly, Indian stations continually replayed disturbing footage of the death and devastation that followed the earthquake that struck the Western state of Gujarat in the year 2000.

Under the Influence: the Media plays a critical role in determining how children see the world and themselves.

"For those watching and especially the children," says Akila Shivdas, CFAR Executive Director, "the media coverage was more traumatizing than the actual event." And for street children, disabled children, or those living in poverty-stricken slums or slum resettlement communities, violent media only adds to the trauma of a life of deprivation.



The combination of trauma and violence has been so devastating for disadvantaged children that CFAR was able to convince the STAR TV Network to do an in-depth portrait of the impact of 9/11 on a slum child. "This yielded a very moving, thoughtful and revelatory piece," says Shivdas. "This was also an example of our strategy to educate those who create media about the impact their work has on children."

Unfortunately, the impact has been limited. For in addition to creating a culture of violence, the Indian soap opera and film culture – Bollywood remains the largest producer of feature length films in the world – is also encouraging a culture of rampant consumerism that promotes subtle and sometimes not so subtle ideals of beauty, violence, and success.

"Right now we're on the war path with fairness creams," says Shivdas. "We're certainly lobbying the ad council and speaking to government ministers but we're also trying to empower communities from the grassroots up. We're trying to educate television viewers, especially disadvantaged children, to make their own choices. We're asking viewers, especially young viewers, to ask whether this product will really be effective, is it safe, how true is it that I won't get a husband if I don't buy this product. We're trying to educate these children to be critical viewers and to resist being manipulated by advertising."

CFAR, in conjunction with UNICEF, also runs a number of special, theme oriented programs on "International Children's Day of Broadcasting," which is celebrated in the second week of December. In 2001, CFAR focused its ICDB programming around the issue of capital punishment. This encouraged children to talk about the abuse and domestic violence they're exposed to on a daily basis. The special guest for the day was Kiran Bedi, a legendary Indian policewoman who became one of the country's first police chiefs and has been an outspoken proponent for women's rights.

CFAR also operates a number of community-based media education programs in slum and slum resettlement communities throughout New Delhi.