

Influence of the Visual Semiotics of Media and the Socio-Cultural Changes of the Rural Masses in Sri Lanka (A Sociological Analysis)

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Abstract: The concepts of semiotics and visual communication in the media landscape have become popular themes in the 21st century. These have formed a new conceptual and theoretical frame as a new carrier in the field of social sciences. The masses experience the world predominantly through perspectives. Unique power of the vision of the man constructs the visual perception through worldly matters and discerns the meaning and notices the differences between them. Signs and symbols are influential in visual communication and they can be described denotatively and connotatively. Syntactic, semantic and pragmatic are the main theoretical aspects of semiotics. The conventional masses have to engage in a contradictory mission since the inception of modern visual communication of media into the rural territoriality. This traditional ideology and the culture have been changed to a greater extent by the visual methods of numerous channels of media. Audience segmentation is the specific case of this social construction. Early segmentation was based on gender, race or ethnicity, caste etc. But it has been quickly developed into a complex of factors that push and pull individuals towards diffusion and assimilation or the maintenance of socio-cultural distinctiveness of the dominant society constructed by the visual aspect of media communication.

[Dharma Keerthi Sri Ranjan. **Influence of the Visual Semiotics of Media and the Socio-Cultural Changes of the Rural Masses in Sri Lanka, (A Sociological Analysis)**. *J Am Sci* 2015;11(3):1-6]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.jofamericanscience.org>. 1

Keywords: Visual Communication, Ideology, Rural Masses, Social Change.

01. Introduction

Human species unravel the reasons for their existence by consuming and satisfying their needs. This has led it to evoke “signs”, “sign system” and “symbols”, which later developed into languages, arts and science to satisfy the exact needs of man. Man was regulated by the accumulated meanings of semiotics captured and preserved by the previous generation. He developed the culture everywhere opposed to the nature of the world with the help of the biological advantage of the skills of communication. Accordingly, communication has developed into a culture and culture developed many patterns of communication. Anthropologists like Edward Sapir (1884–1939) says that every single act of social behavior of man and the every pattern of culture encompasses communication in either an explicit or implicit sense (Seligman, 1951). But every pattern and the signs of communication are indefinitely varied as forms and meanings from society to society.

Since the mid -twentieth century, semiotics has been developed into an enormous field encompassing the language, gestures, eye contacts, arts, rituals, clothing, rhetorical discourse, visual communication etc. But the term *semeiotic* was coined by Hippocrates (460-377 BC) first and was the founder of Western medical science, as the science of symptoms. The symptom, Hippocrates claimed, was

semeion- the Greek word for a physical “mark” or “sign.” The oldest custom of the term semiotic was essentially in medical diagnosis.

Semiotics is a human construct and it includes both the synchronic and diachronic study introduced by Saussure. Although, the general study of semiosis comes under the rubric of biosemiotics, whereas in the specific cultural contexts, it comes under the rubric of cultural semiotics. Semiotics is a deep concept and a paradoxical discipline described later by the sociology, anthropology, psychology, mythology and in a broader sense of philosophy, cognitive sciences and especially linguistics, epistemology, and the other sciences of communication. This evidence emphasizes that semiotics have been expanding in a number of directions since the early turn-of-the-century effort of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) in the U.S. and Ferdinand Saussure (1857–1913) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908 – 2009) in France.

The European tradition of semiology was evolved from the science of linguistics and the American tradition of semiotics can be perceived as the part of the comprehensive philosophical structure. The work of Louis Hjelmslev (1899, -1965), Roland Barthes (1915- 1980), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908 – 2009), Julia Kristeva, Christian Metz (1931-1993) and Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) were the followers of the tradition of semiology of Saussure whilst that

of Charles W. Morris (1901-1979), Ivor A. Richards (1893-1979), Charles K. Ogden (1889-1957) and Thomas Sebeok (1920- 2001) followed the semeiotic tradition of Peirce. But since later in 1960s, these two traditions were bridged by many leading semioticians (Wilfried, 1990; Daniel 2001). But the subject of Semiotics is not yet comprehensively institutionalized as an academic discipline in the world. It is still under the discourse of intellectuals whether semiotics is a science, a field of study or a discipline.

Signs, Symbols and Visual communication are the utmost natural means of human interaction. Sign is the most perceivable aspect of communication. According to Saussure a sign can be a tactile, auditory, or visual image. He divided the sign into two components as signifier (sound, image, or word), and the signified (meaning the signifier represents) (Saussure, 1974); Saussure, 1983). But according to Berger sign can mean different things to different people and produce multiple and complex meanings as a fundamental cultural activity. So the relations between the signifier and the signified are arbitrary and conventional. John Fiske says that signified' is the mental conception of the man and it represents common meanings to all members of the same culture (Fiske, 1990). According to the discourse of Umberto Eco, semiotics is a broad concept. It is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign (Eco, 1976).

The man in ancient times invented writing, painted pictures on cave walls, and told stories through paintings. The visual methods like paintings – and later photographs were much more powerful than any writing. Visual semiotics is a sub-domain of semiotics that helps analyze visual images. With the new generation of technology in the later twentieth century, visual communication became powerful. In the twenty first century high definition video is the pinnacle of visual communications technology, visual artifacts, visual culture which the western culture depends on. The masses of this era use the pattern of visual communication more intriguingly and effectively as a culture of network of intertwining sign system. This mode of visual communication is one of the offshoots of cultural semiotics.

Human beings are surrounded by visual semiotics brought by the new media and the modern media. Visual semiotics deconstructs the social structure and the ideological pattern of the masses. Media directly and indirectly affect cognitive and behavioral processes of man as a hypodermic needle blurring the reality into simulacra and destroying the distinction between people.

02. Methodology:

The empirical analysis was preceded in three aspects in order to measure the influence of visual communication and the cultural change of the rural masses in Sri Lanka. They are

- (1). Increase the Consciousness of Cultural Boundaries (ICB)
- (2). Belief on the Media more than on Religion (BMR)
- (3). Re-formalizing Belief System (RBS).

All the data was collected empirically from five selected rural villages in Sri Lanka and employed to measure the above coefficients. All the measures of the theoretical mechanism were positively related to the community scale, quite strongly.

The results were consistent mainly with much of the qualitative and quantitative data. Kruskal-Wallis & Mann-Whitney Tests have been employed to measure the Quantitative data collected from the 100 questionnaires from the 100 people in the sample. To construct the overall measures of the social change of the rural masses I compute and employ the above scale which is derived from the ethnographic rating. The results paint a descriptive picture of the changing aspect of the rural masses of Sri Lankan village.

03. Visual Communication and Its Social Effectiveness:

Visual communication encompasses everyday life of the masses. It has developed the attitudes of the people to cater for the mediated performances through the electronic media like television, web pages and environmental contexts such as road signs and retail displays. Visual communication manages the people powerfully and causes them to depend on the visual artifacts more than ever before. Sri Lankan masses access this visual culture coming through the new media and the modern media. The most intriguing evidence is that the people not only communicate visually more than before, they have also improved communicative skills better when they communicate visually.

Visual components are far more effective than other patterns of communication. The studies of the psychologist Jerome Bruner of New York University found that the people only remember 10% of what they hear and 20% of what they read, but about 70 percent of what they see and do (Lester, 2006). Researchers of U.S. department of labor have observed that 83% of human learning occurs visually (U. S. Department of Labor, 1996). Researchers at the Wharton School of Business found that visual languages were more persuasive and 67% of them felt that presenters who combined visual and verbal elements were more persuasive than others.

04. Visual Communication, Ideology and the Sri Lankan Society:

The ideology is a deep and broad concept described by Napoleon in a pejorative sense, and redefined later philosophically by Marx and Engels. For Marx and Engels, ideologies are the structures of fabricated impressions which represent consciousness of the dominant class to use, to promote and legitimize the power. Media create and promote the western ideology through semiotics pretending, deceiving and manipulating the masses in society. This critical view of ideology refused to recognize the social and cultural systems and methods of the rural people in Sri Lanka. But media absorb the traditional patterns of the masses of the periphery and reconstruct them at the center according to the western ideology and re-telecast for the periphery masses. For example we can consider songs of the Vadda people (indigenous tribe) in Sri Lanka.

According to Raymond Aron “ideology is the thought of others or even of the enemy” (Reis, 1993. P.7). They plant and cultivate their ideas and systems emphasizing the masses as most modern, accurate and scientific excluding every suspicion in the minds of the Sri Lankan masses. Transnational media have predestined and made essential contribution to develop their own ideology in the peripheral countries of the world. As a result of this, the Sri Lankan society has been changed considerably through this applied semiotics brought forward by media through many channels and programs. This has been strong enough to change the cognitive process and the sensory activities of the rural masses and actions of the groups, social and political attitudes of the people, social class and society as a whole.

The concept of ideology is the value-neutral term without any positive or negative connotations (Dierse & Romberg, 1976). The media and the pattern of communication from the ancient history have been unethically dishonest about the term ideology including the false system of ideas frequently connected to conservative or liberal view of social system. Bakhtin and Medvedev argued that the ideology can be considered as a quasi-synonym of “culture”. According to them ‘All the products of ideological creation — works of art, scientific works, religious symbols and rites, etc. — are material things, part of the practical reality that surrounds man’ (Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1928. P.7). Ideology comprises the sign and sign systems.

According to the pan-semiotic ideology of Voloshinov ‘everything ideological possesses meaning: it represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself. In other words, it is a

sign. Without signs, there is no ideology’ (Voloshinov, 1930. P.9). His argument further clarified that all the signs are permeated with ideology. The theoretical perspectives emphasize that all the signs do not exist as a part of reality. Most probably it retracts another reality and is subject to the ideological evolution. Sign is the present semiotic value. (Voloshinov 1930).

The modern and new media have been forcing the rural masses to share information about the global enlightening traditions and the structure of values. The mass media and the information know-how have been increasingly becoming authoritative instruments, pressurizing the global market behavior, values and behavioral patterns of the rural villagers in Sri Lanka. The aim is to reap the benefits of mass media; its extreme manipulation pressurizes to undermine indigenous traditions and value- system.

The central elements in the mass media have two related purposes: to reach the largest possible audience and to reach the ideal (target) audience for its products. Accordingly, media promote products in more than one medium; which may be composed of billboards, newspapers, radio, magazines and televisions etc. Mass media mostly concentrate on the super structural ways of the society and lead the people for the glamorous effects and benefits. They have been shifting consumerism from the self-governing system to the dependent marketing organism.

Television is a strong influential instrument in the Sri Lankan social context. Its influence on the people’s behavior is heavy through its visual impact than other media. *ie:* In the Sri Lankan rural social context, 82.4% people out of 97.2% are stimulated for the western pattern by the television. Newspaper reading has been second in motivating the rural masses for new ideological behavior (81.8% out of 96.7%). But the motivation by the radio in this regard is 77.9% out of its total listeners (92.1%).

Accordingly, media have created a virtual world carrying a certain meaning to the mind of the people. This world cannot be a hyper- reality but it can be a semiotic world.

05. Influence of Visual Communication on the Rural Cultural Context of Sri Lanka

Visual communication is the most constitutive elements in the transformation of the rural social culture. Culture can be considered as cohesion of shared sentiments and beliefs that govern the mass consciousness. Culture is not natural in this sense. Culture comprises all the things that have been built, created, learned, traditions practiced, and conquered in the course of human history (Trotsky, 1973). It includes whole ways and patterns of life (Williams,

1976). The masses are conscious of their own social actions and interactions because they live in their cultural practices and they give meaning to the ways they live. But ideology and culture is created and re-created by the dominant groups, and consciously misrepresent the people or conceal social inequality and ideals of freedom. Ideology that systematically incorporated and expressed arises from cultural practices. Accordingly, ideas cannot float freely. It depends on people articulating thoughts. Politics of culture, tangible material benefits of culture, and meaningful cultural practices are completely interrelated and insist them on the cultural hegemony in society. Hegemony can be considered as an elusive moment in social conflict. Cultural practices, ideology, hegemony and the other symbolic meanings communicate the philosophy of life.

In the Sri Lankan rural social context, the traditional communication patterns still utilize the cultural codes in order to bring the incongruent elements into a congruous accumulation. Social solidarity of the rural masses is based on the collective feelings or collective consciousness. The Sri Lankan rural socio-cultural context can be elaborated in holistic approach: it bears up with the functional qualities of desire and restraint, chaos and

order, freedom and control which manage the behavior of the masses. The masses are enmeshed in the net of rural social and cultural coercion from its long history. The consequences trot out that the communities still can be regarded as unified wholes whose precise attributes distinguish them from their fellow neighbors.

The internal aspect of the homogeneity of the rural masses articulates through history, traditions, language, as well as the arts, both the cultivated and popular. It has also been enraptured by magic, traditional and charismatic authority. The rural masses living in this cultural context are sensitized. Accordingly, without any semantic finesse, one could find that the rural culture is the identity of the rural masses.

The inferential data in the table 01 below demonstrate how far these homogeneous rural populations have been changed by the heavy influence of media with the central experience. It divulges that the media consistency over the cultural change of the rural masses is at the rate of significance level $P = 0.01$ except the variable of gender. It remarks the level below at 95%. The gender substances in the Sri Lankan social context particularly towards women are extremely traditional.

Table 1. Profile of Cultural Change

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Asymp. Sig.
Age Group and Change of Culture (ACC)	10.7020	1.89388	.000
Education and Change of Culture (ECC)	10.7020	1.89388	.019
Occupation and Cultural Change (OCC)	10.7020	1.89388	.001
Monthly Income and Change of Culture (MICC)	10.7020	1.89388	.006
			Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender and Change of Culture (GCC)	10.7020	1.89388	.750
Civil Status and Change of Culture (CSCC)	10.7020	1.89388	.000

Kruskal-Wallis & Mann-Whitney Tests

The age category, civil status, occupation, monthly income, represented in the table 01 consolidate the media consistency at the towering stage of the rural masses towards the cultural change [ACC: $P = 0.000$; CSCC: $P = 0.000$; OCC: $P = 0.001$; monthly income: $P = 0.006$]. But media consistency over the education indicates the significant ratio at the level below 99% [ECC: $P = 0.019$]. The main cause found in this research to maintain the educational ratio at the level below 99%, is the establishment of the Buddhist culture and Buddhist education over the masses through the Buddhist schools (Sunday schools) and other programs delivered daily by the Buddhist temples. The rural masses are brought up with the central experiences of the Buddhist culture. Buddhist monks structured their messages on the lay people over the multi-faceted

and fascinating communication styles: *ie*: parables, allegories, tropes, wit, humor, rhetoric etc. Buddhist monasteries interact in multifaceted ways with the daily routine of the people in the rural social structure: *ie*: rural economy, political, individual and social life, and all the other cultural events. So, religion is the inseparable part of the life of the rural society and culture. The consciousness of the rural masses about the religion is very powerful.

Though the significant level is high in the above table at macro level, the episode of its own coefficients dissimilarly elaborate the consequence at micro level with insignificant ending at some coefficients in order to express the ideal impact of the media on the traditional masses. The coefficient, "Belief on the Media than on the Religion" (BMR), "Increases the Consciousness of Cultural

Boundaries” (ICB), “Re-formalizing Belief System” (RBS) that extended in the following tables. They are the main criterion utilized in this context in order to measure the cultural changes of the rural masses.

These main coefficients are tested with the independent variables and indicate the subsequent social process as the results of digestions of materials of media, consume by the rural masses.

Tabel 2. Influence of Visual Communication on Culture

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable Asymp. Sig.					
	Age	Gender	Civil Status	Education	Occupation	Monthly Income
Belief on the Media than on the Religion (BMR)	.001	.816	.004	.181	.730	.019
Increase the Consciousness of Cultural Boundaries (ICB)	.000	.128	.840	.435	.013	.000
Re-formalizing Belief System (RBS)	.153	.120	.121	.094	.240	.000

Kruskal-Wallis Test

Media consistency on the coefficient “Belief on the media than on the religion” is significant at the level of 99% and 95% consecutively towards the groups of age, civil status and the monthly income [BMR: - age: $P = 0.001$; civil status: 0.004 ; monthly income: $P = 0.019$]. Rural cultural implications are decisive in creating and maintaining the belief patterns (patterns develop into a system) in the consciousness of the rural masses. The masses living in these pristine microcosms are powerfully persuaded and offered the opportunity for an original insight into the structure. But, the power of the media has been remarkably influential on age, civil status, and monthly income variables of the rural masses and subjugates them for the deliberate changing though the religious and rural social structural impact is considerably high. Media consistency is negative at the gender and occupation variables of the coefficient of belief on the media than on the religion. It remarks them below at the level of 95%. But the belief on the media is significant than the religion in the monthly income. [BMR: - gender: $P = 0.816$; occupation: $P = 0.730$; monthly income: $P = 0.019$]. These characteristics are still bound with the religious phenomenon rather than with the media programs. The activities of the gender and occupation of the rural masses remain static with the religion and mythology still alive in the village premises. The data reveals that the media have been contributing towards the monthly income generation of the rural masses though the influence of the religious institution is considerably high on the masses. Religious impact on the decision making and other forms for future planning programs on the economy cannot be underrated in the Sri Lankan social context. This has been arising a short term and a long term impact on the rural masses’ impressions of the material development. The effect of religious activities tends to fall into two groups of effects: Perceptual effects and attitudinal effects. Accordingly the rural masses have been glued by the religious performances so that

they will not miss the messages passed towards them under the concepts of “Merit and Demerit”, and the “satisfaction with what they received” (*concept of Karma Dharma and Santussako*). These concepts have constructed a wrong iconic memory in the perception of masses. The misuse of the pure concepts of Buddhism master the rural masses for the irrational environment further, and would stimulate their self – esteem needs on this base of tradition. This has inevitably seeped into masses’ unconsciousness through the reactivation of neuronal firing patterns. This subliminal perception and attention are a sufficient motivation for general suspicion and distrust against the most programs of the media.

Media relevance on the co-efficiency of “Increase the Consciousness of Cultural Boundaries” (ICB) is significant at the age, monthly income and occupation variables in the sample [ICB: - age: $P = 0.000$; monthly income: $P = 0.000$; occupation: $P = 0.013$; RBS: - monthly income: $P = 0.000$]. The descriptive analysis demonstrates that the media influence towards the increase of the consciousness of the cultural boundaries (ICB) is high and it has maintained the ratio at 85.3% of the total population. The highest media influencing age group, on this ward in the sample is 29 – 38 that identify numerically as 21.8% and at the same time it remarks the lowest age group as over 59 (8.4%). The highest monthly income group in the sample has increased their knowledge beyond the own cultural premises as the result of the media influence (31.6%).

The major changes have been developing in the occupational characteristics of the rural masses as a result of widening up the knowledge of the cultural boundaries. Accordingly, due to the media influence the agricultural base economy has been gradually shifting towards commercial service economy. (Agriculture = 27.2%; Commercial = 30.6%). Media introduce many commercial opportunities where in the urban areas for masses at the periphery and

structure them in their perception as money making businesses.

According to the empirical data in the sample the rural social culture has not been considerably changed by the influence of media. But the media have been influencing towards their patterns of monthly income and some aspects of their occupation. Belief system has not still been remarkably changed by the media. Belief on a greater religion is still powerful than the belief in the media among the rural masses.

Conclusion

According to the previous research and the above data, it is evident that the world is experienced through our eyes. Media have designed many forms of visual communication and let the people entertain through moving images such as film, television etc. Most probably the visual perception conveys objects in the world to our brains at high speed attractively and sensitively. Dr. Colin Ware of the University of New Hampshire has expertly explained the significance of the visualization and how it works. The rural masses are stimulated invariably to assume the global life styles of conspicuous consumption through the media. The advertisements have mostly satisfied the women's needs in Sri Lanka. The most vivid change is seen in their way of thinking which is reflected in their advance to clothes, to concept of love and beauty and other lifestyle and images, which are continuously impressed upon their minds through media. The rural masses at the periphery are stimulating for the transitional era, exhibiting hybrid formations of the culture, as a result of work round the clock programs of the central hegemonic media that broadcast into the village. This "hybridization" or "glocalization" of the rural masses can be considered as a transient patchwork of cultural material which has an impact on the context motive. But the attitudes which are compressed by the traditions of the masses in the villages deserve less sensation for change, though it seems susceptible relations of the superstructure to the process of communicational hypodermic effect. Accordingly, though their feelings have proliferated from social integration to media integration, masses still utilize the traditional measurements of their own structural causes to analyze the programs of media.

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