Horrible Networks - When Media Kill Ethics

Sudhiti Naskar, Ph.D. Student, Communication & Journalism, The University of New Mexico

Networks are organizations of people and their interests. Without networks, societies would collapse. However, in recent times, several societies in various nations have observed that networks can breed hatred, lies, increased discrimination, and racism, thereby crippling democracies and eroding their ethical fabrics. In an increasingly digital and technology-empowered world that’s mutually networked, the functions and objectives of networks need special attention, mainly because there is scarce understanding about their compositions, organizations, and operations. In Communication, one of the ways networks are understood is through the concepts of first-order networks that include infrastructural units like TV stations, towers, switches, devices, and cables, and the second-order networks that include the “social, user-driven by-products” of the first-order networks (Agur, 2015). The user-driven by-products may be news programming, sharing of information, and other media serving as intermediaries between people and institutions. However, the goals of large, complex first-order networks such as broadcasting media can drastically change over a period of time, possibly even working against the original goals of communicating facts to the audience. The present project provides a case study of Republic TV in India, which illegally engineered Television Rating Points (TRP) to position itself at the top of the broadcasting networks. After (illegally/unethically) staying on top of the TRP for years, Republic TV was able to influence politically polarized, factually-compromised news programming across TV channels. The cumulative effects of such news programming deepened pre-existing anti-minority attitudes toward Muslims and Christians and framed the democratic rights of free speech and dissent as criminal activities. Thus, focusing on second-order networks can help us understand the media’s role in the erosion of ethics and dialogue in societies across borders, including the USA. The project serves two purposes: first, shedding light on the media’s role in intentional, coordinated socio-political polarization, and second, advocating for re-prioritization of ethics as part of the media’s news programming and daily operations. Reference: Agur, C. Second-order networks, gambling, and corruption on Indian mobile phone networks. (2015). Media, Culture & Society, 37(5), 768-783. doi:10.1177/0163443715587873