

## **MEDIA, RISK AND SCIENCE**

*Review by*

**B. Sunil**

Deputy Director

Symbiosis Institute of Media & Communication, Bengaluru, (SIMC-B)

Bengaluru-560100, Karnataka, India

Website: www.simc.edu.in

Email: *besunil@hotmail.com*

## **MEDIA, RISK AND SCIENCE**

**Stuart Allan, Open University Press, Buckingham, 2002 pp 252 price Rs.3477 ISBN  
9780335206629**

Astrology was replaced by Astronomy; Numerology gave way to Mathematics and Alchemy abandoned for Chemistry. Over time our observations which accumulated and organized into various fields of study that we collectively terms as science. In fact science is the language of the universe through which we frame questions and receive answers. Generally skimming through a newspapers one subject we never fail to spot is news stories on science. Most of the newspapers come out with regular supplements on science. There are special programmes on Radio, and even dedicated channels on Television informing, educating and entertaining audiences on science. Science in culture and science as culture are embedded in a complex array of social relations.

The book- *Media, Risk and Science* authored by Stuart Allan is a part of a series on issues in cultural and media studies. He teaches in the School of Cultural Studies at University of Bristol, and his previous works include *News Culture*(1999), Coauthored- *News, Gender and Power*(1998) and *Environmental Risks and the Media*.(2002)

The opening section begins by outlining how scientists want them to be projected and how media actually represents them. Do scientists have a problem expressing ideas to the public and does the news media have a complete understanding of science? As we studied that, a Journalist is a generalist not an expert. The two, perhaps distinctive views operating for one come goal- that to

inform public, will have a profound impact on the way people preserve the world around them and make a sense of it. Positioning him on the side of the scientists the author cautions that, 'The media's failure to give science the respect it deserves will have dire consequences for the future'.

Attempting to trace the evolution of science fiction as a distinct literary genre, there is a detailed mention to HG Well's novel- The war of the worlds which was later adapted into radio programme. The panic broadcast as it is popularly know always finds a mention in communication lectures as a classic example for direct, immediate and uniform effects of media, which is termed as the magic bullet theory. A great mention of the prospect of interplanetary travel, arguably the most celebrated of science fiction themes on Television, the Star Trek series which was aired in the US back in mid 60s and subsequently in India in the mid 80's beamed through Doordarshan took the audience into a world of adventures of starship, is made in the chapter titled Science Fictions. The author, however fails to acknowledge the contributions made by India and Persia who I believe are the earliest science fiction writers- the Fables-the Arabian nights..

One of the public opinion polls, the Gallup polls conducted in US, placed the figure at 27 per cent who believed that aliens exists. Allan attempts to draw a relationship between the popular science fiction in TV and films as a strong contributing factor for the belief. X-Files TV series which broadcasted by Fox science in early 90s was initially considered a cult show and eventually gained mainstream popularity is shown to be an important case in point in the chapter, Science in Popular Culture. There exists numerous popular cultural forms like the comic strips which are the first movers in science fiction but find no mention in the text.

The book then focuses on Science Journalism so as to ask: who defines what counts newsworthy science, under what conditions, and why. As Dunbar in 'The trouble with science' states, that news must have impact and, especially human interest to sell papers. But when science tries to compete with the social antics of great and the not so good, it has only limited chances of success. Routine science is believed to be rather boring. It lacks the stuff of drama necessary to spark lively newspaper headlines. Science journalist will often claim that they simply follow their gut' feeling', hunches or instincts when going about their daily work of identifying which science stories are sufficiently newsworthy. The author stresses upon the competence and credibility of the source in gathering information. Highlighting the process of Journalistic

narratives, Allan states, it should contain dispassionate facts and they must be marshaled into a balanced news story, ideally one with a distinct beginning, middle and end, as well as with easily identifiable good versus evil conflicts.

Media institutions are progressively more dominant and influential because they dictate the way issues are framed for public discussion. The ongoing debate about the ways in which the news and entertainment media represent scientific issues, and how their audiences are influenced as a result is echoed in the subsequent three chapters, Media Risk and the environment, Bodies at Risk: News Coverage of AIDS, Food Scares: Mad Cow and GM Foods, in the book. The core theme being - Media and Representation, of the above said issues. Particular attention is devoted to nuclear technologies in the context of risk society. How news media reported on the environmental issues, the worst chronic killer disease AIDS in its early years, the Mad Cow disease crisis projected as food scare in Britain has been elaborated in these chapters. Using excerpts of newspapers reports and select headlines of a same issue projected in the British and American press, the author tries to draw a comparison.

The final section of the book throws light on robots, androids, cyborgs, and clones and how media questions the ethical aspects of science through its reportage is discussed with suitable examples ranging from headlines, treatment of stories. Not reporting the relative credibility of multiple positions of an issue means the journalist is leaving it up to the reader to figure it out for themselves.

The Book spread over eight chapters investigates the numerous ways in which print, electronic (TV and Films) media present issues of science. It addresses the media portrayal which indirectly leads to cultural representation, using examples of both explicit and implicit discriminatory practices appearing in the media and provides a useful single volume for readers who want an overview of the many ways in which the media are currently studied and discussed.

An assertion made by the book that it aims to facilitate a diverse range of critical investigations into pressing questions considered being central to current thinking and research seems to be unmet. It fails into at least in throwing insights into new approaches of enquires in the field of science and media. In the new century, culture, society, and science will remain the central focus

of the media, though none of them (media, culture, society or science) will remain the same, each contributing to the mutual change and transformation of the others.

This book will be of elementary help not only to students of journalism but also media practitioners, academicians and the public in general about some of the issues related to representation of science and functioning of the media.

**About the author:** Prof. B. Sunil is the Deputy Director at Symbiosis Institute of Median and Communication, Bengaluru, he teaches Communication Theories and Cultural Studies. He is perusing PhD in Development Communication from Osmania University, Hyderabad