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FREEDOM, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND COMMERCIAL MEDIA

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In developing societies (like India for example), the off-late liberalisation, has resulted into things like opening of skies for the foreign commercial and entertainment media, use of sophisticated and super efficient technology and an incredible spurt in the impact of media on the thinking of the people and especially of the growing generation.

Media being in competition inter-se and also with other social institutions, have become hundred percent professional in their functioning, approach and outlook. The principles that guide them, one and all, are professionalism and careerism. So power, profit and professionalism are the three corners of the media- existence, an orbit within which they all move.

The once upon a time ideal of the society, canvassed very vigorously — the freedom of expression -, was in the past infact a value in absentia as the so-called civilised societies were ruled by the monarchies (now military dictators) who were mighty through the active support of the clergy. Both did not allow a single dissenting note. Freedom then therefore was a much sought after dream of the comparatively weak thinking people, politicians and writers and the media too that was indeed weak then. Hence Aeropagitica of Milton.

Libertarianism or freedom of the press is therefore the first Normative theory which provoked thinking people into believing that this alone should be the cardinal principle for 'expression industry'. Every other principle was supposed to be secondary and subservient.

Followed by development of ideology as a basis of human and state behaviour — the boost to it being given by the printing press and the Fourth Estate — the concept of freedom was dearer to most intellectuals than anything else and to them it was larger than their own life. This was alright for a long time till the emergence of omnipotent mass media of the 20th century — the radio, film, television and satellite

communication. The satellite and the dish antenna caused an acute professionalism sans values and at the same time, aided by computers and electronics, they became unparalleled in their potency and range in influencing human imagination, thinking and behaviour. William Carpenter has warned that they are new languages, the grammar of which is as yet little known.

Rise in efficiency supported the professionalism of the media and the most important casualty of this development is the value-based ideals of human society. (It is believed by some communication theoreticians that rise of ideology was commensurate with the rise of the printing press and vice-versa.) The domination of electronic media and their rampant powerful use by commercial people now has relegated the print media to rear places. (Ideology too has followed suit). In the race and the vying for the top the commercial media left the age-old considerations of what is right and what is wrong for the society, into dustbin and have started serving the dishes to their consumer audience without any concern for the social evil which is slowly entering and becoming an inseparable part of the thinking of young as well as functioning generations and finally eating into their vitals.

In India there are numerous commercial channels like Star, Zee, MTV, ATN, Soni and others. To their audiences, through subscribing cable operators, they provide an entertainment package with mainly 2 components - Sex and Violence. Even humour is given secondary importance. These 2 are also highly suggestive if not uninhibited and though there are warning labels like only for 18 and above, these are meant only for complying with the regulations of the state. There are no gatekeepers in the homes to keep a watch that a serial or a film for above 18, is not watched by below 18.

The ideal of freedom thus is exploited by these channels conveniently while turning a blind eye to the ideal of social responsibility. The norm of social responsibility of the media and the freedom to them to set their own goals and to work for them have become mutually exclusive and incompatible with each other as well as contradictory in principle in the present scenario of the commercial media.

The concept of social responsibility entails on the operators and performers duty to counsel prudence and show a positive concern for social well-being of the catered community. It is felt that in developing countries like India the slackening of atmosphere has released an inflow of foreign money and expertise and along with them a flood of promiscuous and unethical culture. The hitherto preserved sober native culture is slowly but surely giving way to a harsh, highpitched, gaudy and licentious new way of life. The TV make everything available to the impressionable minds in their own drawing rooms — sex, crime, jealousy, perfidy, brutality, violence, sadism, absurdity and inhuman bestial behavior that are pressed into service under the name of social realism. The impact of TV is so great that what is shown as a slice of life is believed by the new generations as the complete and whole life.

The film and the private TV Channel networks in India, either operated from within or without, have now near specialised in the art of inculcating ideas and generating aspirations which are totally private, individualistic, romantic and non-achievable. Big estates, luxury cars, starred hotels, rich food and wine, dating, premarital sex, violence on the street, retribution and vengeance, return of the superstitions and gods in a big way, populate the serials on the commercial channels and the films. The media are cashing on the suppressed and repressed desires of the young and functioning adults, the regular fulfilment of which in the present setup is not possible. The result being a widening gap between the actual reality and the supposed reality. Side by side it has also caused a rise in the aspirational level of the youth without any adequate corresponding felt need to set oneself for achieving this level in life. The media do not highlight the second important aspect of how, that is the social and ethical ways of achieving these. Thus for the media, freedom of expression has become a handy and convenient tool with a thin veneer of ethical touch to it for pedalling their own canoes at the cost of their social responsibility.

It is therefore felt necessary that before new and more damaging 'counterculture' is floated by the commercial media, in the developing societies, a rethinking has to be done on the status of freedom of the media vis-a-vis their social responsibility. Which

of the two values should be given more weightage and more significance? Freedom first or social responsibility? To me both are values but one of them is more desirable because of its role in achieving social well-being than the other. That is social responsibility of the media. It is painful to draw such a conclusion, considering the age old hallowed status of freedom of expression in all civilised societies. But the errant and highly professional behaviour of the commercial media has proved their incompetence to wear it responsibly by rupturing the balance between the two for their individualistic selfish ends. Media being socially responsible and answerable to the society, must give more weightage to the norm of social responsibility. This will not only make them credible but also will make them useful institutions working for social good. Unless freedom has a strong and visible current of social responsibility within it, there is every possibility of it leading to defacing of the very society which safeguards its survival.

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