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Reality In The Media:
The Creation / Production Of Media Content

By

Subir Ghosh
Reality In the Media: The Creation/Production of Media Content.

The public buys its opinion as it bags its meat, or takes in its milk on the principle that it is cheaper to do this than to keep a cow. So it is, but the milk is more likely to be watered" - Samuel Butler.

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August 4, 1992
Newspapers have been described as the first rough, drafts of history. But the interest of newspapers and media in general stretches far beyond a passing interest in events. A community needs news for the same reasons that a man needs eyes. It has to see where it is going. The duty of the press, in Walter Lippman's words, is to do "what every sovereign citizen is supposed to do but has not the time or interest to do for himself - that is, to gather information, pick out what is important, digest it thoroughly and without passion or prejudice relate it to the problems of the day".

In order to be able to participate in public life and to make important decisions, free-flowing and intelligent supply of news and views is essential for an individual in today's society. In the global village of the late 20th century where international events often influence the life of an individual and where individual tragedies are often played out on an international stage, the responsibility of the media in informing the public fairly, accurately and objectively in all matters of public interest is paramount.

With mounting communal tension, economic scandals and psychological warfare raging fiercely, media finds themselves in a position of tremendous responsibility today. Modern technology has created a small world and human beings are locked together in a tiny room where everyone is being forced to share the consequences of one another's actions. The media has the potential to help erase erroneous impressions and ease tensions. It can also create fears and needlessly perpetuate anxieties. It can shake people from complacency or it can lull them into unthinking and dangerous sleep. It was perhaps in this context that C.P. Scott, the founder of the Manchester Guardian, wrote: "Fundamentally, journalism implies honesty, cleanliness, courage, fairness and a sense of duty to the reader and the community. Neither in what it gives, nor in what it does not give, nor in the mode of presentation must the unclouded face of truth suffer wrong."

Journalism in the 20th century has been marked by a growing sense of social responsibility. Nearly a century ago, Joseph Pulitzer perceived the press as a relentless fighter for progress and reform. The press, he thought, would: "never tolerate injustice or corruption, never belong to any party, always oppose privileged classes and public plunderers, never lack sympathy with 


poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with merely printing news, always be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong”. Despite revolutionary changes in social perspective since Pulitzer's days, his ideas about the highest ideals of journalism have not been improved in any way.

Gandhiji felt that one of the objects of a newspaper should be to understand the popular feeling and give expression to it, another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments, the third is to expose fearlessly, popular defects. To Tilak, the purpose of his newspaper was "to work for the awakening of the people". The Indian press had led the struggle for freedom and generally pursued an anti-establishment goal. The press in India, unlike in the United States, has rarely been the target of public criticism, presumably because its role as a freedom fighter had traditionally invested it with high degree of trust and idealism.

But on the threshold of a new millenium, the press is no longer seen as a mission and neither, of course, as an exclusively commercial enterprise. Today, in a democratic, consumer-oriented, technological society that is increasingly dependent on exchange of information, the press and indeed the media have become all-pervasive, powerful force utterly indifferent to public welfare. To perform their public-service function and still remain free from government control, the press has become an ancillary to the big business. The scenario in the audio-visual medium is still dismal. Government-controlled media, despite occasional air of glasnost, continue to be the hand-maiden of the party in power, irrespective of its colour or creed.

The press has also become today's definition of economic and political power. It has turned into a battle ground for political and corporate warfare. It is progressively being used as a kind of leverage for vested interests through selective use of information in order to embarrass political and business rivals. The press in India had always taken an active, healthy interest in politics. But it was only after 1985 that it openly became a pawn in the political power game, propagating for this party or that in a blatantly partisan manner. In the process, it often forsakes its traditional role as a watchdog and tends to become a lapdog of the power hungry politicians.
Political ups and downs have infused in the press an exaggerated sense of its own power with the result that many in senior positions have been unable to resist the temptation of active involvement in politics. The distinction between an independent newspaper and a party organ has become progressively thin. The Bofors controversy, it is widely believed, has claimed an unlikely victim. The Press. The credibility of the media has been seriously eroded by the way evidence relating to the murky arms deal has been manipulated or suppressed by the vested interests within the media. It also raises thorny questions on the difference between reporting and exploiting the news.

The press seldom stops to take stock of its own performance and proverbially hysteric even about the most well-intentioned criticism. Ironically, the press seeks to put everybody's house in order except its own. There is no official code of ethics as in many other countries to exercise some sense of professional value and moral restraint.

The Indian press has also become a more competitive business today. Vinod Mehta has aptly observed that in the frantic quest for a soaring sales graph "only those prepared to soil their hands survive in this dog-eat-dog business". The front page often becomes a battlefield with newspapers openly campaigning for business interests in the media war between the powerful business rivals. A battle for corporate take over now-a-days rages more fiercely in the pages of the newspapers than in the Boardroom of the companies. The press, it is well-known, was the main instrument for the running battle between the Reliance and the Bomby Dyeing for the larger share of the synthetic fibre market in India. The struggle for corporate supremacy between Swraj Paul and the Escorts, between S P Acharya of the Shaw Wallace and the Chabbrias, between the Ambanis and the LIC for Larsen and Toubro, between the Chabbrias and the Gammon India was launched essentially in the newspapers through slanted and selective information, calculated leaks and sometimes even a smear campaign. Obviously, in such a context, with private interests subverting the public cause, the concepts of ethics and social responsibility of the press have become irrelevant.

Therefore, there is a premium on the exclusive, the special, gossip masquerading as fact, sensational accusations and the seamy details of the private lives of public figures. In this cut and thrust situation, the breaking
of confidences, the reporting of off-the-record or private conversations, the outright lie, the intentional "plant" have become the accepted tricks of the trade.

No wonder, in this murky and troublesome times, the press is increasingly being seen to take resort to invading privacy, smearing reputations, practising deception, reporting gossip and rumour and failing to correct errors promptly and conspicuously or even admitting that errors have been made. The sane and sober voice of the senior citizens like Nikhil Chakraborty, S Nihal Singh and M V Kamath pleading prudence are often lost in the mindless scramble for sensation and circulation.

The press in such a situation is seen to exercise power without responsibility or as Henry A Wallace, editor of the New Public used to believe: "Reactionaries call the tune and the daily press dances to it". The average citizen does not know where to seek redressal if his trust is exploited as commerce. The indictments of the Press Council are seldom taken seriously by the press and the extent of the damage caused is hardly compensated by the redress offered. Besides, the Press Council is a body peopled overwhelmingly with journalists and serves only as their cosmetic conscience.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that journalists apply a double standard to the reporting of news. They would preach about the need to eradicate superstitious beliefs and give a lip-service to promote scientific temper. But in actual practice, most of the newspapers would give an elaborate coverage to daily or weekly astrological predictions. The shortcomings of journalists and of media generally seem to be unmentionable by the media. The media will name public officials who received preferential treatment by the government in the allotment of public utilities like land, flats, permits, etc, but would seldom run a story giving the names of editors and reporters who also have been beneficiaries of the same privilege. In fact, there is a general reluctance to write about the press with the same insight and scepticism employed in covering almost all other institutions.

Most reporters are generalists but they are often asked to cover highly specialised subjects. This is particularly critical when the subject is business or economics. All too frequently, the result is inaccurate information. Material
Jain, the distinguished former editor of the Times of India thinks: "The press does not inform. It only creates the illusion in the mind of the reader that he is being informed. It reports and comments, often without reservation and qualification on developments about the background of which it knows precious little". As a professional journalist has confessed: "News is a business, a competitive business. The element of competition has much to do with what we do and it is vital. If we all spoke with one voice, it would be a calamity. But competition brings about some abuses. It sometimes takes us into hasty reporting that later, we have to pull back. It may encourage exaggeration for the sake of a strong lead not justified by the rest of the story. It may result in sheer sensationalism".

Many have seen in this a betrayal of trust, reposed in the press by its readers. Clearly it is no longer enough to know who's who in the Indian press. One must also know who's whose. An inevitable fallout of this growing disillusionment is that its image as a guardian of the society is being replaced by that of an opportunist time-server, out to make a quick buck in troubled times. This cynicism is best summed up perhaps in these lines of the British satirist Humbert Wolfe:

No one can ever bribe or twist,
Thank God, the British Journalist,
But seeing what the chap will do
Unbribed, there's no occasion to.

Spiro Agnew, the Vice-President of the United States, spoke of the media in these words in 1969: "A small group of men, numbering perhaps no more than dozen, decide what 40 to 50 million Americans will learn of the day's events in the nation and the world ......... To a man these commentators and producers live and work in the geographical and intellectual confines of Washington D.C, or New York city .... They draw their political and social views from the same sources. Worse, they talk constantly to one another, thereby providing artificial reinforcement to their shared viewpoints." Substitute the United States for India, Washington D.C or New York for any metropolis in the country, and one would find things are almost identical, despite the gap in time and environment.
Related to centralised control is the question of conformity. The media system as a whole tends to adhere to a standardised pattern based largely on follow the leader. As a result, most newspapers on any given day are almost similar in content—despite the fact there are hundreds of news items to choose from. Mass media in India are generally run and controlled by the middle class. Naturally, the media also reflect and uphold essentially, middle class values, myths and even stereotypes. They also help maintain status quo and any attempt to break away from the middle class value system is viewed with suspicion.

Electronic media

Over a decade ago, the government accepted certain policy guidelines laid down by the Parthasarathi Committee (1982) for the electronic media. It was a comprehensive document and reflected all the noble principles, worthy of the highest traditions of professional journalism in any country. It covered a wide range of issues from principles guiding news policy to coverage of Parliament, dos and don'ts for news staff, selection and presentation of news, political coverage, President, Prime Minister, statements and rejoinders, strikes and bandhs, riots and disturbances, sex and crimes and subversion and insurgency. The point underlined by the document is that India has a democratic set-up. Therefore, AIR and Doordarshan are accountable to the community through Parliament. As national broadcast media they have a special responsibility to transmit news with a view to informing, educating and enlightening people because "a well-informed public is the foundation of the democratic process". It emphasised the necessity of the official media being "credible as well as interesting to all sections of society", of news and views being disseminated, "in a fair, objective and balanced manner giving contrasting points of view" and of problems and issues being "covered from the public point of view without any hesitation in bringing out healthy criticism". It went on to add: "In reporting the political controversies the broadcast media should be guided by objectivity and fair play. Due representation of differing view points should be the aim".

Even a casual viewer cannot but notice that such guidelines are honoured more in breach than in the observance. The official media, despite occasional air of openness, are generally identified as the propaganda wing of the party in
power rather than as presenting a balanced and non-partisan view of the events and happenings which an average citizen so badly requires to arrive at an informed judgement. India may stand for free and balanced flow of information in international level. But at home, the distinction between the ruling party and the government, between the party interest and the national interest often gets blurred. While it has not the frankness of the newspapers, Doordarshan news too suffers from the same elite and almost purely urban values. The news bulletins is reduced on any average day to a court circular cum government gazettee.

News is more than the projection of political personalities. A personality can be projected on the basis of news value alone but never solely on his official status. One must also recall the all too brief air of openness and candour that blew in the electronic media in 1985 immediately after the Rajiv Gandhi government took over. Rajiv Gandhi is known to have personally encouraged news-based public affairs programmes like "Janwani" (which he called a parliament of people), "Sach ki Parchhain" and the "News-line". The formats of these programmes were not entirely innovative but they promised new initiative to provide genuine access to the people and the beginning of a new relationship between broadcasting, the people and the government. But it has never been explained why the programmes were dropped or made to shed their character. Where did the things go wrong?

Then there is the oft-quoted letter of the Prime Minister to the then Minister of Information and Broadcasting V N Gadgil. In this letter (July 22, 1985), Rajiv Gandhi wanted the news bulletins not to sound like press releases. "They must develop a distinctive professional character", he said, and added "we have earlier discussed the need to increase the visual content of bulletins. But this should not mean more sequences of me and of ministers. We certainly are not in need of that kind of image building". Even after the letter was sent, AIR and Doordarshan's news and current affairs programmes had shown no great concern for PM's advice.

But perhaps it is unfair to blame the media, beyond a point. They have not been equipped with professionalism, either in tools or in ability to resist day to day pressures. They function under constant fear of being sacked or transferred over trivial matters and hence they tend to make either over-
cautious judgements or exercise options that are safe but prejudiced. Several ministers or their aides have often had a free run on the news rooms. It is not without reason that the Doordarshan news coverage often reaches its finest hour between a general election and the taking over of a new government – the all too short a period when the political interference is almost absent.

The Joshi committee thought that through its VIP oriented news programmes, Doordarshan promoted complacency and an indifference to issues on social transformation, rather than any self-questioning of their life-style on the part of its middle and upper class viewers. It suggested that Doordarshan news needed to be presented from the perspectives not only of the government, the ruling party and the urban well to do, but also of the many other social, economic and political groups who constitute the nation.

The Second Press Commission thought that media should tell the story of what is going well as well as what is going wrong. It should investigate the reasons for success as well as for failure at different places under different conditions, of various development programmes affecting the lives of common people. But our media merely carry official handouts giving statistics of man-days of employment provided, persons made literate or area brought under irrigation. They seldom enable the reader to meet the extension workers who are the agents of change or the beneficiaries of the programmes, and to hear what they have to say, in their own words, about their triumphs and difficulties.

The reporting of non-official initiatives in rural development, educational reform, struggle against superstitious beliefs, evil practices like dowry and Sati or other areas of social campaign is even less extensive than in depth reporting of the implementation of official development programmes. The Commission feels our media usually become aware of such non-official activities only after they have been honoured by a Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation award or Magsaysay award.

To attract the maximum audience, the press emphasises the exceptional rather than the representative, the sensational rather than the significant. Many activities of the utmost social consequence lie below the surface of what are
conventionally regarded as reportable incidents. But as Indira Gandhi never
tired of pointing out: "The meek may one day inherit the earth but never the
headlines". The press seems attached to the Northcliffe formula that power,
position, money and sex make news and that virtue, normalcy, hard work
and humility do not. It therefore fills its pages with stories of crime,
corruption, violence, disaster, etc. so much, that it pays insufficient
attention to achievements and triumphs. As the second Press Commission
observed: "The role that the press plays in a country is considerably
influenced by the news values which prevail among journalists. If conflict
is news but not the resolution of the conflict, if the unusual and the bizarre
is news rather than the normal, if news is what happened just a while ago
(even if the event was not significant) and not a significant happening of a
week or a month earlier, the portrayal of reality in the press is bound to
be distorted".

Perhaps the easiest answer is that the average reader wants to know more
about events that deviate from the norm, events that disrupt the stability
of daily living. Newspapers are subject to commercial pressures and the
number of copies sold determines the rates it can charge for advertisement.
About two third of the total revenue in a newspaper in our country is derived
from advertisement. No one therefore can afford to lose a race for higher
circulation.

Social responsibilities

This bring us inevitably to the question of social responsibility. Certainly,
the press has travelled a long way from the arrogant attitude of the
newspaper owners who said: "A newspaper is a private enterprise owing
nothing whatever to the public, which grants it no franchise. It is therefore
affected with no public interest. It is emphatically the property of the
owner, who is selling a manufactured product at his own risk". Or, such
flippant remarks: "There can be no freedom of the press unless the press has
the right to be irresponsible". Even the most eloquent champion of the press
would perhaps admit that a certain sense of responsibility is inherent in the
concept of freedom.

American Society of Newspaper Editors thought even in 1923: "To its
opportunities as a chronicler are indissolubly linked its obligations as a
teacher and interpreter". After all, responsible journalism is journalism
with a conscience. Nikhil Chakrabarty feels: "Even if you don't like someone
or disagree with him ideologically, you must be fair. Journalists should remember that they are not elected. They are not accountable to anyone except themselves and their readers. But your reader should have some respect for you. If your biases are too strong, that respect is lost. Ask yourself, whether you have been fair and true. No one today would totally like to share the views of C P Scott, a former editor of the Guardian "Facts are sacred, comment is free" for the simple reason that no fact can be totally value neutral in today's complex society. But the thrust of his basic argument that it is the duty of the media to check facts and to assess the context in which such facts exist has not lost its edge. Objectivity may be impossible to a normal human being, but fairness is attainable and that is what one should perhaps strive for. A M Rosenthal, a former managing editor of the New York Times thought that objectivity was "the determination to write and edit with the elimination of as much personal bias as humanly possible, to avoid our own pejorative phrases and comments, to give accused people or institutions the right of immediate reply, to present all shadings of opinions and counter argument, and most of all, to keep examining ourselves day by day and story by story to see if we are being as objective as we can".

Gandhiji who called the press the foundry of the nation wrote several decades ago: "To be true to my faith, therefore, I may not write in anger or malice. I may not write merely to excite passion. The reader can have no idea of the restraint I have to exercise from week to week in the choice of topics and vocabulary. It enables me to peep into myself and to make discoveries of my weaknesses. Often my vanity dictates a smart expression or my anger a harsh adjective. It is a terrible ordeal but fine exercise to remove these words". Gandhiji's appeal for introspection seems far more relevant today than when this was written.

A journalist is confronted with ethical decisions almost daily. Should a news source go unnamed? Should a "leak" possibly affecting national security be used? Does the public interest override individual privacy? Should a rape victim's identity be disclosed? Should communities be identified in a communal clash or gory details of violence reported? General professional codes call for truth, accuracy, impartiality and fair play. Unlike in most countries where free media exist, there is no universally accepted code of conduct in India. Even the professional bodies have not been unanimous in developing any. Nor any serious effort has been made by the media to find out what the society thinks of them and identify the possible areas of disagreement.
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The Indian press had been always known for its sanity over sensitive issues like communal disturbances. But on the threshold of the nineties, it appeared that a large section of the press lost its sense of balance and fairness while reporting such highly explosive issues and events. Barring a few glorious exceptions, most of the newspapers betrayed a distinct and dangerous slant in reporting the Ram Janambhoomi - Babri Masjid controversy. Unverified information, irresponsible guesswork and sometimes emotional writing calculated to incite violence, particularly in the language newspapers, have raised serious doubts about the social responsibility of the press. Again, in its coverage of the incidents following the government's decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, the press brushed aside all the facade of impartiality and balance. Without going into the social causes or background to the report, it fomented and fuelled the misguided sentiment of a section of the society. On both the grounds, it sought to raise a mass hysteria, seeking to tear the country apart on the basis of caste and community.

Indian newspapers apparently equate what is good for dominant religious, economic and political forces with what is good for the country and are generally indulgent toward official misconduct. This has been attributed, among others, to the influence of large private interests that own Indian newspapers and governmental pressure on the press. Many felt that the failure of the press to act without fear or favour has contributed to a general decline in levels of public debate and morality. Some newspapers show scant regard for higher values underlying the concept of the freedom of the press and misuse this freedom for partisan ends at grievous cost to public order, tranquility and social harmony without any thought to the consequences of their actions. In so doing, they gravely compromise the credibility of the media as a whole and invite public anger, suspicion, contempt and blunt reprisals from the authorities.

Under a libertarian system, journalists must themselves determine both collectively and individually their own responsibilities and guard against biased propaganda, misleading advertisement and entertainment. Most professional journalists would at least informally agree about the need for such principles as accuracy, fairness, restraint and truth. But like most
abstractions, these are perhaps left to individual judgement in the absence of any viable and better alternative. Any form of external control, however, liberal, will always carry the danger of the cure being worse than the disease. It is, of course, true that there is no professional code of conduct in our country to guide the behaviour of the media. But in countries where they exist, these codes are at best pious platitudes, unenforced and perhaps unenforceable. After all in the long run the media are a typical product of the society in which they function. They will, as a result invariably reflect its prevalent value-system and the practitioners can never be more conscientious than the contemporary standard of ethics will permit.

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