

Article

Media as a Fourth Pillar of Democracy Needs to Engage more Issues that Affect Human Development

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A B S T R A C T

Media is an important and inseparable part of a democratic society. The media is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy because often time's people assume that the media is more neutral and freer from elements of state power, in contrast with the previous three pillars which are all oriented to power. In a democratic setup the media can act as a bridge between the government and the people. Its true function is to inform the people, and the measure of freedom it enjoys, depends upon the way it discharges that function. The people have a right to be informed freely and fully, and for that the media is accountable neither to the state, nor to the proprietor, but to the people. The media, known as the fourth pillar of democracy, has a huge impact on the society. The effects are of course, positive as well as negative. Media is such a powerful tool that it literally governs the direction of our society today. It is the propeller as well as the direction provider of the society. Opinions can change overnight and celebrities can become infamous with just one wave by the media. The media acts as a deterrent on corrupt practices and keeps a check on the working of the government. But, sometimes under political pressure, pressure of corporate entities, etc. the media oversteps its avowed mandate. Media has significantly promoted social causes like literacy, health management, anti-dowry practices, discouraging female feticide, AIDS awareness, etc. As a fourth pillar of democracy, the media of today has an all embracing role to act against the injustice, oppression, misdeeds and partiality of our society. Thus, in a democratic society, the media is charged with the responsibility to provide the public with background information about the issues.

Keywords: Media, Media's Role, Media's Responsibility, Fourth Pillar, Human Development, Democracy

Introduction

Media which is regarded as one of the pillars of democracy has wide roles in the society. It plays a vital role in moulding the opinion of the society and it is capable of changing the whole viewpoint through which people perceive various

events. The media can be commended for starting a trend where the media plays an active role in bringing the accused to book.

The liberty of the media is the palladium of all the civil, political and religious rights. This right is especially important

at the stage of the formation of the government. Democracy cannot survive without this right. Media as a fourth pillar of democracy, exercise this right of freedom of speech and expression. The media have also played a traditional watchdog and gadfly role, in investigating misbehavior by politicians and officials and private business, a role traditionally summarized as “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.” The media is thus a crucial instrument of accountability, in addition to being an instrument of communication. A free press and free media rank along with an independent judiciary as one of the two institutions that can serve as powerful counter forces to corruption in public and private life. Freedom of the press is the freedom of communication and expression through vehicles including various electronic media and published materials.

In India, media played an important role during the struggle for freedom. The media not only played a significant role in creating a feeling of national integration and solidarity among the people but also contributed to the social change and development. The print media gave voice to the aspirations, demands and problems and held strong affinity with the readers. The importance of print media, has been enhanced by the role of press in India’s struggle for freedom. After independence, the main challenges before the press was the political and developmental news and sensitize the readers about the various social and developmental issues. In a democracy, media plays a significant role in bringing about social change, as media is considered an integral part of democracy. For the proper functioning of democracy, free media is essential for representing public interest. The liberty of press and democracy goes hand-in-hand.

The press or media acts as a watchdog of democracy. In fact, during post-independence, the Indian press has played a vital role in restraining corruption and injustice in the nation. The press is also instrumental in arousing the general public’s interest in the government and its operations. However, like everything else, there is a flipside to this as well. Over the last few years, yellow journalism has been rampant in Indian press, which has led to widespread misconducts in the nation.

Responsibility of the Press Media in a Democratic Society

First, the media needs to give people the information that they need in order to make informed decisions about issues of the day. Second, the media needs to act as a “watchdog” to ensure that government officials and agencies are acting in proper ways. The media needs to investigate public officials whenever there seems to be any sort of wrongdoing going on. For example, the media needs to make sure that the public knows about things like the scandal surrounding takes place or going on.

Since the basis of citizen participation in a democratic government is through voting in elections, it is important that people are well - informed about the primary issues on hand and the different viewpoints on the subject. This allows individuals to form their own opinions of the issues then see which candidates best reflect that rather than attaching themselves to a candidate for other reasons.

The image and representation of women and girls in the media has long been a subject of concern. In everything from advertising, television programmes, newspapers and magazines, films, video games, etc. women and girls are likely shown as: in the home, performing domestic chores such as laundry or cooking; as sex objects in the service of men; as victims who can’t protect themselves and are the receivers of harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence and murder. In fact victims of violence are usually portrayed as young and beautiful woman.

The role of media in representing women issues centers around media agenda that dwells on what kind of ideas and ideologies adopted by media for covering issues. Harris mentions that media presents encapsulated information to the public on the different social group and it portrays gender as omnipresent in media categories, (Harris, 2004). Media’s portrayal of women and the gender stereotyping has been the subject of study for gender and media activist throughout the world.

According to the MWCD, Government of India, “the role of the Media in portraying women and the female gender as a whole leaves much to be desired. Press and the print media are generally found to unduly sensationalize traumatic events such as rape, etc. thereby invading the privacy of the victim. Very few positive stories of girls/women. who have stood up for their rights or are achievers are published. Similarly, the electronic media and films portray serial/films highly derogatory to women, glorifying subservience of the woman before her husband and in-laws, celebrating the birth of the boy child and portraying the disappointments of the family at the birth of the girl child, making out eve teasing/sexual harassment as ‘fun’ items, etc. As a result the general populace are fed on a regular diet of stories/news that are highly gender abusive, thus reinforcing traditional views that the woman are an inferior race and can be freely exploited. The media has to become gender sensitive and more responsible when portraying the woman and thus play a significant part in bringing about attitudinal changes in the society. A gender friendly media policy needs to be formulated for this purpose.”

At the present social situation, some scholars blame media for not being sensitive to women and their cause. More recently, in Assam, some popular electronic television channel’s inhuman coverage on acts of violence and harassment upon women raised a lot of hue and cry among

media practitioners and intellectuals. Media reporting on Beltola incident where a tribal girl was made to run naked through busy roads in Guwahati city is one of the shameless representations of insensitive treatment of women's issues in media houses in Assam. The recent attack on a woman MLA by some anti-social people and live-coverage of a helpless girl becoming victim of sexual harassment in G.S. Road Guwahati have received large-scale media flak from people across the nation.

In some cases the media influence public policy directly and whenever the rights are violated, the media stand at the center of a highly political process. For example: - Tragedy of Roop Kanwar of Rajasthan, Ram Kumari's fiery death of West Bengal, Shah Bano Controversy, Uma Maheshwari's dowry death and killing of girls in Haryana, in these reports the media dominates societal issues. Again, on the other hand, reports such as Tandoor Case of Delhi, the capital of India and Beltola incident of Assam regarding a Dalit tribal girl argues that sometimes journalists and editors are under an unethical professional rather than moral. Therefore, it is evident to examine whether media is performing its societal role as well as social obligation towards the society. In a proper and expected manner regarding gender issues and women atrocities.

Media Serving as a Bulwark against Human Rights Violation

The media can serve as powerful instruments against violence. The Violation of the human rights of 300 million of our people on a daily basis is inexcusable at every level. We must empower ourselves, to bring critical issue of hunger, human development, gender equality, sustainable employment and environmental protection. Police are often accused of violating human rights, but sadly, no effort is being made to include the subject in the curriculum of police training academies. In India the role played by electronic media against human rights violation is no doubt a matter of appreciation but at the same time the print media has played a significant role during the last twenty - five years or so in reporting the violation of human rights. In early eighties, a revelation made by Sunday magazine published by Anand Bazar Patrika from Kolkata with a front-page story of the blinding of prisoners in Bhagalpur Jail had virtually rocked the entire nation when copies were waved in parliament. This was the first major case of human rights violations reported in the Indian media, and which threw light on the alarming situation in the jail.

The impact of the media in society is tremendous. The social responsibility of the media is fostered when the media engage in what is referred to, as 'committed journalism', in which priority is placed on values such as democracy, free choice, openness, morality, and serving the common good, thereby informing the public about political, social,

economic, and cultural affairs. 'Committed journalism' would best manifest when the media undertake to be the public watchdog. In terms of human rights promotion or protection, the concepts of media social responsibility, 'committed journalism' or 'watchdog journalism' (ibid) are perhaps irrelevant fragmentations of the role expected of the media if the media make sincere efforts in clinging to their professional codes of ethics.

Lessons for Indian News Channels

Despite extensive coverage of post-earthquake scenario, by the period of a week, 24X7 Hindi news channels based in India faced an enormous wave of refusal in Nepal after M 7.8 earthquake that took place in Nepal on 25 April 2015. The whole episode indicated that the satellite televisions needed to be aware on specific skills and sensitivity for the disaster reporting. The Nepali audience felt humiliated and misled by the Hindi - language - news channels from India. Consequently, public sentiment got reflected through the social media and international media noticed that Indian news media had come under fire for its allegedly insensitive and jingoistic coverage (Pandey, 2015) of the earthquake. The Indian media, from day one, over presented the Indian Prime Minister Modi. They, irrelevantly played visuals and presented his graphics. Instead of practicing objective journalism, they tried to perform overt publicity and Public Relations for Indian establishments as a result the Indian media faces a severe backlash.

Potter and Ricchiardi (2009, pp. 39), state that during times of extreme shock, trauma and tragedy, it is important that people's thoughts, feelings and behavior be reported accurately. They (Potter and Ricchiardi, 2009, pp. 30) further state that a media person, while reporting the crisis, needs to be clear, accurate and compassionate. They (Potter and Ricchiardi 2009, pp. 46) also state that one of the toughest decisions for journalists is how to cover victims, survivors and eyewitnesses to catastrophic events. They observe that when crisis strikes, ordinary people they find themselves thrust into media spotlight. They view that journalists have the responsibility to tell the story and help the public understand the tragic event but according to them, journalist should balance truth telling with minimizing harm to vulnerable people. But, Indian televisions in post-earthquake situation, never rectified the errors, and went on committing enumerable mistakes. Moreover, they never demonstrated sensitivity towards the survivors. Hindi news television channels based in India were seen captured by the ruling elites of Indian politics. They played as if they were the agencies of political power.

Television journalism from the world's largest democracy got injured by their unverified materials, sensational reporting and jingoism during the Nepal earthquake coverage. It has taught a lesson that the Indian media, specifically the Hindi

news channels, need to get rid of any kind of insensitive attitudes in the days to come.

Rape, Media and Collective Conscience

An incident of rape occurred on February 23, 2015, in Dimapur, Nagaland but there was no information about it in the public. The leading newspapers- The Morung Express, Eastern Mirror and Nagaland Post released information in their headlines, identifying Syed Arif Khan, the accused as an IBI (Illegal Bangladeshi Immigrant). They also didn't fail to make the readers insecure of an immigrant, an outsider. "IBI rapes women in Dimapur ... " was the headline of the leading newspaper of Nagaland, Nagaland Post. The burning headlines of the leading newspapers, along with a massive threat to their ethnic identity provoked the Nagas to label the accused as an IBI. There was an ongoing clamor against the IBIs.

On February 24, 2015, the Naga Student's Federation had organized a meeting with other Naga associations and leaders, the main aim of which was to defame the IBIs and toward them off. The frustration due to unemployment and financial blockade amongst the youth is definitely one of the reasons that led to Arif's lynching. Moreover, the sensational headlines of the newspapers and the dehumanized profile construction by media fuelled the fire. Without once confirming Arif's identity, people united to take a step as big as killing him publicly, to bring about justice. The newspapers till date, have not taken the onus of the misidentification of Arif as an IBI. It is always assumed that with great power as media possesses, comes great responsibility. Disgracefully, this power is used only to groom the sacramental selective reportage. On the other hand, on March 11, six days after Arif's lynching, the government released information that the case which was being criticized as that of rape was in reality a case of consensual sex between the accused and the victim.

Coincidentally on February 27, 2015, four days after the rape was supposed to have occurred, a 39 years old Naga man, raped a 6 years old minor in the Mon district of Nagaland. Neither did any newspaper talk about it, nor did any mass agitation take place. Besides, there was also no statement issued by any Civil Society Organization, regarding this. This is how the incident was fabricated. The mouths of the entire Naga community were kept sealed because no IBI was involved.

Parliamentary Panel for Media Commission for Manifestation of "Paid News"

On May 6, 2013, The Standing Committee on Information Technology presented its Forty - seventh Report on the subject 'Issues related to Paid News' in Lok Sabha which was laid on the table of Rajya Sabha on May 7, 2013. Further this report was considered and adopted by the Committee

on August 11, 2015. Based on this report the government took an action for Manifestation of "Paid News".

When some sections of the media receive monetary or other benefits for publishing or broadcasting in favour of individuals/ organizations/ corporate entities, it is referred to as "Paid News". Undoubtedly, this phenomenon has spread at remarkable sections of the media and it has the effect of unduly influencing the financial/ stock/ real estate market, health, industry and influencing public opinion in election process. The Committee found that Paid News is not limited to corruption of individual journalists instead has become complex and 'organized' involving multiple players like journalists, manager/ owners of media companies, corporations, public relations firms/ advertising agencies and some sections of the political class. Therefore, the Committee recommended the Ministry to act swiftly on the issue of 'Paid News' so that this menace is curbed at the earliest. The Committee desire that the Ministry of I&B urgently take up the matter with the Ministry of Law and Justice for expeditious examination of the proposal for amendment of the Representation of People Act, 1951 to make Paid News a punishable electoral malpractice and also empowering the Press Council of India (PCI) to adjudicate the complaints of Paid News and give final judgement in the matter.

Taking into account the pathetic working conditions of the significant part of the media personnel, the Committee notes that Paid News is not only the outcome of the convergence of the editorial, advertising, Public Relations CPR), lobbying group and the 'industry' but is also due to the decline in independence of the journalists/ reporters. Another related issue that has plagued the working conditions of journalists/ reporters, is that of wage/ salary of the media personnel i.e., they are paid very meagre wages or sometimes paid commission on given fixed targets for business/ advertisements. Therefore, the Committee recommends that government/ concerned regulatory bodies should take necessary steps for improving the working conditions of the journalists/media personnel and also ensure that the autonomy of the editorial staff is upheld forth with. It also desire that all the employees of media houses are given protection under the various provisions of the Working Journalist Act.

Conclusion

The media can play a constructive role in a democratic society. But sometimes certain media indulge in yellow journalism. They give highly sensational, biased and colored news just to create some sort of excitement among the people. They spread rumors and indulge in mud - slinging. Such like actions on the part of a media must be curbed. This inevitably has the effect of distorting the freedom of the press/ media and thus undermining its social responsibility.

As its basic purpose is to inform the people, the media has to be treated more as a public institution than as an industry. It has a definite social function to discharge. Its foremost and highest purpose is to make available to the people information, which is as unbiased, as accurate and as full as possible so that the people should be able to judge and decide well. It can perform this duty in the right manner only when it seeks to justify its existence by popular approval only to the exclusion of other consideration.

Wielding the power of the media in the realm of public affairs, the journalist is apt to find his path strewn with hazards and temptations. He can steer clear of these only if he is imbued with a burning and uncompromising concern for truth, is courageous enough to risk displeasure of authority and strong enough to resist temptations. He has to be on his guard always against influences which can contaminate the free flow of news eg., consideration of party or personal gain. He must not allow himself to become subservient to power, whether political, economic, social or of any other sort, he must seek to be studied, criticized and judged by his audience or readership.

Simultaneously, to discharge his function properly, he must have a balanced personality and the capacity and habit of introspection. Few journalists will be able to conform to the exacting standard set by Gandhiji, but the freedom of the press/ media is not safe unless those who work for it exercise this sort of self-discipline, to the extent they can.

Truly, speaking all outside control on the media, whether by political groups and parties, or by big money or by the state - militates against and restricts its freedom. But perhaps the most suffocating of these is state control. The freedom of the press/ media is enshrined in the constitutions of parliamentary democracies so that if the power of the state ever comes into conflict with the power of the press/ media, the former should not be allowed to throttle the latter.

The State can exercise control over the media/ press mainly in two ways, i.e. negatively through censorship, denial of advertisements, etc., as has been done in the case of the Express Group of newspapers) and secondly in a positive manner through giving subsidies, advertising support, etc. Whichever of these and the numerous other forms it takes, it cannot be harmful because it prevents the media from coming out frankly and playing its rightful role in the economic and social transformation of the country.

Media helps in fighting against corruption, nepotism, cronyism of institutional machinery and carrying out relentless campaign against them. Way back in independent India from the Mundra case to the jeep scandal to the Hawala case to the kickbacks received in different defense deals- Indian media performs commendably in exposing the corrupted highly placed statesman. It acted as a catalyst

to government action compelling government to swing into action including suspending ministers and putting ministers into jail. Who can forget the crusade taken by Indian media in the Nirbhaya rape case and shaping the public opinion in one of the most heinous crimes the world has ever witnessed?

The media can be used as a force on the side of liberty and progress only if it is kept free of all restraints except those which it voluntarily accepts as an earnest of its responsibility to the reading public. Only in that case it can inform and educate the people along the right lines and breed that tolerance of thought and expression, which is the hallmark of a democratic setup.

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