

Time to bust the fake, move away from TRPs

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News journalism is in the midst of a crisis, says N. Bhaskara Rao. And yet, we continue talk about symptoms than the root causes, he adds. More than twenty years ago, Rao signalled the twist and shift within the journalism paradigm, even cautioning the unions and associations of working journalists that they were going to be the worst affected. Today, journalists world over face threat, harassment and risk to life. The trend is to muzzle independent journalism and investigative reportage, which is already shrinking anyway, he points out.

We are today at a point when for the news media it is no longer the journalist who matters. Indeed, the profession itself may no longer count as it did some years ago. Yesterday's schools of journalism are today's school of communication, which means more of corporate communication and public relations. Journalists exist today only to the extent he or she has adjusted and adapted to changed priorities in the media and alignments outside.

Nevertheless, it is time to introspect. First, the context of journalism and journalists. Here, let us look at three aspects – freedom of the press, what it means today and who decides. It is the government and the corporates who decide the scope of press freedom today, not so much the Constitution of the country. Second, is journalism a job or profession? If it is a profession, with what standards and self regulation? Third is the human development angle. Unless this larger context is understood, the deep malice troubling journalism cannot be addressed.

A second factor for the paradigm shift is the conflict of interest (reflected in many spheres of activity). Of late, this important aspect is being ignored or brushed under carpet. This has to do with the fundamental question – is news media a service or a business or both and with what restrains or under what regulatory jurisdiction. It is a lobby of the powerful which decides what matters. This is also because journalists are cornered, divided, with some of them hankering for individual advantages and producing stories without substantiating facts and figures. We don't see them any longer as a community of professionals or as critical stakeholders in society.

A third factor is the way journalists have slipped as a credible force. Despite the Wage Board, issues concerning journalists were never taken up at a macro level in a systematic way, resulting in fake, planted news and compulsions of new media becoming routine. With objectivity and independence giving way to manipulation, influence and quick profits, the journalist has lost out. That is the challenge independent and objective voices are facing world over.

And, a fourth factor is decay of instruments and institutions of a profession. For example, journalism or communication schools are no longer run by journalists but by management and PR people. The TRP mania has further misled a nation. The school syllabus is more about management and PR. There are few professional magazines or websites, voices supporting the profession. The research is for numbers. Those who have 'clicked' matter, not necessarily those who have read. A good example of making

a difference is about how the Andhra Pradesh Union of Journalists brought the paid news phenomena to the fore. The need is for more such studies and initiatives.

The task is challenging. It is a national task. Journalists themselves should come forward; no one else is going to come to risk to retrieve journalism. The unions and associations should come together, and take to analysis with transparency and debate substantial issues to do with the profession forthrightly. Such bodies themselves are dwindling, getting isolated or being limited to micro issues.

I have a five-point agenda for journalist fraternity. One – a show of strength and solidarity. This has to be on larger issues within the media and outside. Two – take to research and analysis. Substantiate with facts and figures what is being pursued. Avoid the allusive style of writing. Three – professional objectivity must be visible. Be cautious and concerned while using words such as activism, conspiracy, Dalit, etc and while covering fake, false and planted stories. Four – while reporting, use anecdotes, humour, analogies. Bust, blast and black out the false and fake. And five – cover citizen and civil society and the basic concerns of grassroots far more. Move away from the TRP priority frame.

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