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# Media: Disturbing shifts

## Its Priorities Are Going Haywire

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President A.P.J. ABDUL KALAM and Justice A.S. Anand made very pertinent observations recently at the IPI-India Award function for Excellence in Journalism. President Kalam said, "the urban-oriented Indian media" should become "media for one billion people" instead of concentrating on the 300 million urban people. Former Chief Justice of India Dr Anand said that "while commercialism has a legitimate place in the business office of the newspaper, it becomes a danger when it invades the editorial room". Stating that "today, there are some genuine concerns about the way in which some sections of the media function," he said that "the liberty of the Press cannot be confused with its licentiousness". They were commenting on recent dramatic changes in the media concerns. What is happening in the media is known to many of us. But why it is happening is not and hardly discussed.

With the proliferation of TV, radio and newspapers recently in the country, the overall role, reach and relevance of the media should have expanded much beyond (about two-thirds of people) what it was a couple of years ago. Also, the range of coverage of the news media should have expanded beyond metro cities. But hardly there has been any change in both respects. This was because the competition within and across the media has been for the same sections of people, the ones having deeper pockets. That is how rural reach as well as coverage are still negligible. Some increase in circulation and viewership nevertheless is because of multiplicity, not because of expansion in the reach. That is the ones seeing are seeing more channels or programmes, and the ones reading are reading more newspapers.

Despite the boom in 24-hour news channels, their overall credibility has not increased, nor the extent and range of their coverage of India. It is more of the same or same from more. No wonder, newspapers continue to enjoy relatively more credibility and are often checked back for what is seen or heard on TV news bulletins — as if reading is more believable! A research study described this phenomenon as "appetizer effect".

Role and relevance of the news media are to do with their concerns and contents. Until a few years ago these were to do with the "Fourth Estate" notions and "watchdog" standing. For, that is how the news media has been enjoying certain privileges and societal status. The media is expected to have larger and long-range concerns, not just market compulsions or competitive concerns. Today it is more a corporate voice than of the community. New definitions, new news values and new priorities dictate the media today.

What does this paradigm shift mean for the dilemma involved in the media operations and to the very credibility of the news media and its accountability. Is the

media for public service or for private interests. These include societal concerns *versus* market priorities, stakeholders *vs* shareholders, short-term gain *vs* long-term implications, etc. Then, of course, the controversies to do with blurred distinctions between news and views, news and advertisements, etc. How much do we understand these priorities, pre-occupations and the shifts in the news media? They are not even discussed within the media and by any *fora* to do with policies and futures. There is no independent and objective analysis of these changes and their implications. How else could it be explained that even a very provocative analysis of the President or the Prime Minister or the Chief Justice of the country in this regard is never followed up. But when it comes to the interests of the individual media, or competitive compulsions between any two media houses, such issues are all over as if they constitute the national agenda.

Today advertising and market research in many ways determine the scope of the media, including journalistic trends. With allowing of 100 per cent FDI in both fields in the last couple of years, these functions are in the hands of corporates controlled from abroad. Advertising, market research and media planning set the pace of the media, including in the case of ownership pattern and journalistic trends.

Firstly, the share of advertising in the total revenue of media has been on the increase from that of a "supplementary" (25-30 per cent) nature some decades ago to that of a "supportive" one (45-55 per cent) now. In fact, in the case of television channels, advertising has been the "primary source" (50-70 per cent) to the extent of "determining" the priorities and pre-occupations. Even in the case of some big newspapers, revenue from advertising constitutes as high as 60 per cent of the total revenue.

Secondly, advertising through newspapers and television is mostly by multinationals and big corporates. In fact, top 15 advertisers account for three-fourth of advertising revenue of newspapers and television channels. Thirdly, advertising agency business in the country has been getting concentrated in fewer and fewer hands for the last couple of years.

Fourthly, market research is a basis for the proliferation of brands and consumerism as well as for the preoccupation and priorities of the mass media and the very scope and character of advertising. Until a few years ago we had about six or seven market research agencies owned mostly by Indians. Today top seven or eight market research agencies, accounting for more than three-fourths of research, either have already been taken over by one or the other foreign corporates or they have acquired significant interest.

More specifically, market research agencies are the one which also conduct "readership" surveys and "rating" of television viewership, and thereby directly influence advertising agencies as well as the news media as to their priorities and preoccupation. The point here is that the methodology being followed for readership surveys and viewership rating is not without bias in favour of the sponsors and subscribers.

Fifth, with the media becoming complex and also specialised, two "new

mediating functionaries have emerged since 2000 with serious consequences to the very nature and character of the journalist-centered "Fourth Estate". Both these functionaries of media planning and public relations in a way erode into core prerogatives of journalists and their "editorial control".

Adding to these trends have been the ad-hoc decisions of the government without a national media policy and objectives. In fact, by such "reactive approach" and temporal outlook, issues were made further complicated. Further, the landmark judgment of the Supreme Court in 1995 on airwaves was never followed up. In fact, minister after minister violated the spirit of the judgment and went about taking decisions—without reflecting the concern to do with the challenges before the nation and tasks of the news media. The Cabinet Committee currently seized with some of these issues should take note of the emerging media scenes and its implications so that the media caters to a billion people and becomes relevant to their aspirations.

*(Reproduced from The Tribune, Chandigarh dated January 7, 2005)*