

(Primepost special on completion of twenty years of round the clock news channels in India)

Neither more news channels nor more coverage is good enough for excelling!

Or, more is not merrier for news channels to excel

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

As the round -the -clock -news channels complete 20 years in the country, the Chief Justice of India, S A Bobde's observation last month about television news has special significance. Although he made those observations in the context of a news channel, its larger ramifications should not be lost sight of. His comments remind a larger malice under carpet. Or under the weight of a self-aggrandisement of channels. In a rare insight on October 26 in the context of the controversy involving the Republic TV's news chief, the CJI Bobde noted that *"I cannot stand the bombast on TV ...this was never a part of our public discourse... (should be) concerned with peace and harmony of the society. There has to be responsibility in reportage"*. Within a fortnight there after in another context of a Kerala journalist, the Supreme Court referred to *"unfair reporting"* of channels. And another judge of the Supreme Court said in the course of the hearings that on his own he *"will not watch"* (such news presentations).

On completion of the first ten years of the round the clock news channels, I analysed their priorities in contents and preoccupation and in my book of 2013 concluded of their futility and failure to unleash their potential. That book, *"Unleashing the power of news channels"* by EMESCO was not availed by channels. Instead, news channels continued to proliferate with trivial and more of the same formula with in a frame of

competitive trap driven TRPs. Because of the myth of viability, instead of making a difference on the fundamentals of discourse based democracy and people centric development, channels continued to be copycats more. And yet there is no evidence of channels bettering their viability either, exceptions are hardly a couple.

And yet most news channels continue to claim themselves as number one or most viewed or most relied and the like based on dissected TRPs or creating hype through misleading awards. They needed pops to boost claims. Two profit seeking companies with conflict of interest have been issuing awards to news channels for almost a decade. The 2020 awards were issued in the last one month, each naming a hundred awards under different categories. What signals these awards give? If at all? Other than enabling claims by channels. Can anyone explain what difference they made? For that is what awards are expected to the standards, concerns and responsibility. Is that possible without awards being independent and transparent of their criteria and methodology. Have they atleast changed the news priorities? Have they bettered the structure of news presentation or the way they are cover?

An analysis of news bulletins of major channels on every day basis between 2000 and 2015 by CMS, independent research based think tank of the country, showed no difference in the news priorities of the bulletins. Between 2005 and 2015 politics continued to be prime concern with around a quarter of time of bulletins followed by crime and entertainment. Health, education and environment together, for example, remained within five percent although. (A detailed discussion is available in the book,

"TRP Trick how television in India was hijacked," Vitasta publishing, 2019). CMS also monitored bulletins of a few prominent Telugu news channels daily between 2007 and 2010. While the differences between channels were marginal by and large their priorities for news bulletin remained crime, politics and accidents/disastrous or Governance in that order. The point is neither the TRPs nor the awards made any difference in the priorities in coverage or the way of reporting. While it is understood that TRPs are quantitative exercise, awards are expected to bring out and make qualitative difference.

Awards to news channels remained a PR exercise more than differentiators. That is why they made no difference. They were by preselection by channels themselves, by roping in passive panels and depending on the amount paid directly for their entries. Some 15-20 continue claiming the awards again and again. Neither have prompted any experimentation or repositioned the coverage or the structure of news. Awards should prompt new insights and guide new initiatives. More than one third of awards by these companies continue to be crime related or divisive or copycats.

Before these two agencies took to awards as a business proposition, CMS in consultation with people like Sam Benegal took to a different model of methodology to recognise specific initiatives of Telugu news channels. This was an independent exercise where channels neither preselect entries for awards or pay any money at any point directly or indirectly. Those with no conflict of interest with news coverage were the panel of eminent judges who based on viewing of news bulletins together during

the months will select the awardees. This was supported by viewer's views based on sample survey. After five years CMS gave up as it found the channels were not prepared to adopt any insights for a news coverage or experiment with presentation structure of the news. News channels rather prefer a jugalbandhi arrangement where they could pay for awards and prompt the process too.

Have the awards made any difference in the structure of news being covered? Three examples are given here. Recent floods in Hyderabad and impressive way they were covered by some local news channels with visual backup to bring out how about a hundred local water bodies were encroached and how the drainage lines were choked by local residents etc. instead of what the channels do in such situations, channels should have made a difference by going into the causes and responsibilities. This coverage nevertheless compelled a Minister to come out with facts about how many structures were built encroaching and how much compensation it requires etc. if such happenings to be prevented in future. But there after the same channels had gone silent instead of pursuing to logical conclusion with new research revelations by Telangana Irrigation and Command Area Development department's own study to back up and pursue the coverage by channels.

On the other, the way the news channels in Delhi covered about missing children between August and October 2020 is another example for how channels miss the core in the structure of their coverage. For children missing is not a onetime event. During this quarter police of the national capitol claimed tracing over 1440 children. that means the actual number of children missing must be much more. Not a word about

it in the coverage nor about **why, how** or **who** is responsible aspects involved in children missing. But that police had given a promotion to a lady constable for tracing 76 children was the focus of news coverage for news channels.

Building toilets nationwide under Swatch Bharat initiative remained in numbers even for news channels when they could have followed up about utilisation of toilets on ground. Even about the claims of zero public defecation? Can there be a bigger story and easier one to follow up and cover by the news channels and also make a difference? The same thing could be said about fantastic numbers being put out about tree plantation. Do news media want to keep people in make believe world? Is it not time for the round the clock news channels to rethink about their model of coverage and viability? Where is the honest coverage or competitive coverage of proliferating news channels?

Chief Justice Bobde's or even of Justice Chandrachud's observations should not be taken as reflection on one channel or one chief editor but of twenty-four-hour news channels and the model they are pursuing in the name of competition. Peace and harmony of society should better be as well their concern! Twenty years is long enough for news channels to come up with their own model? It is time for news channels to unleash their true potential. Creative genius required for that is in abundance in the country.

(This column is in memory of two creative genius Devi Priya and Ravuri Bhardwaj)

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(For any clarification plz. contact Dr N Bhaskara Rao, E. nbrao@cmsindia.org, M. 9811159588)

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