

How could we see a respite in fake news phenomenon in 2021!

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(This is second part. The first part of the analysis on fake news appeared on 31 Dec. 2020)

With unfolding of manipulations that go into Ratings once again in the end of 2020, it is a compulsion in 2021 that news media find ways of restoring their credibility individually and together. Is such a respite possible for news media without taking conscious initiatives? These should also help restore their features as the Fourth Estate. This of course depends on how inclusive and reflective are in their scope of coverage and contents. But They also need to be seen as having such concerns and credentials.

In grip of advertising, market research

The general impression that media are under clutches of the owners is not unfounded as Editor Girilal Jain had indicated thirty years ago. that news media is also in the grip of advertising and market research was amply quantified. This is too obvious now the way the rating scandal is reminding with new evidence and the ways the fake and planted news are unleashing. Together they determine the scope, direction and priorities of media. These have become the competitive compulsions for the trend to fall into or fit into fixed roles. These continue to be the susceptibilities. With fake and planted becoming far more tactical, News media should be even more sensitive and determined to be objective, inclusive and reflective. Such efforts are far more critical now.

Strategy to deal with compulsions

News media cannot be restored without a strategy to deal with these external factors and internal compulsions. Party politics and elections have become more determining and deterring the standing of news media. Conflict of interest, quid pro quo, paid news are no longer hidden, new trends are manoeuvred, manipulative and pronounced. Instead of succumbing to these trends, news media should set their own course and position themselves. A few strategic initiatives are suggested here based on my insights into these matters over half a century. (yes, since the First National Readership Survey (NRS) of early 1970-72).

Susceptibility of ratings

In my 2019 book, “the TRP Trick-how TV in India was hijacked” (vistara), and earlier in another book, “unleashing the power of news channels”, I brought out susceptibility of ratings by TAM earlier and BARC now with specific examples in the previous decade and yet the race continued as if it is more the merrier. I cautioned of perils of Readership surveys too writing in Vidura magazine (1975) soon after I brought out the first NRS. But what saved some from going with the wind was my exclusive report of media trends then in Hindi states (1978-9) which made the regional Hindi dailies carve out a course of their own without falling into larger competitive compulsions (with the example of Eenadu Model with district editions as a turning point). Now the phenomenon of fake and planted news and quid pro quo culture compels news media to carve out a course with a series of conscious measures. This is a compulsion.

10 mandatory measures

The following are the ten measures that could be considered: **First**, individuals responsible for coverage and contents need to be identified every time and their credentials should be evident (instead of one person, either as anchor or editor). The news media should not be seen as a solo enterprise! The Team idea should be evident.

Second, the old practice of source identity should be indicated with references for most stories. Also, the time reference (when) for the contents individually should be evident.

Third, revive and reposition ombudsman idea with visibility and a tenure. It should not be a mere announcement of one high profile individual but a team of at least three of independent standing. Their annual report should be in public domain. They should come out as and when a coverage is raging in public.

Fourth, space for readers, viewers and listeners should be evident and this feature, like the good old “letter to editor” or “opinions”, should stand out as an interactive forum more than as a grievance redressal.

Fifth, why should news media resist RTI. They have everything to gain by adopting it voluntarily. Their power goes up to that extent. It is even better they preempt certain matters in a sue motto way. Certain business and patent related

information is already allowed exemption from RTI. Each could adopt transparency with own ground rules.

Sixth, on contentious issues in particular the news media should present or reflect different viewpoints and should avoid being seen as one sided. This fundamental principle should also apply in particular when a majoritarian rule is visible. When news media is seen as of a political party or of certain interests, inclusive coverage of other point of view benefits even more.

Seventh, news media need not feel shy to put forward a position or stand on certain issues, in support or against or as an advocacy. But should explain or share the logics with public. News media should be conscious that perception of general public is that news media tend to be under the influence of govt., or the ruling party or corporates or/and the advertisers and do to reflect otherwise as often.

Eighth, news media should invariably give proper source identity while reporting research and survey findings, in particular. Fact Check should be evident. Of late news media have been referring to known and unknown research outfits from anywhere and without indicating the basis for the coverage, instead of merely sourcing to a social media site like Facebook.

Ninth, it is better for credibility that news media indicate who the owners or main investors are and who is responsible for the contents and coverage aspects at least once a year. The news papers are already doing for years under an Act.

Tenth, news media individually take a cause and concern for coverage in a proactive way and pursue it in its own way reflecting popular underdog feelings and follow it up. This issue could be different every quarter or year.

These ten suggestions are given only as examples. Together these initiatives help neutralize implications including of fake and plant news. Seriously, practised on an ongoing way these will bestow credibility of news media together and individually. But all this is not possible unless individually news media restrain falling into divisive and lampooning rhetoric of political party leaders.

Present mechanisms inadequate

The mechanisms in vogue have not addressed the threats or insulated news media from the perils of market. For example, the Press Council of India over the years has made no difference to any of these concerns to do with fake, planted news or quid pro quo. Ombudsman hardly ever been seriously given chance. Times of

India's experiment thirty years ago with justice P N Bhagavati remained short lived. More recently NDTV announcement with eminent jurist Fali Narimen did not even take off. Earlier, HMTV's initiative by Dr. K Ramachandra Murthy did make some difference with veteran journalist GS Varadachari as ombudsman. Consumer Grievance Redressal Council for some reason never seriously took up news coverage as they do with advertisements. Professional groups hardly ever seized the vacuum in this regard. Journalist Unions and the like were too busy fighting for sustenance and survival matters. In the absence of these, "dirty tricks" elements got entrenched. Social audit has never been pursued either by the news media as a proactive initiative or citizen groups.

Citizen activism best bet

Citizen activism is best bet in such situation to cope and counter the trends threatening the very stature. Such a "Talk back culture" is good for the news media as much. I closed down National Council of Television Viewers (NCTV) that I experimented with during 1976-79. Only Doordarshan then took letters from viewers seriously and changed program schedules. News media should seek assistance of academics to support with reliable data and periodic analysis of trends. Media literacy is important for children and even for adults. This sensitizes readers and viewers how much or to what extent they should take on face value of what they read or see. They should realise why or what is being hyped or faked or planted. This is not only during times of election campaigns but even otherwise. The curriculum at high school level should have a lesson with examples and followed up with workshops. And functionaries of news media should frequently visit schools to interact with the young and avail open public forums as frequently as possible.

(Dr N Bhaskara Rao is foremost media researcher in the country with pioneering studies including on news media.)

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