

RECENT SHIFTS IN THE PARADIGM OF MEDIA OPERATIONS

SHOULD THERE BE A LAKSHMANREKHA, FOR THE MEDIA?

N Bhaskar Rao
Centre for Media Studies

Changing pattern of the ownership of media is key factor that lead to this demand for a Lakshmanrekha. This is a very important recent phenomena and that includes the emerging cross media ownership.

The news media are not so much editor-lead any more. Non-journalists are maneuvering the whole show. Then, there is paradigm shift and most of it is because of the TRP centric priorities. In fact, it could be said that TRP has hijacked the media in the country in the recent years. The print media is following the same route of television. Then, there is no retrospective view of the media within. But media appraises everyone else in the system. Then there is a conflict of interests and yet no disclosures as to business interests of owners as well as others, for example. The media wants everyone else to be transparent but they themselves are not as to their other interests. In some cases even real owners are not known. And now, we have the right to information in which, media has not been excluded, which means there is now a new compulsion. The power of the citizen being uppermost, who media should look for as to their responsibility for the contents, should be obvious.



N Bhaskar Rao

The range of coverage of the news media should have expanded beyond metro cities. But hardly there has been any change in both the 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 is still negligible.

With proliferation of TV, radio and newspapers recently in the country, the overall role, reach and relevance of media should have expanded much beyond (about two-thirds of people) what it was a couple of years ago. Some increase in circulation and viewership nevertheless is because of multiplicity, not because of expansion in the reach beyond two-thirds of population. That is the ones seeing are seeing more channels or programmes, and the ones reading are reading more newspapers.

Despite 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 the same from more news channels or channels. No wonder newspapers continue to enjoy relatively higher credibility and, are often

checked back for what is seen or heard on TV news bulletins - as if reading is more believable! CMS research described this phenomena as "appetizer effect".

Role and relevance of news mass 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 have been enjoying certain privileges and societal status. The news media are expected to have larger and long range concerns, not just

market compulsions or competitive concerns. Today news media are more a corporate voice than of community. New definition, new news values and new priorities dictate media today.

What does this paradigm shift mean for the dilemma involved in the media operations and to the very credibility of news media and their accountability. Is media, public service or for private interests. These include societal concerns vs. market priorities, stakeholders vs. shareholders, short-term 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, preoccupations and the shifts in the news media? These shifts are not even discussed even within the media and by any fora to do with policies and future. There is no independent and objective analysis of these changes in the media operations and their implications. How else it could be explained that even very provocative analysis of the President or Prime Minister or Chief Justice of the country in this regard are never followed up. But when it comes to interests of individual media houses, or competitive compulsions between any two media houses, such issues are all over as if they are the national agenda.

The paradigm shift involves bigger issue. The bigger issue and the core of the issue is the consumerism. Consumerism which is a global phenomena is what dictates the media priorities today. They cater more for the greed not so much for the needs of majority of people. That is how market sustains the media. Let me tell you

phenomena.

Not reader/viewer lead!

Today advertising and market research in many ways determine the scope of mass media, including journalistic trends. With allowing of 100 percent FDI in both these fields in the last couple of years, both these functions are in the hands of corporates, controlled mostly from abroad. Advertising, market research and media-planning sets the pace of media including in the case of ownership pattern and journalistic trends. By and large the control of these

Entry of foreign advertising agencies has been going on parallelly to the entry of foreign brands and increase in the share of foreign corporates in the total advertising in the country.

"determining factors" has changed with no one raising an issue of it nor a debate at any level.

Firstly, the share of advertising in total revenue of media has been on the increase from that of a "supplementary" (25-30%) nature some decades ago, to that of a "supportive" one (45-55%) now. In fact, in the case of television channels, advertising has been the "primary source" (50-70%) to the extent of "determining" the priorities and preoccupations. Even in the case of some big newspapers, revenue from advertising constitutes as high as 60 percent of total revenue. That is how the recent boom in media in India is often being attributed to

In a race to break the news earliest, some news channels announced the death of Former President, Sh K.R. Narainan when he was still alive. Hearing the news Congress Headquarter at Akbar Road had even downed their flag to half-mast which was raised again once the news was proved wrong.

that, 30 years ago when I did the first survey for the second Press Commission, 55-77% of the total revenue of newspapers was from the readers. Today it is opposite. That's why the markets sustain, and they have become the deciding factors. There is a declining dependence on the reader and the viewer. And yet how they are able to grow and increase their profits needs to be discussed. News media have become the support service for the markets, corporates and of course the Government. Of course the markets and corporates are a recent

advertising. That is advertising today sustains and steers media. Secondly, advertising through newspapers and television today 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 in last couple of years. Top five advertising agencies, with major holding from outside the country, account for well over half of advertising business in the country and this has been on the increase. In fact, lifting the limits of



foreign capital in advertising agency business has opened the floodgates. Well over half of Indian advertising now is accounted by overseas-based agencies. The revenue of the media has gone up manifold in the recent years. But their expenditure has now gone up manifold in the recent years. But their expenditure has not gone up on people who are responsible for sustaining it as the Fourth Estate—the journalists, the editors, the content people. In fact, proportion of spending on them has come down recently.

Power Shift

Fourthly, market research is a basis for proliferation of brands and consumerism as well as for the preoccupation and priorities of mass media and the very

both print as well as electronic. This is because of restricted view of concerns and limited representative nature of contents. That is a very interesting phenomena that needs to be analyzed. Despite competition they all have same formula contents because of the TRP formula. In fact, we see more a copy cat phenomena. Every channel is trying to imitate the other one. They are all reacting to the others rather than pro-actively being on their own. The public relations are in conflict totally with the editor. Some of the regional media ones are better in this respect. In fact, what is being played up in the media is, what interests the public not what is in the interest of the public. The two are not the same as is often being made out. Public wants good news "page-three news". This is what

Market research agencies are the ones, which also conduct "readership" surveys and "rating" of television viewership and they have direct influence on advertising agencies as well as the news media as to their priorities and preoccupation.

scope and character of advertising. Until a few years ago, we had about 6 or 7 market research agencies owned mostly by Indians. Today, top 7 or 8 market research agencies, accounting for more than three-fourth of research either have already been taken over by one or other foreign corporate or they have acquired significant interest. In fact, with recent mergers and acquisitions, certain monopolistic trend is already evident in this function with an annual turnover of well over Rs. 500 crores.

More specifically, the point here is that the methodology being followed by readership surveys and viewership rating is not without bias in favour of the sponsors and subscribers. As the one who was involved in launching India specific readership and rating studies 30 years ago, we feel guilty for what is happening today, particularly the way the findings of these surveys are being used both by newspapers and TV channels as if a national agenda has been hijacked. The "TRP trap", as we call the phenomena or assessing "popularity" of TV programmes, has larger and long-range implications to India.

Findings of TRP or IRS or NRS, do not highlight about certain stagnation in the overall expansion of media particularly among the poor and far off ones. As a result, the total reach of the media is not more than two-thirds of the population. It is much less depending upon which state we are talking. Overall during the last five years there is a stagnation despite proliferation of the media

the corporates want us to believe. That logic is being perpetuated by the TRPs, readership surveys, NRS and the IRS.

Fifth, with 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". The media planners are the ones involved these days in buying wholesale space and time of media for advertising and selling the same in retail on their terms.

In the case of corporate "public relations", functioning of these "experts" implies certain undermining or interference in the functioning, particularly of news reporters and editors and their marginalisation. For, the function of PR is to ensure coverage for a particular viewpoint or otherwise. "Disinformation" being talked about recently is a part of this new phenomena. Today majority control of these PR corporates in India, some six or seven leading ones operating nationally, is with foreign agencies.

Sometime ago President APJ Abdul Kalam and Justice A S Anand made very pertinent observations. President Kalam said Former Chief Justice of India Dr. Anand said "while commercialism has a legitimate place in business

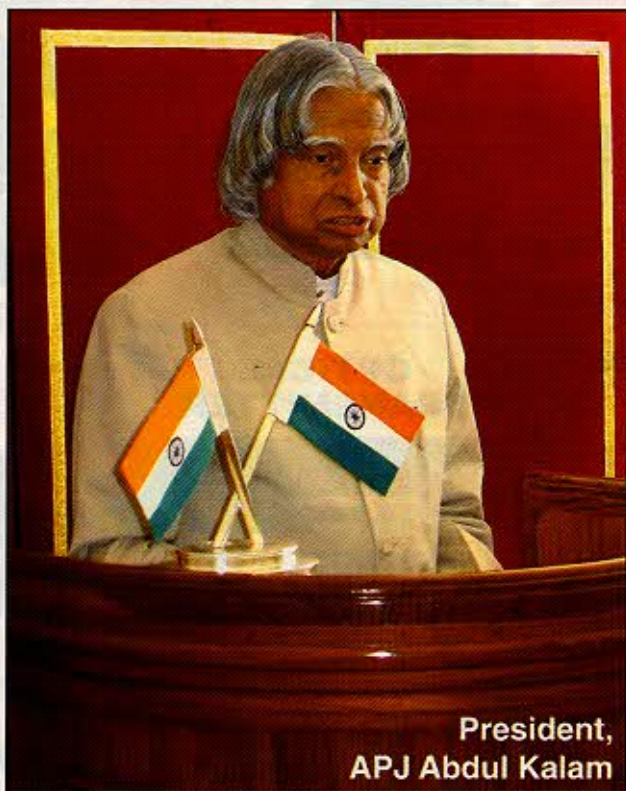
office of the newspaper, it becomes a danger when it invades the editorial room". Stating that "today, there are some genuine concerns about the way in which some sections of the media function," he said, "the liberty of the press cannot be confused with its licentiousness". They were commenting on recent dramatic changes in India in the media concerns.

If national Hindi TV news channels of 24 hours are analysed, what emerges is that politics continue to be the preoccupation. One gets the feeling that rural India does not exist for these news channels. Coverage for rural India is a consistently less than 2 percent bulletins. 60 percent of their news is from the four metros of the country. As to social development issues like health, education, environment, gender and children, how much television channels are bothered? Hardly 4 percent of the total news bulletin time is devoted for all these issues. Stories which have something to do with economics are being repeated many times, sometimes to the extent of 60 percent of news, as if nothing else is happened as that day.

Adding to these trends, the Government seems lacking in priorities in policies to do with media. The policies prefer corporate ownership rather than community media as in the case of radio, they prefer centralised media as in the case of DTH, when it is known that regional media are more appropriate for India, and the policies are in favour of monopolies and conglomerate the latest example being SUN TV. 100% foreign investment is allowed in areas which sustain and support media. These include advertising, public relations, market research, etc. They together determine the direction of media priorities.

Further, the landmark Judgement of Supreme Court of India of 1995 on airwaves was never followed up. In

fact, Minister after Minister violated the spirit of the judgement and went about taking decisions—without reflecting the concern to do with the challenges before the nation and tasks of the news media.



President,
APJ Abdul Kalam

"The urban oriented Indian media" should become "media for one billion people" instead of concentrating on the 300 million urban people".

In about 7-8 states the situation today is that, the same media group dominates the news scenario. By and large more than 50 percent of the viewership, readership and circulation are by the same group. There are at least 8 States where monopoly of a single media house has been on the increase, not on the decline. There are about 13 media groups emerging as conglomerate in the country. They are all in the news business. They own, newspapers, magazines, radio, cable TV, television. There is no debate and there is no independent regulator as suggested/directed by the Supreme Court of India for the broadcast sector ten years ago. The Government is yet to respond.

We have hardly any media watch groups which are based on objective analysis and reliable methodology. There is no independent research. I am emphasising the words independent research, because, TRPs, IRS, NRS, if you really dig into, will find that the same global corporates who are interested in each other are involved in perpetuating their findings as yardsticks for India.

It is this recent paradigm shift in media operations that gives scope for raising questions like, should there be a Lakshmanrekha for news media. It is for the professionals within the media, owners and journalists, who should take initiatives more than the Government and not to give scope for such apprehensions about their vary role and responsibility and causes they pursue and the concerns being echoed.