

The path of least resistance

By DR. N. BHASKAR RAO

Today we should be thinking aloud about the scope and tasks of change in the concept of "mass media" from a much broader perspective than we have been so far. What is usually talked in professional gatherings has been in praise of various media and their contribution to national development, democracy and so forth.

We should be talking about social change in our ways of conceiving mass media instead of the other way around. Until recently a wide conflict existed among various groups involved in managing the mass media and in producing the content of the media and the Government—whether it be on delinking or diffusion of ownership, or on the concept of commitment, or on democracy and freedom.

Source of conflict

This conflict can be described as one of between the "reality process" and the "social process". The reality process is the way by which individuals, like publishers of newspapers and producers of films, come to conceive of themselves and the ways in which they can and will relate themselves to all other things.

The social process, on the other hand is the sum total of all of the consequences of what people do as a result of the ways in which they conceive of themselves and of all other things. In general terms this is described as a clash between myth and reality.

The gap between these two processes, thanks to the last Lok Sabha elections, has since then been seen through at large. But to what extent the media has taken this into account?

The imposition of censorship

on media brings out that thereby the media themselves or set has been less constraint and less self-correcting effort built into our mass media operations. Only when the Prime Minister or a Minister raises hell on this point is it that the privileged men in our media murmur around and call a conference and ease out with the crucial task on hand and pass a resolution or two on a price increase or appealing for an abolition of surcharges—whether it be the press or the film industry.

The point I am trying to bring out is that the more imperfectly and less mutually-constraining the reality and the social process are, the more change there is obviously in the structure and style of the operations of the privileged media in India. And this is what happened on June 26, 1975—as an inevitable course of events.

The source of conflict between the reality and the social processes is the isolation of those who manage media organisations and filter the media content because of their own privileged position in the society.

This is evident from the fact that these privileged men permitted themselves far exceeding alternatives of what they see, hear and present than "permitted" by the clientele at large in the country.

These operations were living in a world that constantly confirms their wisdom and relieves them of any pressure to keep re-examining their own concepts, attitudes and goals. The main threat that emanated from the mass media was not tyranny or erosion of freedom, but inanity and irrelevance.

No criteria are evolved either

by any other representative body as to what is important, legitimate, relevant or worthy of production on paper or celluloid. So this function is left as an exclusive right of a few men at the helm of affairs in the media. The unions or associations we have are primarily for safeguarding salaries, newsprint raw film, and for ensuring representation on Government Committees, rather than for setting professional guidelines and evolving professional ethics and norms.

Let me pose this question to you, why should every newspaper start with the requirement of filling a predetermined number of pages, regardless of what has actually happened the preceding day or week? As a result of this old tradition, every form of journalism gives a distorted emphasis to events because the standard is not the importance of those events in our lives but only their place in an inflexible quota of news.

Irrelevant

The result is that amidst a national crisis, we were bombarded with repetitive for fragmentary and gloomy reports that compete to get our attention at the expense of comprehension coherence, relevance and positive achievement.

Unfortunately, one of our criteria in media management and media use has been the exposure of the reader as an end in itself, rather than as a means towards affecting his or her ideas and attitudes for some action or involvement.

Why aren't we interested in all of mass communication

which goes on outside of the privileged media that is the press, the radio and the film, when their collective reach is not more than a quarter of the nation's adults?

Involving people

Aren't there more methods of reaching people, and informing, arguing and involving them? The other methods are either already in use but not yet labelled, or some not yet identified. Why were the "mass mobilisations" and "big gatherings" held recently in Delhi not given the same status by the opposition parties as is being enjoyed by the media.

This we will be able to do only when we ask as to what are the social functions which can be or must be served by mass communication systems. Then only we need to recognise the actual or necessary social functions of the mass media, and to evaluate their performance in terms of these criteria.

What I am saying is that the ways in which mass media and mass communication have been traditionally defined, are only partial and limited and against ideological backdrops.

It is time we reconceptualise the notions on and about mass media instead of outrightly borrowing them with all the inherent assumptions and connotations.

We need to do so not in terms of what people do who presently label themselves or get labelled as mass communicators or media men, but in terms of the social functions which are or should be served by mass communication systems.

(To be Continued)