

Mass Media: Fourth Estate vs. Corporate Interest

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Mass media have various accountabilities and responsibilities. But in recent years several changes have developed in their work culture. Despite being called Fourth Estate they have also to fulfil the corporate interest with their critical and horizontal expansion. The present article discusses some aspects of these changes, quoting the opinions of various experts.

Key words: - Mass media, Corporate interest. Fourth Estate

We can start with some pertinent questions: Are news media like other business corporations with their own corporate interests? And, do corporations have some social responsibility and public accountability? Do media organizations constitute business entity? Or, they are one of the pillars of democracy-The Fourth Estate. By their actions and intentions what image are they creating for themselves- a Watchdog or money monger Can each and every action undertaken by different news channels in the name of 'sting operation' or 'undercover investigation' be justified? Every discerning person is aware of what is going on in the name of 'exclusive' or 'breaking news'. Our media, especially TV news channels in their quest for exclusives and 'breaking news', have, willingly or unwillingly, chosen to follow the western media practices and that too only in flesh, not in spirit.

It is not important to define mass media, but one needs to ponder- mass media for whom? Mass media for whom? Mass media for classes or for masses? Mass media for education, awareness and dissemination of information or for entertainment or both? Again, for public service with social responsibility or for corporate interest sans social responsibility? It has been a regular practice for Media to make much hue and cry for freedom of press, and talk less about their accountability and responsibility to society. Media and communication theorist **Denis Mc Quail (1994)** said, "The media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust". Even media freedom can be allowed so long as it is used in cognizance with social responsibility and public accountability. Media are the trustees of the public faith in Democracy. They are the custodian of democratic rights, keepers of the social values and purveyors of fair and balanced news. Media are the watchdogs of the public good against abuse of office or power, either by government or by any other private entity.

Globalised media is obliged to disseminate and perpetuate the messages and value systems that promote and boost consumerism. Media will cater to the choice and the taste of audience who have the purchasing power because they (audience) constitute advertisers market. He who pays the piper calls the tune.

The first impression the word 'globalization' gives is westernization. Globalization demands everybody to conform to the western view and the value system of the world.

We have adopted western fast food to satiate our taste buds and immediate hunger and as a result endangered our health. Now we are adopting their 'fast' culture that satiates our copy cat instincts but alienates us spiritually.

Management gurus have never been unanimous on whether corporations in fact have **social responsibilities** beyond caring for their own customers, employees, and profits.

Tracing the origin of social responsibility of press, Denis McQuail says, "From the seventeenth century onwards, in Europe and its colonies, the newspaper... was widely seen as either a tool for political liberation and social/economic progress, or a legitimate means of opposition to established orders of powers (often both at the same time). This perception of the part played by the press in society has understandably left an enduring stamp on questions of the rights and duties of the press itself and on the attitude of civil authorities to the press" (**McQuail, 1994:123**).

The 1947 US Commission on the freedom of the press (popularly known as **Hutchins Commission**) not only reaffirmed the principle of freedom but added to it the notion of social responsibility, which the press was called upon to accept, in recognition of its essential role in political and social life (*Blanchard, 1977*).

Singhal and Rogers (1989:75-80) have noted that the successful commercialization of **Doordarshan** provoked often intense debate about television's role in Indian society, including its role in the promotion of consumerism, competition between consumer goods manufacturers, and in exacerbating inequalities.

Former President K.R. Narayanan in a lecture 1997 said that journalism, once a solemn vocation, had become "a ruthlessly competitive profit-making industry, including in all the tricks of the trade". Instead of presenting factual accounts of incidents, the media were sensationalizing them (*'Narayanan...'* 1997).

The Prasar Bharati Act 1990 gives a clear mandate for public service broadcasting in India, saying that the Prasar Bharati "may take such steps as it thinks fit to ensure that broadcasting is conducted as a public service" (*Kak, 1996*).

With the advent of Justice Markandey Katju as Chairman of the Press Council of India, the issue of accountability and social responsibility of media, especially that of TV news channels, has resurfaced with an added and related issue of freedom of Press. Much debate, as also confute, is going on throughout the country, on TV channels and through print columns, among the discerning people and the champions of the cause media. But there is doubt about some concrete outcome of this battle of words.

In the United States, social responsibility developed during the 1920s and 1930s and received boost from growing awareness that government intervention in media affairs was real possibility, and that the only barrier was support by the public of a free press. Commenting on the social responsibility of press **Hutchins Commission** observed, "The relative power of the press carries with it relatively great obligations". (**Hutchins Commission** report, *A Free and Responsible Press, 1947*).

Edward R. Murow, the well-known American broadcaster, called television, "the money making machine". It is relevant to quote him here: "One of the basic troubles with radio and television news is that both instruments have grown up as an incompatible combinations of show business, advertising and news...The top management of the networks , with a few notable exceptions , has been trained in advertising, research, or show business. But by the nature of the corporate structure , they also make the final and crucial decisions having to do with news and public affairs . Frequently they have neither the time nor the competence to do this..." (as quoted in **Sperber , 1987:xvi**).

Milton Friedman, a Nobel Prize winner in economics, declared: "There is one and only one social responsibility to business- to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of game..." (*Friedman, 1970*). But did he mean media as an industry or business entrepreneurship?

In this regard Leonard Silk, the then economic correspondent of the New York Times points out the paradox, "Can a newspaper simultaneously be both a business serving its own interests and affect to be a quasi-public institution serving everybody's best interests as defined by the newspaper itself?" (as quoted in *Fink, 1988: 83*).

"The reality, then, is that profit as a motivational factor in modern communications corporations has fundamental importance to the practice of ethical, responsible newspaper and television journalism. Yet, many editors and news directors resist the thought that they are involved in a 'business' manufacturing a 'product' that must compete and win in the marketplace just like any other product" (*Fink, 1988:111*).

The role of editors has changed. This change started in the United States a couple of decades ago, that followed in India in mid nineties of last century with a modest and sporadic pace in print and later in the TV news channels with ever increasing assertion of proprietors as managing editors and executive editors running their organizations as corporate houses aiming on increasing profits. A couple of decades ago, editors were editors. Now, they have become editor-managers. They direct the editing of the newspaper with one hand and, with the other; they manage their corporate interests.

Editors now use the jargon of corporate world to describe their newspapers; what used to be 'a good newspaper' earlier has now become a 'quality product'. Rajendra Prabhu, a journalist, pointed out in 1995, "...the newspaper empire is closely aligned to their business interests. And in fact the only reason why they pursue their newspaper

empire is because it gives them the political put to threaten and browbeat Chief Ministers into getting benefits for them in their other businesses"(Prabhu,1995).

Richard Gruneau and Robert Hackett (1990) say, "In the United States news is a business and, for television, journalism often becomes indistinguishable from show business. Most television news production in the United States is produced by organizations with a mandate that has very little to do with the dissemination of public information; rather, these organizations exist to sell audience viewing time to advertisers for profit". This was yesterday in the US and we are experiencing it here today.

Now a days editorial functions in some of the leading newspapers are divided and men handling news operations are merely titled Executive Editors. Management is becoming more and more interfering and influential. Of course, effective management may increase profits; but managers are less concerned with social responsibility or public accountability. Same is the case with the news channels. With the cut throat competition among them for TRP, many TV news channels have indulged in, if not in illegal, unethical practices- some in the name of sting operations crossing the line and breaching the rights of citizens and others in the name of mythology and cultural rituals promoting superstitions. This is all done to arrest the eyeballs. Audience are not individuals for them; they are considered mass only statistically important.

The desire of proprietors, or their wards, to direct editorial operations, without any experience is becoming increasingly popular across the media world. But they forget, or willfully ignore the fact that even effective and efficient managers cannot be substitute for good editors.

Journalists are appointed on contract; and directly or indirectly are subordinated to the management.

It is relevant here to quote former President K.R. Narayanan who while delivering a lecture in Parliament Annexe more than a decade ago said: "...the old preeminence of the editor has become extinct. The proprietor and not the Editor formulates policy, and the editors execute the policies. In this context it is the proprietor who really enjoys the freedom of the press" (*Narayanan...* 1997).

Freedom of media can be prerogative given to and enjoyed by the Fourth Estate or the Watchdog in order to perform their genuine and assigned duties towards the public in a democracy, but it can not be used by media houses as a tool for promoting their corporate interests. Further, the buck stops at the top but freedom must percolate to the lowest rung of the hierarchy in the media organizations.

In a globalized world, the growing marketing concept in media management regards newspapers and television news as brand products to be produced in response to marketing research, to be promoted and marketed just as any other commodities are. If the concept is permitted to run unrestricted through management ranks, what news items are created - and for whom-is decided by marketing experts whose goal is not fearless coverage of the news on its newsworthiness, but, rather, attracting the right affluent readersèaudience who in turn will attract advertisers (*Fink 1988: xxii*).

Thus, organizations to whom profit is the main consideration give a low second place to accountability and responsibility. Only an informed public opinion and an alert and committed corps of journalists can motivate and maintain the public opinion and pressure needed to ensure that social responsibility comes before profit.

One of the largest newspaper groups in India, The Times of India Group, prides itself on increasing its profits. Its proprietor was once quoted by the Business World as having said: "I cannot have a diarchy in this office" (*Business World, 1995*). That means he was the boss and did not accept the basic claim of journalism that the editor is outside the corporate structure.

Across the country the proprietors are taking over or are already the editors.

In fact most of the newspaper empires are closely linked to their business interests. And the only reason why they pursue their newspaper empire is because it gives them the political put to threaten and browbeat politicians and bureaucrats into getting benefits for them in their other businesses.

When The Times of India Group proprietor declares that his newspaper is a brand and he is free to do what he likes with it (*Business World, 1995*), he is only taking the stand of the proprietors who claim that the newspaper business, as also TV channels for that matter, is just like their other commercial activities. Here a very pertinent question arise: if the newspaper business is just like their other commercial activities, do they have

any moral or legal right to claim the privileges or prerogatives provided by the governments or faith and respect shown by the people to them as the Press or The Fourth Estate, or the Watchdog?

It is still relevant here to quote *Agee, et al.* (1988:32): "The media as a whole are concerned in a news sense with reporting and interpreting society's conduct, in an entertainment sense with presenting material that will earn a profit because it pleases audiences, and commercial sense with marketing goods and services through advertising, at a profit for themselves".

Media cannot shirk its social responsibility. They have to play a constructive and positive role and focus on issues related with vital aspects of society and detract themselves from the trivialities. Apart from being the Fourth Estate and Watchdog, communicators and media persons are also 'social lubricators aiding the smooth running of a technologically advanced society' (**Hoggart, 1970**).

While reporting on developmental issues the media should concentrate on process based reporting and not on event based.

Print and Electronic media should fix regular space or airtime for development communication or success stories as a gesture of social service. A very low percentage of their expenditure would do it. After all they are also part of civil society.

It may be concluded that adopting a socially responsible corporate policy is the right choice, the ethical norm, to adopt.

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