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Strengthening democracy: Is media in India up to the challenge?

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Abstract

Traditionally, the media has been assigned the traditional role of surveillance of the environment, correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment and transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next.. Newspapers have played an important role in this for centuries and helped public discourse. With the globalization of economy, media houses have come to be corporatized. In India, publishers have entered the equity market, directly or indirectly owning scrips of companies that they are supposed to be watchdog on. Publishers of the largest circulated English daily newspaper which expectedly wields influence with society and the government of the day, enter into private treaties with corporate while officially identifying their editorial chiefs as editor of specific markets. Regional newspapers have followed suit. Political parties have joined the game and enticed the watchdogs with the lure of public offices. Under the circumstances, can the media houses continue to play the role expected of them? This paper looks into the ethical dilemma that good journalism and good journalists face today.

Keywords: Traditional role, Media ethics, Private treaty, Watchdog

1. Print is dying. Is it?

The obituary of the print media is being written at a frenetic pace. Quite a few epitaphs have been engraved and installed, too. A few years ago it was felt that the prospects of print media would be good at least in developing countries for a few decades more as a large section of the population was still getting into the realm of literate world and the neo-literate would get on to reading printed stuff in the beginning before switching over to other media, especially the cyber media. However, there is every reason to believe that the neo-literate may no longer first get on to printed literature as computers and internet connectivity are becoming more widespread and increasingly more affordable thanks to advancement in technology. Indeed there are evidences of neo-literate skipping the first step on the media consumption rung and moving on to television (Mallik, 2016) for information and now on to mobile platforms.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the future of exchange of information is on the chip and in the wireless world that is on the move. It is important to deliberate on the responses of the print industry to these challenges.

Let us set this discussion in perspective and look at the industry trends. The discussion on the state of print media is taking place when the growth in global economy has shrunk to 2.4 per cent in 2015 from 2.6 per cent in the previous year. It is no coincidence that the print media in the developed world, too, has shrunk.

Bucking the global trend, Indian economy is growing at about 7 per cent and with a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12.8 per cent the Indian entertainment and media (E&M) industry was Rs 1157 billion in 2015. The figure was Rs 1026 in the previous year. Trade figures show that E&M industry has outperformed Indian industry for more than a decade now.

2. A brief history of the print industry

Before we look at the global and Indian trends in print media, let us take a quick look at the evolution of newspapers. A part of the daily life of a large chunk of humanity, newspapers as we know them today, evolved over about six centuries.

The forerunners of today's newspapers appeared in the late 1400s in what we today know as Germany. They were in the form of pamphlets. Incidentally, they were often sensationalized

in content. Among the oft-cited reporting of these pamphlets were the oppression of the Germans by Vlad Tsepes Drakul in Transylvania who was later to be known as Count Dracula of written and celluloid folklore.

There is an earlier version of newspapers, photographs of which are not available, as it dates back to 59 BC. *Acta Diurna* (ie, daily acts) was a gazette of official notices in Rome. These were presented to the people carved into wood or stone. *Notizie Scritte* from Venice is considered to be the first monthly publication that ever came out, in 1556. It cost one gazetta. Some people hold that the term ‘gazette’ in the nameplate of many newspapers come from here. Written by hand, it aimed at conveying political, military, and economic developments across Europe.

La Gazette was France’s first weekly. Founded by Théophraste Renaudot in 1631, its original name was *Gazette de France*. It folded up in 1915. The oldest surviving newspaper is Swedish newspaper *Post-och Inrikes Tidningar* (or *Post and Domestic Times*) which is being printed since 1645! Restricted to certain topics and not meant for common public, these publications cannot be considered newspapers as we understand them today.

Corantos were the predecessors of newspapers in the English-speaking world. Typically, corantos were published when some event worthy of notice occurred and the publishers felt like telling the rest of the world about them. While the first successively published paper was *The Weekly News* of 1622, the first true newspaper was the *London Gazette* of 1666. The latter remained the only officially sanctioned newspaper for many years.

3. Initial days in India

Newspapers in India had a rather torrid beginning. James Augustus Hickey came out with *Bengal Gazette*, a weekly political and commercial paper which he claimed was “open to all parties but influenced by none” in 1780. The paper, Hickey said, was to report “social” and “political” life of the British. A year later, Warren Hastings denied all postal facilities as Hickey wrote more about the scandals in the expatriate community. Not to be outgunned, Hickey hit back but was arrested in 1781. Despite this he continued to write for *Bengal Gazette*. The paper stopped publication a little later after type blocks were seized.

Though Hickey is credited with launching newspapers in India, an attempt was made by William Bolt who “announced” his paper a couple of years earlier. Those who wanted to

know of the happenings back in Britain could go to his home and read the “news”. Again, by no stretch of imagination, it can be called a newspaper.

The next five years after Bengal Gazette’s closure saw six newspapers, all by Englishmen. Some of these had government patronage, too. Madras Courier and Bombay Herald flourished, though subservient to the government. Their combined circulation was 2000. With Samachar Darpan, Serampore Missionaries were the pioneers among the Indians. As one of the main impediments to the growth of free journalism was removed with the withdrawal of censorship on August 19, 1818, a number of Indian language papers started publication. By the end of 1822, Calcutta (now Kolkata) had launched two weeklies in Bengali and two in Persian while the third was on its way. One of the Persian weeklies, the Mirat-ul-Akhbar, was edited by the indomitable fighter for the freedom of the press, Raja Ram Mohan Roy. His objective was to give public intelligent reading, make them acquainted with laws and rules and indicate the real situation of the subjects to the government. However, Roy stopped publication later to protest against press regulations. A year later, Mani Ram Thakur brought out the Shamsul Akhbar which survived for five years.

The pioneers of Indian language journalism fought hard to overcome the numerous impediments. Their breed swelled. The Oudh Akhbar, Lucknow (April 11, 1880) quotes from the Times, London: The number of Indian language newspapers, which stood at six in 1835 and 28 in 1850, rose to 97 in 1878. These 97 papers commanded a total circulation of 1.5 lakh. Some of the important publications that came up in subsequent years were Bombay Samachar (1822), Mombai Vartman (1830), Jam-e-Jamshed (1831) and Bombay Darpan (1850). Bombay Samachar and Jam-e-Jamshed continue publication even today, making the first the oldest surviving newspaper in Asia. Down south, Tamil and Telugu papers came up and in North West provinces Hindi and Urdu papers. In Bengal, by 1839 there were nine papers with circulation of about 200 each. There were 26 papers, six of them dailies, in the British stable.

Despite Lord Canning’s Gagging Act of 1857, Bombay’s (now Mumbai) press supported Indian way of life and Amrit Bazar Patrika and Kesari fanned nationalist aspirations. Patrika denounced deposition of Maharaja of Kashmir while Kesari opposed the government’s Age of Consent Bill of 1881. Edited by firebrand Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Kesari’s stand was supported

by Patrika and Bangabasi. As Lord Elgin added sections to IPC to suppress those fomenting “disaffection against crown”, “enmity/hatred between classes” and “mutiny”, Tilak became its victim and was imprisoned for six years. However, Aurobindo Ghose’s Bande Mataram, BB Upadhyaya’s Sandhya and BN Dutt’s Jugantar came up. A new era began with Gandhi’s arrival from South Africa and his emergence on the national social and political firmament. His Harijan (October 7, 1919) and Young India (October 8, 1919) were to greatly influence the Indian national social and political life.

Press in India, including that in princely states, played a major constructive role. It reported war, and opposed communal and sectarian violence and the eventual Partition of the country. It is strange that after independence, the governments in India continued to act like the colonial government when it came to letting the press enjoy freedom of expression, though guaranteed in the Constitution of India. Press acts were repealed or amended, but Official Secrets Act and sections of IPC were retained. The great champion of free speech and himself founder of a newspaper, Jawaharlal Nehru brought in Press (Objectionable Matters) Act in October 1951. It faced tremendous opposition and the government had to allow it to lapse in 1956. In 1984, Press Bill was introduced by the Congress government of Jagannath Mishra in Bihar. He was forced to withdraw the bill after big protest. Rajiv Gandhi, the young prime minister of India who talked of leading the country into the 21st century, introduced Anti-defamation Bill in 1987. This bill, too, had to be withdrawn after nationwide protest. The then Information and Broadcasting Minister in the Congress government, VN Gadgil, brought in Right to Reply Bill. This, too, had to be withdrawn after massive protest.

4. Media today, globally

The World Press Trends 2016 survey shows that newspapers generated an estimated \$168 billion in circulation and advertising revenue in 2015. Print and digital circulation brought in \$90 billion (53 per cent) while the rest came from advertising.

WNA-IFRA, which conducts the annual survey, points out that magazines and newspapers are the third largest among all cultural and creative industries, and the two are creating about 2.9 million jobs across the globe. Global newspaper revenues fell 1.2 per cent in 2015 from a year earlier and had plummeted 4.3 per cent over the last five years. WAN-IFRA estimates of

global industry revenue again include data on non-daily revenue, which is estimated at \$8 billion.

Across the world, more than 2.7 billion people read newspapers in print. Digital newspaper readership is growing, and in some developed economies, readership on digital platforms has left its print counterpart behind. Trends analysis estimates that at least 40 per cent of global internet users read newspapers online.

The challenge for the industry is the combined measurement of reach and influence of newspaper content on all platforms with new metrics. According to the survey report, print unit circulation increased 4.9 per cent globally in 2015 from a year earlier. This means a growth of 21.6 per cent over five years. The figures can be attributed to largely to the growth in circulation in India, China and some other Asian countries. India and China together accounted for a whopping 62 per cent of global average daily print unit circulation in 2015, up from 59 per cent in the previous year.

Circulation rose 7.8 per cent in Asia in 2015 in a year. The opposite happened almost everywhere else: North America (2.4 per cent fall), Latin America (2.7 per cent dip), Middle East and Africa (2.6 per cent fall), Europe (4.7 per cent fall) and Australia and Oceania (5.4 per cent tumble). Over five years, newspaper print circulation rose 38.6 per cent in Asia but fell elsewhere: 1.2 per cent in the Middle East and Africa, 1.5 per cent in Latin America, 10.9 per cent in North America, 23.8 per cent in Europe, and 22.3 per cent in Australia and Oceania.

In the most advanced markets, especially regional and local ones, sales of print products are stabilizing as an important element of a larger product mix. Many successful print products are smaller, community- and interest-focused, and follow the needs and habits of various specific audiences.

According to the survey report, more than 92 per cent of all newspaper revenues still come from print. United States, Japan, Germany, China, the United Kingdom, India and Brazil remain the seven biggest markets; together they account for more than half of global newspaper revenues and about 80 per cent of global daily unit circulation.

Newspapers are making efforts to stay financially relevant. The example of *The New York Times* can explain this. The New York Times Company has already started aligning its business to the global trend. Its official website reads:

“Welcome to our Company Web site. Here you can find out about our history, our business and journalistic endeavors and how our powerful and trusted brands are committed to quality news, information and entertainment in the U.S. and around the world. The New York Times Company is continuing to make the transition from an enterprise that operated primarily in print to one that is increasingly multiplatform in delivery and global in reach.

“To accomplish this, we are executing on our strategy of:

“Diversifying our revenue streams, with particular focus on digital;

“Leveraging our brand strength to grow profitable circulation revenue;

“Securing strong performance on costs; and

“Managing our asset portfolio to strengthen our core operations and enhance our digital presence.”

The New York Times was made available on the iPhone and iPod Touch in 2008, and on the iPad mobile devices in 2010. It is also the first newspaper to offer a video game as part of its editorial content, Food Import Folly by Persuasive Games.

So, should we say The New York Times or nytimes.com, now?

5. Trends in India

Defying the global trend, accordingly to RNI figures, there are more than 80,000 newspapers in print today. As Table 1 shows, India’s newspaper industry grew by 8 per cent in 2015. The Economist refers to Enders Analysis, a research outfit, to project that between 2014 and 2018 revenues from print advertising in Britain will drop more than a third from £993 million (\$1.4 billion) to £625 million.

In India, print publications account for a whopping 43 per cent of all corporate advertising. A little bit of comparison: the figure is less than 15 per cent in America. Between 2010 to 2014 advertising revenues from newspapers in India rose by 40 per cent. Many English dailies slip in supplements which are, in fact, advertorials. This partly explains why annual subscription

of a few papers in India cost 399 rupees (\$5.80), roughly the cost of a Sunday edition of The New York Times, points out The Economist. The magazine of repute concludes that most of this growth is driven by non-English newspapers. Hindi daily Dainik Jagran is perched at the top with over 16.6 million readers. The Times of India is the only English newspaper to feature in the top ten. Table 1 depicts the circulation of the top 10 newspapers of India.

Table 3
Circulation of newspapers in India (as of June 2016)

Rank	Newspaper	Headquarters	Language	Circulation
1	Dainik Bhaskar	Bhopal	Hindi	3,812,599
2	Dainik Jagran	Kanpur	Hindi	3,632,383
3	Amar Ujala	Noida	Hindi	2,938,173
4	The Times of India	Mumbai	English	2,731,334
5	Hindustan	New Delhi	Hindi	2,399,086
6	Malayala Manorama	Kottayam	Malayalam	2,372,256
7	Eenadu	Hyderabad	Telugu	1,841,276
8	Rajasthan Patrika	Jaipur	Hindi	1,813,756
9	Daily Thanthi	Chennai	Tamil	1,714,743
10	Mathrubhumi	Kozhikode	Malayalam	1,461,881

Courtesy: Audit Bureau of Circulation/ The Times of India

So what is it that keeps the print media ticking, nay flourishing in India? Better than the global economic growth rate, rising purchasing power, being subsidized by the advertising industry and hence low cover price of newspapers, and innovations by the marketing teams are some of the factors that come to the fore immediately.

Television and internet dominated the 1990s and about half of the next decade. This had an impact on the media habits of the people. Choices multiplied and technology changed only to

become cheaper and more accessible. Curiously, newspaper circulation kept pace with the rapid expansion of the internet. Better technology meant that printing newspapers in the regional languages of India was becoming commercially viable, and Hindi and English were not the only norm. Trade analysts say that for the first time the revenue collection of non-English newspapers will overtake that of English newspapers by 2017. As of now, 85 per cent of the estimated 80,000-odd newspapers are printed in one of India's 22 official languages, and the circulation of English-language newspapers is expanding by about 1.5 per cent annually. As the number of literate Indians rises by about twenty million each year, some non-English newspapers are growing at about 4.5 per cent. However, English-language papers draw 70 per cent of the available advertising money because their readership base is upmarket, The New Yorker wrote in a report.

5.1. Literacy and circulation: The literacy rate in India in 1991 was 52.21 per cent. At the turn of the century, in 2001, it went up to 64.84, and Census 2011 reported it to be 74.04 per cent. The increase in literacy rates has prompted localization of newspaper content and changes in technology have ensured that it could be printed and distributed widely.

The increasing literacy rates in rural areas of India has seen the investment in newspapers grow: Dainik Jagran, Rajasthan Patrika, Dainik Bhaskar, Amar Ujala, Eenadu, to name a few, raised their number of editions. Some of them leapt out of their home states and spread to other states.

It is important to note that circulation of newspapers has increased more in areas with increasing literacy rather than those which have better purchasing power. Kerala is a case in point. One can explain this to the people seeing in newspapers opportunities to get more involved in civic and political affairs of their city and the state, and by extension, the nation.

Print media's capacity to retain a large chunk of advertising revenue, too, has helped the localization of content in micro editions. Ad-spend has grown along with newspapers' circulation. Also, newspapers – and some of these have come in for criticism for this – have made several marketing innovations to pump up their numbers. Incentives to readers in the form of gifts in exchange for coupons printed in dailies, helped newcomers gain a foothold in

new markets. At the same time the existing players adopted the same practice to increase their respective pies.

The “gift coupon culture”, as the practice came to be described in Gujarat was used by the new entrant to the state in 2003, Divya Bhaskar which was the Gujarati language offering from the Dainik Bhaskar group, to carve a niche for itself in the state. Not to be outdone, market leader Gujarat Samachar and another popular daily and the oldest of the three Sandesh, too, used the scheme to fiercely protect their territories. There has been no verdict on who won the battle, but what can be said with some degree of certainty is that all three increased their circulations. No gainsaying the fact that the readers were the ones who gained the most: more choices of papers to choose from, more scrap value for the old papers which were sold to the dealers, and a gift to top it all!

While such marketing gimmicks have come to be frowned upon by the old-timers and purists, the practices are here to stay. What the localization of editions and content has ensured is the increased civic and political engagement of their readers. Readers in tier II and tier III cities who did not have a media platform to raise their voice have got one and they are able to contribute to the political debate.

“Rising literacy rates coupled with localised content coverage explains the sustained spike in regional newspaper sales. Physical newspapers have also flourished in part because their online versions have failed to woo India’s 400 million internet users. Broken links, shoddy user interfaces and ads masquerading as news stories have put readers off,” wrote The Economist.

A New Yorker report , too, points to similar facts. “One reason that Indian newspapers thrive is the absence of digital competition. Less than ten per cent of the population has access to the internet, and, with two-thirds of the population surviving on less than two dollars per day, expensive smartphones and tablets aren’t about to replace print media as the news-reading platform of choice.”

Indeed, India currently has about 350 million internet users, second only to China. However, seen in perspective, the numbers are deceiving. The Times of India in a recent front page report pointed out in a recent report that nearly 950 million people out of 1.25 billion – this works out to more than three-fourth – do not have access to internet. Quoting the joint

Assocham-Deloitte study “Strategic national measures to combat cybercrime,” it wrote: “Even with the internet data plans in India being among the cheapest in the world and the average retail price of smart phone steadily declining, connectivity is still out of the reach of nearly 950 million Indians.”

5.2. Competitors cooperate: Rethink on operations, too, has helped the publishers make their business easier. Gone are the days when publishers will wage fierce fight to cut into each other’s market or even baulk each other. Cooperation looks like doing them good. For example, popular Marathi daily Lokmat uses its factory in Maharashtra to print Maharashtra Times, a competitor. In Gujarat, The Times of India as part of its expansion project launched Surat edition and got it printed at the Gujarat Samachar press. Though a Gujarat language daily, and a very popular one at that, Gujarat Samachar competes fiercely with TOI for the same advertisement pie and thousands of overlapping readers. Divya Bhaskar, too printed TOI supplements even though DB Corporation competed with TOI in that it had launched its English daily dna (this is how Daily News and Analysis, the paper, likes to abbreviate itself: in lower case) in the same market in 2007.

“Customers, too, are shrewd about picking discount schemes and benefit from selling the paper back to scrap paper dealers. And newspapers continue to have a strong social and cultural significance. Many people remain attached to the paper version of the news, as a stroll down any busy street in India will reveal,” The Economist wrote.

The New Yorker report cited earlier also points to the fact that Indian papers are cheap, costing between five and ten cents daily. Publishers pay for the delivery of newspapers to their readers at home. Indeed, only about five per cent of papers are sold over the counter “The actual price of each paper is even lower, because of what Indians call raddi, their recycling program. Subscribers save their newspapers, which are picked up by raddiwallahs each month; the customer receives about ten cents per pound, and the raddiwallahs sell the bundles back to the paper companies to be recycled,” The New Yorker reported.

According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), print circulation of its member publications grew at 5.04 per cent CAGR between 2008 and 2015. Hindi publications were at the forefront of this. English newspapers are also growing, but not at this pace. In its 2016 report, ABC said, “This growth by print publications was achieved due to new titles entering

various market places as well as existing titles expanding their reach by starting new editions/printing centres at various locations.”

Choudhary (2016) in her report in *The Mint*, a business daily, quoted Mallikarjun Das, the chief executive of media buying agency StarcomMediaVest, to explain the growth of the newspapers: “They (Hindi and regional language papers) are growing organically and getting more and more mainstream... English dailies are growing on the back of premiumization. Circulation growth is low but the revenues are coming in from high end and premium advertising positions like jacket ads and full pages.”

On the monetary front, print advertising was expected to expand 6 per cent in 2016, as against 5.2 per cent in the previous year, to reach touch Rs 17,674 crore (Rs 176.74 billion) by the end of 2016. Choudhary quoted media agency GroupM, report ‘This Year Next Year’, published in January 2016: “The increase in ad spends expected from print-heavy sectors like auto, banking and finance and the government sector augurs well for newspapers. Regional advertising of telecom and consumer product brands will benefit language dailies.”

6. Sunset years, globally

FICCI-KPMG report-2016 and WPT Analysis show that print has held on to its own. Other media grew faster, but the print too is growing and the projections are only positive for the next few years, as Table 3 shows. Globally, advertising revenue has been falling, but the audience revenue has been heading north. However from its heydays, it clearly is in its sunset days, globally, as several other media have mounted challenges over the years.

Initial challenges came from the radio and television in the 1920s and 1940s respectively, Newspapers survived them. But internet is giving the print a run for its life. News is free on internet if one discounts the cost of internet connectivity. And if one considered the free WiFi being made available at public places and the liberal use of office internet by the workforce, then it is indeed free. The internet upset the business model of many newspapers and big publications like the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Los Angeles Times* the *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*, took massive blows. The circulation of *The New York Times* fell to less than a million copies around 2010. In an indication of the changing times, its web edition www.nytimes.com is the most popular web newspaper in the US and, according to figures on its company website, it

attracts more than 30 million unique visitors every month. In other words, more than a million readers daily. This means The New York Times has more web readers than print readers.

Similar stories are being reported from the other major English reading market, the UK where both papers of repute like the Independent and the Times and popular tabloid press like The Sun and The Daily Mirror have taken major blows. Chapman and Nuttall (2011) have very aptly summed it up: newspapers today are characterized by four themes: personalization, globalization, localization, and pauperization.

7. Trade challenges:

According to WAN-IFRA report, television retains the largest share of global advertising revenues at around 37 per cent. Desktop and mobile internet follow it with about 30 per cent, newspapers with 12.7 per cent and magazines with 6.5 per cent. Outdoor and radio (around 7 per cent) and cinema (0.6 per cent) trail them. Quoting Zenith Optimedia, WAN-IFRA points out that globally print advertising went down 7.5 per cent in 2015 and 24 per cent over five years. Since it began in the mid-1990s, internet advertising (both desktop and mobile) has risen mainly at the expense of print. Desktop and mobile internet advertising grew 18.7 per cent in 2015 and 102 per cent over five years.

However, these challenges can be converted into opportunities. After trying out web editions, newspapers are now gearing up for mobile editions. As Wan-IFRA survey of 2016 points out, for some publishers it is mobile-first, but some are already mobile-only. This makes sense, as the worldwide smartphone market saw a total of 1.4 billion units shipped in 2015, making it the top year for shipments on record, with around 30 per cent of the world's population owning a smart phone today.

Indeed, mobile growth represents a huge opportunity for newspapers and other news brands. And why not? Desktop audience continue to shrink. Time spent using smartphones now is greater than web usage on computers in many developed countries. Newspaper digital content keeps more than 80 per cent of people in the US engaged, and more than 70 per cent of the audience in Australia and Canada read a newspaper on digital devices. News brands reach 70 per cent of the UK population across online, tablet and mobile. WAN-IFRA use Newspaper Association of America figures to point out that more than half of the US newspaper digital

audience uses only mobile devices (smartphones or tablets) for their newspaper digital content.

8. Challenges of a different kind

The discussions above give us a grasp of the history, current global and Indian trends, and the challenges the media -- print, in particular -- face. This section is to draw the industry's attention to some ethical challenges that have emerged.

8.1. Business models are changing: From subscription-advertising revenue to only-advertising and now only subscription revenue (The Times of India Group's Lite version) media houses are constantly changing to keep the moolah flowing in. Yet, the largest of the media houses have faced the heat of the changing pattern of media usage of their audience. Some of the biggest and mightiest have either closed shop or mortgaged their properties, changed their format to cut down on the consumption of newsprint, the most expensive input, trimmed human and other capital and technological resources to keep the show on. Innovations like invitation pricing, differential pricing, and combo packaging have gained currency and the ones using these most effectively have benefited the most and walk to the bank laughing.

8.2. Everybody is a media producer: A couple of decades ago, when communication education in India was in its infancy, the concern was "anybody can be a journalist". Even before the universities and industry could collectively answer the question, as medical fraternity does through Medical Council of India and its affiliates in states, or engineering fraternity does through All-India Council of Technical Education, media fraternity is faced with the reality of everybody being or likely to become media content producer. Many of them could be journalist. Of course, there will always be at least two categories: professional and non-professional journalists. While the professional variety will need professional training, even the non-professional types can do well with a bit of training.

The classical role of media has been (i) surveillance of the environment, (ii) correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment, and (iii) transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next. In simple terms, to (i) inform, (ii) educate, and (iii) entertain. To these was added a fourth one as the media got commercialised – bringing advertisers and consumers on one platform.

To what extent does the media do live up to expectations? This author would like to draw certain lines here. They are arbitrary, but they coincide with certain major milestones in the history of our country.

The first milestone: 1947. The beginning of media in India was scandalous, as mentioned in the initial part of this paper, thanks to Hickey. But the newspapers owned by the Indians more or less lived up to its assigned role with distinction, despite being gagged and suppressed by the colonial power before independence.

Five years after independence, in 1952, the federal government constituted a press commission to assess the status of media in India, for it was realised that media has a role to play in nation building and its growth and development. It found certain lacunae in the press in India and recommended certain steps to strengthen it so that it could play the role expected of it.

Based on the responses it got to its questionnaire, the First Press Commission concluded that five owners controlled twenty-nine of the 330 dailies of the time and fifteen owners controlled fifty-four newspapers and 50 per cent circulation. This was a disturbing trend and the commission warned against it. The Second Press Commission (1978/80) looked at newspapers' role in nation building and concluded that newspapers have a role in developing and democratic society as neither adversary nor an ally. It gave certain recommendations, important among them being exercising restraint while writing on communal flare-ups and allied issues, amendment to the Press Council of India Act to enable the PCI to review quality and adequacy of training facilities of journalists and a few others.

To what extent could the industry live up to these recommendations and answer these challenges of the time. There are no ready figures, but one can safely say from experience – this author has worked with India's leading media houses for more than twenty-five years – that very little has been done and very little is being done. The ownership trend identified by the First Press Commission – and that continues more or less – is not good for democracy.

And as the print industry grappled with these challenges, came the second milestone: the opening of the economy, circa 1990. The economy changed: from the shortage economy of the 1950s to 1980s India plunged head on into consumerist economy in the 1990s. Lifestyle changed and so did media in both form and content to align itself with the changing economy.

Today, individual media vehicles are planned, produced, packaged, marketed and branded like any other fast moving consumer good. Some of the publishers make no bones about accepting this fact and their marketing warriors very proudly flaunt their “innovations”.

Prior to 1947, the media, whatever of it existed, was into the business of social responsibility (though this term was coined in the US, a few decades later, and a theory was enunciated in its name following the recommendations of the Hutchins’ Commission on Freedom of the Press that was set up only in 1947).

From 1950s to 1980s media was into the business of news. Sometime, in the 1990s the media got into the business of entertainment and advertising. The traditional role remains the same: to inform, educate, entertain, and be a platform for advertisers and consumers. The order has changed. It is now: be a platform for advertisers and consumers, entertain, educate and inform. Indeed in an interview to Ken Auletta of The New Yorker, Vineet Jain, the Managing Editor of Bennett, Coleman and Company Limited, more popularly called The Times of India Group, said, “We are not in the newspaper business. If 90 percent of your revenues come from advertising, you are in the advertising business.”

Clearly, market has overtaken media in India, too, as Chomsky and Herman (1988) wrote while discussing the media in the US. So the biggest challenge before the media in India today is to resist the market and get completely swamped by it. There are other challenges, but they are nothing in comparison.

Incidentally, the agenda reversal has paid off. And what a dividend it is. Circulation and reach has shot up. Newspaper is a strange business: the more you sell, the more losses you make. But this reversed agenda has ensured that media houses’ bottomline – profit before tax and profit after tax – too have soared. Things have come to the pass that almost every time the media does anything that was considered ‘not good’, it clicks. Purists squirm. Since these ‘not good’ practices are paying off, they are becoming what is called self-fulfilling prophesies. Purists again squirm.

The New Yorker report quoted a senior BCCL executive: “We knew we were in the business of aggregating a quality audience. Before that, we just sold advertising space.... We are a derived business.... When the advertiser becomes successful, we are successful. The advertiser wants us to facilitate consumption.”

The explanation of the “newspaper business” does not have “news” of “newspaper” mentioned even once. As senior journalist Krishna Prasad told Auletta, “The toothpaste is out of the tube.” It tastes sweet. Some say the toothpaste cannot be put back into the tube, some say there are ways to put it back into the tube. If the toothpaste has to be put back into the tube, the major print media players will have to take the lead. Unfortunately, there is no sign of willingness on their part as of now.

9. Conclusion

With the globalization of economy, media houses have come to be corporatized. In India, publishers have entered the equity market, directly or indirectly owning scrips of companies that they are supposed to be watchdog on. Publishers of the largest circulated English daily newspaper which expectedly wields influence with society and the government of the day, enter into private treaties with corporate while officially identifying their editorial chiefs as editor of specific markets. Regional newspapers have followed suit. Political parties have joined the game and enticed the watchdogs with the lure of public offices. Under the circumstances, it will be too much to expect media houses to live up to their tradition role and strengthen democracy. Good journalism and good journalists are caught between the horns of the dilemma.

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Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) is a non-profit body for measuring and auditing newspaper and magazine circulation in India. Its figures are widely used by the media industry to take strategic business decisions. ABC is one of the several organisations of the same name operating in different parts of world. Founded in 1948, ABC is a not-for-profit, voluntary organisation consisting of publishers, advertisers and advertising agencies as members. It does pioneering work in developing audit procedures to certify the circulation figures of publications which are members of ABC. Its membership today includes 562 Dailies, 107 Weeklies and 50 magazines plus 125 Advertising Agencies, 45 Advertisers & 22 New Agencies and Associations connected with print media and advertising. It covers most of the major towns in India. An Advertiser would like to know the facts and figures before investing his money in advertising. An Advertiser ought to know how many people buy a publication and in which area. The ABC gives all these vital statistics every six months. The ABC figures are not the outcome of opinions, claims or guesswork, but they are the result of rigid, indepth and impartial audits of paid circulation of member publications by independent firms of Chartered Accountants working in accordance with the rules / procedures prescribed by ABC.

GroupM is part of global advertising group WPP Plc.

WPT Analysis, E&Y, Zenith Optimedia, PwC Global Entertainment and Media Outlook: 2016-2020.

For more details, see Keval J Kumar's "Mass Media in India". The First and the Second

Press Commissions were given the mandate to look into creation of training facilities for journalists. Also, Press Council of India, accordingly had in its mandate to look into training of journalists. For more visit www.presscouncil.nic.in

Annals of Communication..., op cited.

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