

ROLE OF MEDIA IN DEMOCRACY - A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Introduction

The freedom of press is a basic pre-requisite of a democratic set up to which we have pledged ourselves in our Constitution. In the modern world of speed and manifold engagements, the freedom of the press is an integral part of social safety. In fact, the freedom is based on the fundamental principle that distribution of power is significant for the development of the general public. Thus, press plays an important role by providing the facts and true opinions which provides proper environment for a democracy to flourish. In reality, the faith of the people in the popular government rests on old dictum, "Let the people have the truth and the freedom to discuss it and all will go well." The newspapers not only give ideas but also give the people the liberty to seek out what ideas are correct.

In India, the right to freedom of the press is not specifically mentioned in the Constitution. But from the reference of the Constituent Assembly Debates, we can say that the framers of our Constitution did not think it necessary to make a reference to this particular freedom as the same was mentioned under Article 19(1)(a) of Indian Constitution which

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states about the freedom of speech and expression. Later, the Supreme Court also acknowledged explicitly that the freedom of the press was a prominent part of the right to freedom of speech and expression. However, the freedom of press in India is as similar as freedom of speech to citizens, unfortunately, press is not given any special privileges.

Meaning of Freedom of Press

The basic idea of freedom of press is to provide freedom to the individuals to express themselves through the medium of media and press. It clearly signifies that there is no special privilege to the press and their position is same as that of individuals. In fact, this freedom is prime to the lifetime of a private individuals within the democratic polity. Explaining its concept, William Blackstone stated,

“the liberty of the press, indeed essential to the character of a free state; but this consists in laying no previous restraints upon publications, and not in freedom from censure for criminal matter when published. Every free man has an undoubted right to get what sentiment he pleases before the general public, to forbid this, is to destroy the liberty of the press; but if he publishes what's improper, mischievous or illegal he must take the consequence of his own temerity. To subject the press to the restrictive power of a licencer is to subject all freedom of sentiment the unfairness of man, and make him the arbitrary and infallible judge of all controversial points in learning, religion and government. But to punish any dangerous or offensive writings, which when

published, shall on a good and impartial trial, be judged of a pernicious tendency, is important for the preservation of peace and good order, of state and religion, the sole solid foundations of civil liberty.”

The word “Global Village” is given to the world just because of media. In the history, we can see that a lot of impossible works have been done with the help of media because it has the ability or we should say power to mould the minds of the people¹.

Role of Media in Democracy

It is pertinent to note that media plays a significant part in creating and shaping a healthy democracy. On freedom of press, the whole set up of democracy is based and can be called as the backbone of a democracy. Media makes us aware and conscious regarding all the activities happening round the world whether it be of social, economical or political. The main aim of press is to find out the truths of society and pin point the facts of the same. Undoubtedly, in the recent years, the scope and rights of media has evolved and become more active. It is pertinent to note that media does the work of reminding all the politicians regarding their unfulfilled promises at the time of elections. Media also helps in spreading awareness amongst the illiterate people specially, regarding to

¹ Patrick Lee Plaisance, “ The Concept of Media Accountability Reconsidered”. Journal of Mass Media Ethics, Volume 15, Issue 4 February 2000, pages 257-268.

whom they should cast their vote. Their whole day coverages on television is yet another way to elaborate the vision of citizens which consequently helps them to decide their leader. It gives immense pressure to politicians to perform well otherwise their failures get highlight at all platforms of media which will badly effect their votes. As our country is multi lingual, again media made a big achievement in educating masses and in making them conscious and aware regarding all the events happening around in their own language². Another significant role which media plays is to bring all the wrong doers in the light of law and make them liable for all their malpractices.

Furthermore, it is pertinent to note that as media plays the role of mirror of society, it also gives scope for eradicating all the present loopholes of the society. Due to massive level of broadcasting, media make it very easy to bring all the lacunas of democratic system and thus government can perform in filling all the exposed lacunas. Due to this, the chances become more of getting more accountable, sensible and responsible government. Today, in this modern era we are so technically upgraded that it is super easy to get any information on any subject in seconds. The circulation of information has become easier. The perfect blend of technology and human resources

² Jay Black, “ An Informal Agenda for Media Ethicists”, University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, 2008.

proves to be prominent in eradicating corruption and other malpractices from the society.

Accountability and responsibility in journalism

The Irish poet, Edward Eggleston, has called media “Organized Gossip” which is very much close to the work which actually media is performing. As we all know media reports everything that general people would find interesting rather than reporting on such things and events which should be known to them. Presently, the whole reporting done by them is based on people’s liking not on need of the times. Although, it cannot be denied that media has to show everything which is going on but to show only things only for entertainment and not reporting truth and informing people is something which is unbearable in any way. Honesty in journalism is need of the hour and journalist should be brave enough in collecting, informing and interpreting information. The accountability of journalist not only towards their profession but also towards the public is really high. A journalist must not feel any kind of obligation while doing his job with complete dedication. Undoubtedly, for running these professions, capital is needed but it is not apt to put this kind of profession on stake just for the business to survive³. Media has immense power to create

³ 200th Report by Law Commission of India on “Trial by Media: Free Speech and Fair Trial under Criminal Procedure Code, 1973”, August, 2006.

public opinion and consequently mould the conditions of country. This is the highest capability for any profession, so the responsibility is pretty much higher too. Journalists should have commitment to instantly expose all the unethical practices which they encounter with.

Promoting Responsible Citizenry

It is pertinent to note that for any democracy to run, the aware and responsible citizens are needed. As we all know, India is the biggest democratic country which shows how much citizens should be vigilant. It is significant to critically analyze that how the citizens of country are behaving and how much they are involved in the workings of government. It can be easily judged by the ratio of people who are actually casting vote and giving their opinion openly regarding rules, regulations and laws made by the government. It is a clear fact that if the citizens are in touch with everything happening in the country, it would not be easy task for media to misinform them. Aware citizens give a positive push to journalism also and make them more active and honest in bringing out all the relevant and genuine information. If we want to make our democracy a success, the role of journalists and citizens go hand in hand as it is the clear case of demand and supply⁴. If

⁴ Mass Media Research, Roger D. Wimmer/ Joseph R. Dominick.

citizens demand certain kind of information, it will be specifically supplied to them by media.

Impact of Media

In contemporary era, media is regarded as one of the pillars of democracy and the most important one also. As media plays a significant role in looking out the working of other three pillars. Needless to say that media has imminent role to play in the proper functioning of democracy in nation. Marshall McLuhan said, “the medium is the message”. It clearly implies that medium is the means of explaining how the distribution of a message can often be more significant than content of the message itself. In today’s world, where everybody is very much occupied in their social circle, the much reliance is on the media if they want to get any information relating to any other matter. Such is the power of media. Media is the interlocutor of the world and humanity⁵. The impact of media is noteworthy, the little mistake on the side of media can lead to communal riots. The excessive coverage and sometimes the publication of sensitive news in insensitive way create a hue and cry across nation. The illiterates fall into these hype news more in comparison to literate persons. Therefore, each and every news by the media plays a crucial role in maintaining and ruining the peace. As for illustration, we can take the example of the telecast of

⁵ Mass Communication Theory, Stanley J. Baran, Dennis K Davis.

hanging procedure in Dhananjoy Chatterjee case, the excessive hype lead to death of few children who tried to imitate the same act which was repeatedly getting played on their T.V. screens. There is plethora of negative effects which can be caused by media due to their insensitivity. The reason behind their such kind of behaviour may be sometimes the tough commercial competition which they are facing in their business. To be first in the rat race of winning, many a times media cross the limits of ethical practices and cover stories which are hypothetical, fake just to get more and more viewers. It lead to cheap journalism only. There are so many positive things which can be done by media too. India has a rich and diverse culture, media can be an instrument to promote harmony in the society by awaring citizens and making the masses educated about the positive and negative things in each faith⁶.With the help of media, emphasis can be laid on all those individuals and organizations who are working untiringly for the upliftment of poor people, the underprivileged and destitute. These heroic actions should be broadly telecast so that everyone comes to know about these things and imbibe in them too these positive vibes. In the similar way, there are many public servants like police officers, doctors etc. who are doing their duties with utmost honesty and giving their best in

⁶ Ambika Srivastava, "The Role and Responsibility of Media in Global Tobacco Control."

creating a peaceful, healthy and developed country. These individuals should get their part of popularity too via media. They should be called on TV to speak about their deeds and achievements which will give positive boosting to other people too to get involved in serving country in their own ways. It will positively impact the thinking and behaviour of general public⁷.

Conclusion

The major function of media should be as a source of information and should work to sustain democracy by constant struggle. Journalism is a challenging profession in which success can be achieved only with the inspiration of doing hard work. At present, media is going through very tough times as the sole objective behind journalism is only to increase TRP and get more and more commercial benefit. Many a times, the media develops unnecessary sensation and distortion of truth to attract attention. It is needed that such a trend needs to be stopped as it would lead only to more market-driven and profit oriented journalism⁸. Today's media should have this realization that they are carrying immense responsibility on their shoulders of preventing the youth from going in the wrong direction. It is pertinent to understand that media should

⁷ Times of India. 2005. Bharat Nirman, Times of India, Ahmedabad Edition, 13 November.

⁸ Dr. Y. Prabhanjan Kumar Yadav – Global Media Journal- Indian Edition- June 2011. Is Social Responsibility a sham for media.

need to cover the news not only on the parameter of gaining profit but also need of the time. They should understand that there are so many good and positive things happening across the country which need to be highlighted so that all the readers and viewers get to know about our culture, our achievements as a country also. One of the big reasons for poor media content is inefficient and inadequate number of highly trained professionals in the field of media. The media cannot be compared with other industries where cost cutting or any other interest can be preferred over the quality. In India this tendency has haunted the media more than anything else. The poor quality content is the result of the lack of resourcefulness of the media persons as quite often they fail to select or generate high quality content without compromising the 'interesting' factor. Hence, the quality media education is another must for the things to be improved. Undoubtedly, it is again the duty of media to bring each and every material thing into the light irrespective of the fact how it effects the mind of public. The only thing which needs to be considered is the conscious understanding of priority and usage of proper language⁹. There are certain news which need to be circulated but that should not be scandalized. The other roles which get played significantly by the media is inducement of baseless ideas through

⁹ Salman, C. (1989). "Campaigns for Social Improvement?: An Overview of Values Rationales and Impacts," sage publication.

advertisements. People are forced to buy harmful or substandard products. The media has the power of educating people, the good and the bad. Since it affect the eyes, the ears and the mind simultaneously nothing can overcome the influence of the media. The media in the advanced society should perform a noble mission of enlightening people and discourage sectarian, communal and divisive trends.