

FUTURE OF NEWSPAPERS

* Justice G.N. Ray

Let me congratulate the Makhanlal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism and Communication for organizing seminar on the theme that has global relevance today. Anyone remotely connected with the media world is concerned about the future of the newspapers in the face of ongoing rapid transition from print media to online media. The Indian press being 228 years old is also not unaffected from this global trend. The Makhanlal Chaturvedi University known for its commitment and concern towards value based journalism has organized this discussion where the august gathering can review the changing scenario in the media world.

Today, when we are facing ongoing rapid transformation from print media to online media, there is big and natural question mark about the future of print media. However even before we discuss the issue in depth, I may state with confidence that the print media and newspapers are here to stay many more years and no e-communication module has the capacity to replace it.

The technological breakthrough in printing has brought in unforeseen structural changes in the set up of print media. It has not only helped in better designing and lay out and more attractive presentation with improved colour scheme in printing of the papers but also made it feasible and economically

* Address by Mr. Justice G.N. Ray, Chairman, Press Council of India at Seminar on 'Future of Newspaper' on 4th & 5th December 2009 at Bhopal organised by Makhanlal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism & Communication.

viable to print more multi edition copies faster and at lesser cost with better get up and attractive type, thus, enabling the press to cater to more readers stationed at different locations. The developing telecommunication services and transport facilities have also facilitated news reporting even from remote and forlorn places, and quick transmission and dissemination of news resulted in prompt and wider circulation of the newspapers with better news contents. These developments in technology coupled with the growth in the newspaper readers on account of higher literacy level and higher per capita income have led to an enviable growth in the number of newspapers and their circulation. Daily circulation of some of the national level newspapers is enviable even globally. Formation of linguistic states paved the way for development of language press in various linguistic regions which in turn has made significant contribution in the developmental programmes of the government. Further, the status of language press is now well recognized and considered at par with the English newspapers. As a matter of fact, small newspapers published in local regional language and dialects in remote areas in India are working as conduit between local rural and urban population in other parts of the country unfolding not only rich culture and heritage of the region but also various problems in such area.

Today's readers of the print media have a wide variety of options to choose from the publications devoted to specialized subjects because of diverse information easily available on account of technological development. With a click of the mouse news and happenings in every part of the globe are before

you. India is the world's largest democracy. In a democracy the role of the media has social responsibility to inform, educate, guide and mould the society and the Indian media is responsible towards about 1.1 billion people of the country. India's newspaper evolution is nearly unmatched in the world press history. India's press is a metaphor for its advancement in the globalised world.

The first attempt to start a newspaper in India was made in Kolkata. On January 29, 1780 the first Indian newspaper, the Bengal Gazette popularly known as Hicky's Gazette consisting of two pages twelve inches by eight in size was published. During the later half of the 19th century, Anglo Indian Press established firm foundation in India. *In 1861, there were 11 Urdu Newspapers and 8 Hindi Newspapers. By 1870, the press in Indian languages newspapers was growing rapidly. There were about sixty two Indian language Newspapers in Bombay, about sixty in North-West Province, Oudh and Central Provinces, some twenty-eight in Bengal, about nineteen in Madras [Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Hindustani]. There were about 1,00,000 readers and the highest circulation of any one newspaper was about 3000.

** Today, the number of newspapers has grown to 99 million copies daily. Indian newspaper sales increased 11.2 percent in 2007 and 35.51 percent in the five year period.

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** WAN Report: World Press Trends 2008

A glorious chapter of Indian newspapers was unfolded in the later years of 19th century which reveals the newspapers consistently reporting on challenges ahead of the nation. Instead of reporting societal events of the Britishers and feudal Indian society, the newspapers focused on news and write-ups on diverse social and political concerns and problems and the country saw the birth of a different kind of journalism, a dedicated journalism which stood for social reforms and public welfare, and creating opinion on issues like education, child marriage, widow marriage and sati.

The press gradually became the most powerful weapon for freedom movement under the leadership of towering personalities like Tilak, Gokhale, Gandhiji and others who stood for progressive journalism and liberal notions and believed in the strength of the press to mould public opinion, to shape the destiny of the nation and safeguard the rights and civil liberties of its citizens.

The strong belief of our freedom fighters that 'pen is mightier than sword' and the power of their pen can challenge the political establishment directed the Indian journalism with a sense of purpose that never weakened and holds ground till date. As a result, Press had always enjoyed popular support with respect and despite various lamentable aberrations in the functioning of media, even now, media in India has strong popular support and the liberty which it enjoys today is founded on such popular support of the civil society.

National political struggle and advocacy of social reforms and emancipation in the years before independence contributed to the creation of the

core strength of the press in free India. This included independent functioning, resistance to state oppression and censorship, firm commitment to free speech and expression.

The Indian press being 228 years old is known for its role in the freedom struggle, fight for social reforms and public awareness. Unfortunately, long cherished values of social and political outlook are now facing a losing battle on account of onslaught of modern values governed by technology and competition and largely dictated by market forces for deriving higher and higher profit like a commercial venture. New modes of communication are making their presence felt even in the remote corner of the world. This new system and functioning have reshaped the focus, approach and priorities of media. Therefore, a new conflict is markedly evident in media world, a conflict between value system of yesteryears and marketism, a conflict whether journalism is a service and a profession or a business and industry.

The 2007 annual report by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) on the Indian Entertainment and Media Industry (E & M) titled 'A Growth Story Unfolds' projects that the print media will grow at a 13 per cent annual growth from 85 billion to 232 billion in 2011 i.e. at a compound growth rate of 18 per cent. The figures reflect the achievements of the Indian press especially during the last two decades.

From 1990s India has witnessed an explosion in electronic media and online news services. Media has acquired such great control on the mind of the

masses that it now controls and shapes the liking, disliking and interest in different segments of news items to a considerable extent. Compared to the print media, electronic media has grown faster in view of advantage of visual impact enjoyed by it.

The Indian press is going through transformation because of changes occurring in today's polity of the country on account of rapid socio economic strides. Liberalization, globalization, and competition from the electronic media are impelling the print media to adapt new technologies, with more professional outlook and sensitivity to the market forces. Today, the structure of India's print media maintains a product line which is amazingly diverse array of languages, management set up, topics and news contents.

The rapid challenges being faced today and to be faced in near future need dynamism and quick adaptation for the growth and effective survival of print media. The newspapers today are compelled to delicately balance the twin challenges namely how best they can adapt to and gain from digital distribution and advertising revenue; and how to meet the role of fourth estate. Unfortunately, media is failing to play its role as fourth estate effectively. What is witnessed in today's media scenario is that instead of making newspaper rich in news contents and addressing serious issues for better governance of the country and improve socio economic disparities, the media driven by market forces and in unending urge to make more profits, is indulging in trivialisation and sensationalisation and tainted corporate communication. It is interesting to

note that media is cleverly attempting to keep under wrap such deplorable design, by covertly under playing trivialisation of news contents and biased news and views sub serving interests of advertisers and corporate houses in order to remain gainfully floated with market forces. Such clever manipulation has been aptly described as 'feeding the readers spinach with the ice-cream.'

The changes in technology and marketplace are shaping the growth and development of Print India. In India, almost all big newspapers are accessible through the Internet and provide up to-date news and information not only relating to India but other parts of the globe as well. Today's readers are not satisfied with traditional news contents but some thing more giving insight to what is happening all around. Unfortunately, in their anxiety to get more or more readers and particularly more and more advertisers and corporate sector as client, the print media is, by and large, turning to be a commercial enterprise and the newspaper as a commodity. Journalism in today's media scenario appears more as a profession than a mission. The print media is consciously oblivious to its role as Fourth Estate. To say the least, this trend is not only unfortunate but deserves to be condemned by civil society in no uncertain term.

Today's media particularly big national level newspapers are mostly owned by the corporate houses. These newspapers barring a few are running the newspapers with an aim to derive more and more profits like commercial enterprises. More and more revenue from corporate houses and commercial ventures being targetted, news contents and articles have orientation suiting

corporate houses and business community. These newspapers very often covertly lobby the pursuits of big corporate houses from which large revenue is obtained for advertisements. The problems, concerns and the interests of the weaker segment of the society are inappropriately projected and serious national issues are not addressed properly. The Centre for Media Studies in its study of media scenario of 2004 very appropriately indicated that "the overall reach of all mass media in the country individually and even collectively is not expanding although individually the media is registering growth. The un-reached sections being at the bottom of economic pyramid are not the target of mass media both for reach as well as for concerns."

The emergence of big media houses and corporatisation of media is heading fast towards monopoly in the media. This is a matter of concern. The small and medium newspapers particularly regional newspapers with low circulation and operating in remote rural areas are facing acute financial crisis and their survival is at stake because of rapid spreading of wings by big newspapers covering large number of cities and districts. The elimination of the rivals at any cost, through competition and acquisition is the age old device. In the interest of body polity of Indian democracy consisting of different segments in the society, sources of information should also contain voices and concerns of all segments of body polity. To achieve this, ownership of media should essentially belong to such persons or institutions who would be concerned in the voices of all segments of the society. The other news or the other side of the

news and views, will not be available and dissemination of only the specified information will be subtly ensured if media suffers from monopoly and corporatisation. Such monopoly in media is inherently not good for Indian democracy.

Media, like other institutions has also succumbed to the vice of malpractices and corruption. In media, such malpractices operate in both explicit and implicit forms. Yellow journalism and blackmailing were the known forms of corruption in journalism. But in today's media functioning, subtle and implicit form of corruption is creating greater mischief. The distortion, disinformation and 'paid news syndrome' aimed to serve certain interests and suppression of news and concerns of other interests have become a usual feature in media. The promotion of certain politicians and political groups, business magnets, commercial and industrial interests, products and services, and entertainment programmes through induced news and favourable articles and in the process, maligning rivals through interviews, articles, reports, so called surveys and reviews have ushered in an era of tainted communication. It is a said commentary on today's media functioning that media entrusted with sacred duty to inform civil society and the administration correctly and dispassionately has indulged in large scale misinformation and tainted communication only to augment greater profit. Journalists are often softened on account of wooing them by liberally giving various favours in the shape of foreign trips, costly presents and other monetary benefits. As a result, their pen becomes friendly to

givers while reporting or advocating their causes and concerns even though such journalists know well that such causes and concerns advocated by them are not beneficial to the society at large.

The monopoly trend in Print Media has been aggravated further by the fact that many big corporate houses owning big national level newspapers are also running T.V. channels. Unfortunately, no legislation against cross media ownership as prevalent in some other advanced countries is in force in India. It is high time that the problem of cross media ownership in India needs to be tackled efficiently.

In the last Parliamentary election media in general and print media in particular has indulged in nefarious monetary deals with some politicians and candidates by agreeing to publish only their views not as advertisements but as news items and not to publish the view points of other candidates and even publish news items against rival candidates as desired by the other party in exchange of specified amount of money. This paid news syndrome was so rampant that voices of concern were raised by members of various journalists' unions and also members of civil society and eminent media personalities. Shortly after election, the Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists in association of others held a seminar to express their concern about this malpractice. Similar seminars were organised in other parts of the country. The Makhnallal Chaturvedi University of Journalism and Mass Communication also held a similar workshop. A committee has been set up by the Press Council of India

to collect inputs from various parts of the country and make in-depth study of the malady of paid news syndrome in election and to make its recommendation to the Press Council. Newspapers enjoy freedom of speech and expression as the watchdog of the nation and as a representative voice of the people with a solemn duty to inform the people and the government correctly and dispassionately. They do not enjoy freedom of speech and expression to misinform and give distorted news and project views of a particular party or group in the guise of news for monetary consideration.

As the new media shapes the newspapers and journalism in India, the journalists need to introspect and choose how they want to contribute to national and human development. It is true that with technological advance and break-neck competition among newspapers, the operation of a modern newspaper with different functions each one requiring skillful planning and execution by knowledgeable and experienced people is not an easy job. The importance of their contribution for the success of the paper must be duly recognized. Care has also to be taken to see that the proprietor's interest in the economic success of his venture does not unduly restrict proper functioning of newspaper. Commercial interests cannot be allowed to override the editorial considerations. The editorial freedom must come first. As the Second Press Commission has observed, the journalistic freedom is the heart of the freedom of the press and the exercise of this freedom depends largely on the editor. "The freedom and independence of the editor is the crux of the matter" said the Commission. It is,

however a pity that the high office of an editor in the newspaper has either been demolished or considerably marginalized. More power and authority lie with the in-charge dealing with advertising and corporate communication,

I would like to emphasize that various steps should be ensured for a secured future of the Print Media in India. Primarily, these may be by encouraging accountability of the press through social audit; plurality of functional structure of a newspaper; establishment of internal Ombudsman to lend an ear to the readers; encouraging better flow of information and news between the urban and rural areas; encouraging small and medium newspapers in this multi-regional, multi-lingual country like ours not only to sustain but also to thrive, and above all the establishment of a **Media Commission** to examine the matter in a new perspective. Sooner such Media Commission is formed it will be better for the media functioning in the country.

I would like to remind the Print Media that having the enormous power of pen in its hands, it can illuminate the future of not only our own country but that of this beautiful world.

The Print Media will do well by keeping in mind that if it wants bright future, it will have to sow the healthy seeds today. Future is not something that awaits. It is something for which foundation is to be laid today. The potentiality of the Print Media has no limit but it is to be harnessed carefully. The need is to balance technological revolution with the value based ethics in journalism and

with orientation for Bahujana Hitaya and Bahujana Sukhaya [welfare of many and happiness of many].

Mrs. Sonia Gandhi in her message to the Press Council on National Press Day has aptly observed, "Our press has an admirable record in acting as a watchdog to protect and promote democracy, human rights, transparency and accountability in public life; and also as a prime source of information, a vibrant platform for opinions and debate on every aspect of national life, and as a window to the world".

Permit me to conclude with a note of optimism about a secured future of Print Media. I may state with confidence that despite stiff competitions being faced by Print Media in India, from the impact of globalisation, proliferation of electronic media and online news, the Print media will secure its place in the Indian society if it takes care about its role as Fourth Estate and address issues relevant for societal development and pays attention to the contents of the newspapers serving various interests of the civil society and also for good governance of the country. Print Media in India is in cross roads. It is time for reckoning.

Namaskar
