

Inform and be informed: The Changing face of Communication

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Dr. Banerjee, respected Vice Chancellor of Netaji Subhas Open University, Mr. Samir Goswami, President of today's function, faculty members, panelists, dear students, journalists and media personalities present ladies and gentlemen, it gives me immense pleasure to address this august gathering on "Inform and be informed: The changing face of communication". Needless to point out that the topic is very relevant in today's social scenario and deserves proper attention of all concerned. Information is the bedrock of knowledge and right to information is an inalienable human right rightly recognised and respected in India and recently strengthened by enacting Right to Information Act. Indians from time immemorial, worshipped knowledge in the form of 'Saraswati', the Goddess of knowledge. **'Let noble thoughts come to us from every side'** is the eternal message of the Rigveda given several millennia ago signifying the freedom to inform and be informed. The Upanishads also expound a fearless quest of free and frank exchange of views.

In 1948, the United Nations made the Universal Declaration of Human Rights laying down certain freedoms for the mankind. Article 19 of the declaration enunciates the most basic of these freedoms, thus: "Everyone has

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the right to freedom of opinion and expression the right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, received and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

It will be pertinent to note that information may rest between the pages of books or in computer software but it assumes a reality when it is scanned by human brain and translated into effective application. The greatest visionary of the modern world Swami Vivekananda has rightly said **“All knowledge that the world has ever received comes from the mind; the infinite library of the universe is our mind”**.

Since the beginning of human civilisation, the need to communicate with each other has brought the homosapines into cohesive groups. Communication is not only an exchange of news and information, it lies in sharing facts, ideas, thoughts and message and other social activities. The desire to communicate has resulted in the birth of language the basic mode of communication. The art of communication has later on been developed into other modes of communication through different art forms and technological means. Mass communication has however, experienced a sea change with the introduction of printing press and later on through the mind boggling role being played by the electronic media. Today, within minutes through internet you can reach the amazing store house of information and for that matter to library of knowledge derived from such information compiled by mankind all over the world.

The position that a country may enjoy in the present day world is to be determined by its ability to make best use of the information forming knowledge power. The capability to harness knowledge power is the foundation upon which our future is to be built.

The 21st century has been acknowledged worldwide as 'knowledge century'. In March 2000, the European Council at Lisbon had set strategic goal for Europe to be achieved by 2010 by indicating 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'.

For developing countries like India focusing on the vision of information society must occur in parallel with other socio political developments. The need of the hour is for a balanced approach to other targets such as the U.N. Millennium Declaration regarding hunger, poverty, education, gender inequality and environmental resources. The transformation of existing social structure by knowledge as a core resource for economic growth and employment and as a factor of production should constitute the basis for designating advanced modern society as a knowledge society and reap the benefit by transforming the intangible investment, human and social capital for a harmonious growth of every segment of the society by eliminating the paradox of vulgar affluence in one cross section and abject poverty in other cross section of the society. This can be achieved by relentlessly and selflessly working towards a perfect knowledge society where all forms of knowledge get recognised and valued from

where they originate and ultimately put to use in benefiting the society at large. The transition from information society to knowledge society is the process where not only the people have access to information and for that matter to knowledge but such people also find out the way to optimum user of such knowledge for balanced development of society. When the information forms the base of knowledge and then transformed to higher quality of human value, the rich culture of human civilisation emerges benefiting not only the country of originating culture but the entire civilisation of this beautiful planet. The march of civilisation is founded on transformation of information into knowledge and further transformation of knowledge into higher qualities of human value and culture. Rabindra Nath has very aptly indicated in 'Shesher Kabita' that if the stone of diamond is knowledge then its lustre emanates from the culture achieved through knowledge.

India had been leader of a world nation by propagating the principle of universal unity, peace and friendship through advocacy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'. Such ideal situation can not be achieved by mere economic or social progress. Today's seminar dealing with the issue 'inform and be informed' hopefully will go deeper into the question of dissemination of information and technological knowledge flowing from information amongst every nation of the world particularly amongst undeveloped and underdeveloped nations for sharing the fruit of knowledge power without any reservation or constraint. Unfortunately, the developed and underdeveloped nations are sharply divided

over the issue of equal enjoyment of intellectual property and this problem is required to be resolved as early as practicable. Otherwise 'be informed' will not reach its goal.

Coming to the second limb of today's seminar namely, changing face of communication, it may be indicated that means, modes, extent and reach of communication have reached unprecedented height. At present, the electronic media has been developed to such an extent that within seconds one may reach through internet the store house of information and ocean of knowledge achieved by mankind on any conceivable topic. The face of communication has really undergone a sea change. For an individual, the frontiers of geographical and political regions do not create any problem to inform and to be informed by getting access to unimaginable store house of information. The World Wide Web allows anyone, anywhere any piece of information, comments and opinions, pictures etc that can be viewed almost instantaneously around the globe. Therefore, changing face of communication is unquestionable reality.

It should however be noted that not all information is knowledge, nor all of it is beneficial for the progress and welfare of mankind, and tested by application of independent mind. Information has to be accepted only if it is true and rational. How do you find knowledge that can be trusted and true? The credibility of the source of information can be the deciding factor. Major newspapers have their online editions and these online editions have the same credibility as the print edition.

On the other hand there is new race of blogs, which provide opinion or news on a particular issue and thus can be termed as personal online diaries. The credibility of such blogs is always under shadow. As mass communicators, the responsibility of the journalists, to distinguish between truth and untruth between rational and irrational, and between good and evil is more than that of any member of the society.

Revolution in information technology and communication totally transformed the face of media. Today electronic journalism has overshadowed the print media and newspapers.

The online journalist's role is strongly influenced by technical convergence, cross-media mergers, and transnational media. Moreover, economic constraints of globalised media business can put restrictions on journalistic freedom and free speech.

The uniform use, global interactivity and organisational constraints of the profession tend to diminish the distinction between editorial and paid content. The 'tight intertwining of content and advertising' and the absence of any code or law for electronic media are raising serious problems. More non-journalistic entities such as search engines, software portal to provide news are worsening the situation.

Many Voices One World, 1980 Report prepared by UNESCOO was inspired by the time pressing issues of eliminating striking imbalances and disparities in the communication and information flow. Underdeveloped and developing

countries suffered such imbalances, not only in the communication and media world, but in general.

As a public watchdog, media should let people voice diverse opinions and help them to build public consensus over important political, social, economic, cultural and related issue, the aim being to reduce significantly communication gap and digital divide. To that end Many Voices One World has to be reassessed in the context of new Information Communication Technology and its complex socio-cultural impacts.

Another issue is the regulation of the new communication. We must remember that there can be no absolute freedom particularly in the field of freedom of expression including the cyberspace communication which is likely to impact others. Uniform code is advisable to regulate the transnational media, for the freedom of one cannot be greater than the freedom of another.

Recent growth of news and advertising on the internet might have challenged the dominant position of the traditional media. As per the latest report of World Association of Newspaper, newspaper circulation worldwide rose 2.3% in 2006. In India, its growth is 12.93%. India stands second in the list of five best markets for newspapers establishing that bravely facing and defying the challenges from new media, traditional media is not only alive but has increased exhibiting innovation and energy to maintain the place as the news media preferred by millions of people.

It will be appropriate to address at this stage to corporate communication which covers a substantial area of mass communication. With the rapid growth of this sector propelled by the impact of globalisation, the need for effective communication by the corporate sector has been well perceived. Corporate communication is essentially an exercise in public relations to bring in public domain the objective and achievements of a corporate house and to obtain a feed back from its client to understand their attitude and requirements for future course of action. Such communication is a delicate art which helps in assessing public psychology, sociology, political communication and economic impacts for fine tuning the management. Mr. J.R. Lowell indicated the importance of public opinion vis a vis a corporate house. "The pressure of public opinion is like the pressure of the atmosphere. You can't see it but all the same it is sixteen pounds an inch". In today's scenario need to communicate by the corporate sector is felt more strongly than that in olden time. For a corporate house, the proverb 'silence is golden' does not apply. Professor Northcote Parkinson, propounder of Parkinson's law stated "In the world today, you have no chance if you keep silent. There was time when strong silent men could not fail to announce their views. Today, if you don't speak up, other people will speak and not to your advantage. One has to say one's piece and say it more effectively than one's opponent". Prof. Subir Ghosh in his book 'Public Relations Today' has succinctly indicated the purpose and role of corporate communication. "Communication is the key to corporate success. A regular two-way flow of information can set up a

bridge of understanding between an organisation and its stakeholders. It can impart knowledge where there is ignorance. It can also neutralise the harmful impact of disinformation.....Familiarity breeds favourability, not contempt. Nine times out of ten, the better-known company is better regarded”.

This message appears to have been well received by corporate houses and corporate communication is much more pronounced now. It has become imperative for the corporate house to reach the people effectively and to address to public perception of its functioning. In a free market economy which has thrown open steeper competition from other players in the field, for the growth of business concern and even for its survival in the long run, the business house can not ignore favourable public opinion. It is rightly said that today's public opinion, which may appear very thin like air, may lead to stern action or legislative enactment unfavourable to the business house in future. With the improvement of literacy level and with easy access to information technology consumers are more and more knowledgeable and consequently they are more critical in their appreciation and acceptance of products or services of a business concern by judging the same from various parameters like quality, durability, safety, conformity with international standards, environmental standards or objectionable involvement of child labour etc. The corporate house is now compelled to be more transparent in its functioning and it is also facing compulsion to make people and authorities entrusted with compliance of such parameters, posted with relevant facts. The business activity today is no longer a

personal activity of a business house enjoying greater degree of freedom as was the case in yesteryears. Because of rapid and revolutionary development of electronic media, the sweep of corporate communication at present is undoubtedly much more intensive and extensive.

Business activities have now grown to such an extent that all major businesses are being corporatised and big business has become synonymous with big corporate houses. Corporate giants have become celebrities in our national life. With such massive corporatisation, corporate communication through advertising has reached new heights and broken new grounds. Today, we are being literally bombarded with barrage of corporate communication, 24 x 7. Due to the extent to which corporate communication through advertising has touched the lives of the people coupled with the proliferation of the media, especially electronic media, carrying such corporate communication to the people, the same has started having direct impact on our value system, our culture and our social fabric. Such phenomenon with complex ramification and touching the question of ethics in corporate communication in the context of what is being practiced today by the corporate houses with the aid of obliging media houses, needs proper evaluation.

The Press Council of India in 1996 considered the issue of considerable influence over the minds of the readers flowing from financial reporting by the print media and had drawn guide lines inter alia to the effect that no newspaper

owner or persons closely connected with the newspaper should use his relation with the newspaper to promote his other business interests.

I feel distressed to mention that there has been paradigm shift in the functioning of both print and electronic media. With the rapid growth in corporatising media houses, by and large the media houses nowadays are guided more and more by profit earning motive at the cost of acting as fearless and independent watchdog of the nation catering news and views in an unbiased manner to guide the activities of society and the government in right direction. It is only unfortunate that when more and more information have enriched our knowledge power, the media in general of course with a few exception, instead of utilising such proper to guide the nation in right direction, are resorting to trivialisation of news, and sensationalisation of news in order to increase revenue earning at the cost of fair journalism. The ever increasing urge to increase revenue has resulted in media house failing to maintain impartiality and concern for media ethics. It is unfortunate that many media houses do not enjoy the credibility which they had enjoined earlier. It does not require any imagination to comprehend that a media house in its urge to increase revenue by securing more and more advertisements from a corporate house is bound to be friendly to such corporate house. As a result, there has been steady increase in the practice of unfairly reporting in favour of a corporate house from which there is a steady flow of advertisement, by overtly and covertly advancing the interest of such corporate house by giving induced news or biased views in the garb of news.

Even when some facts unfavourable to the corporate house are known to the media house and fair and impartial journalism required such facts to be made known to the public, the media house deliberately does not bring to such facts to the notice of the public in its anxiety to protect the interest of the corporate house from which substantial revenue is earned. Fortunately, there are media houses which despite provocations and threat to lose market have been discharging the duties honestly and fearlessly. The number of such media houses is unfortunately quite low and their survival in the long run in steep competitive market has raised question mark. The problem has been further aggravated by corporate houses owning media houses.

Recently, a round table was organised in Delhi jointly by the Press Club of India, Indian Journalists' Union and Andhra Pradesh Media Academy. I was invited by participate in the said round table. The consensus was that media house must retain its impartiality in functioning as media house and such impartiality can not be permitted to be subservient to other business interests which the owner of the media house may have. This unfortunate trend is got to be reversed and media must play effective role of watchdog of the nation without being influenced by personal concern dictated by profit motive and compulsion of safe guarding the interest of corporate houses either overtly or covertly.

To put the media and corporate sector in the right track, public awareness about this malady and raising voice of protest whenever necessary are need of

the hour. By conscious efforts of all concerned, by holding dialogues and debates for raising public awareness and inducing introspection by the corporate houses, media houses and advertising establishments themselves, by effective role played by existing regulatory bodies, and by bringing suitable legislation where it is necessary, the malady can certainly be contained and sooner such concerted actions are taken, it is better for the society. I am confident that strong voice of protest against malpractices by corporate sector and subservient role of media if raised by vibrant society of shining India, can never be ignored or taken lightly. Let us not be oblivious of the age old wisdom that there can not be any compromise with eternal vigilance by the members of the society.

I am certain that today's seminar will throw up ideas and information that will strengthen the University's commitment to keep it well informed using the benefits of distance communication.

Netaji Subhas Chandra has said **“One individual may die for an idea, but that idea will after his death incarnate itself in a thousand lives. That is how the wheel of evolution moves on and the ideas and dreams of one nation are bequeathed to the next’.**

I wish the Seminar all success.

Namaskar

