Media, Public Policy and Development – Some Musings

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The demi-world of journalism is like the fun house of mirrors that one finds in carnivals. In one reflection you are too fat; in another you are absurdly thin; in another reflection you appear to have an elongated neck; in another, a flat head; in still another you have next to nobody. Yet there you are, standing in front of these bizarre reflections, fully formed and bearing little resemblance to any of the images before you. The difference is, however, that unlike the fun house of mirrors, the distortions of the media are rarely a joke.

From -Two or Three Things I Know About Journalism

Media has been hailed as the Fourth Estate that checks the three estates of the legislature, Executive and Judiciary. It earned this status after the history of bitter struggle and oppression. The dynamics of the structure and processes of print, broadcast and internet forms of media vary and attempts of audit and prescriptive suggestions have to be done separately. Notwithstanding such requirements, this paper primarily attempts to understand, analyse and judge the oldest segments with some variations.

To understand the complexity and importance of media, one needs to understand its origins. Media finds its origins in the late 15th century in newsletters that were circulated among tradesmen. From these emerged a regular paper essentially to spread financial information among the business community. Nieuwe Tijdinge from Antwerp published in 1605 is considered the oldest. The trend caught on in Europe and later publications began covering foreign news for local audiences. Courrantor 'Current News' was one such attempt at newspapers by the Dutch.

As the popularity of newspapers grew, governments clamped duties, imposed censorship rules and engaged them with libel prosecutions. The Stamp Duty of 1712 in the UK imposed a duty of one penny for each copy of the Spectator which had a cover price of one penny! It was not just stamp duty but also 'a tax on knowledge'.

William Corbett, a radical political essayist, was imprisoned in 1810 in the UK for his articles. Since Corbett, hundreds of journalists, publishers and photojournalists have met with harassment, imprisonment, torture and death in the last two centuries of media history. In a sense, the Human Rights index of a society reflects the status of the media and of its journalists.

Media began as a private initiative and has commercial origins. It soon emerged as an information interface between public authorities and the society. Media entrenched its right as a 'watchdog' of the three estates and added various segments of human activity like entertainment, sports and lifestyle to its repertoire.

Contemporary Understanding

It is not only media that is capable of distorting reality as the fun mirrors of the carnival. Our understanding of the media is also distorted by our own mirrors. In a poor and underdeveloped country like India, with its glaring development issues, it is natural that the expectations of the mass media are very high and any perceived shortfalls erupt quite emotionally. Emotion is very essential but at the end of the day the understanding of the paradigm in which the media operates will only make it easier to effect the desired intervention through the media.

Media in its concept connects two or more structures and processes. A map of the dynamics of the media shows it to be:

1. Between the public power holders – the authorities and power addressees – the people
2. Between the private power holders – the individual/trade/industry/voluntary organisation etc. and power addressees – the people
3. Between public and private power holders

This broad spectrum covers all the players on the basis of private and public power. Mediating between the power holders and power addressees is a two-way process where media is expected to inform the society of the state of public affairs and also serve as a feedback mechanism relaying the pulse of the people to the power holder. In its quest to inform, it must unmask people, institutions and transactions. This is investigative journalism.

From a functional perspective, its common minimum mandate is three-fold:

1. To report objectively and accurately, happenings in the public sphere.
2. To investigate and expose misuse of any power processes in the public and private spheres.
3. To reflect the varied views of the people and provide feedback to power regulators and the public

From a structural perspective it must be noted that:

1. Media in its true sense has to be a private initiative
2. Each initiative competes in the proliferation of media ventures
3. Technological advancements have pushed mass media as a big investment and advertisement dependent sector
4. Media has to cater to complex priorities of expectations of different strata of readers.

Interfacing media and Human development

When dealing with media, it is essential to understand the concept of human development as expected to be promoted by the media. Human development in its bare minimal discourse can be taken as health, housing, education, meaningful employment and clean environment.

The State is mandated by the Constitution to provide the above to each citizen as bare minimum needs and then to promote the same to higher standards. The Government of the day operates to fulfill such promises. What is the role of Media in such human development viz-a-viz the primary responsibility of the Government? What is the quantum or quality of such a role?

As discussed earlier, in the construct of the 'media' between various stakeholders of the power processes, it is the responsibility of the media to reflect different viewpoints and provide information on human development aspects. Some responsibilities include:

1. Monitoring the public power holder's action and inaction on the promotion of human development
2. Investigating concealed misdeeds to be exposed to the political community of opposition parties and the society
3. Educating the power addressees to equip themselves to be receptive to efforts and measures on human development
4. Covering and encouraging non governmental players who are involved in human development efforts

The question of the quantum and quality of such a role has come into sharp focus of concern for media watchers in the last decade. The media has been accused of having the wrong priorities in terms of the content mix, quantum of coverage and positioning of news, which has titled in favor of the private power holders who wield commercial clout at the expense of human development players. The publishers have a standard answer that they are directed by catering to what the readers need and following the competitor's strategy to stay ahead in the business. Catering to reader's needs is not a black and white proposition. This is the easy way out and cannot be an option for media that wants to enjoy the exalted position of a fourth estate. Competing strategies, price wars and ad drives to compensate losses only contribute to imbalances in coverage. The Press council should take the lead in sorting out the issues.

It can be clearly stated that the media must play a pivotal role in promoting human development. The media's history and struggle in many parts of the globe and in India have been inspired by such ideals in the past. Technological advancements and financial management cannot dictate the agenda of its information processes. Friederick Seibert in 'Four Theories of Press' lists, 'informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance as the obligations of the press to the society.

Public Policy and Legislation

The constitutional position on the role of media in the Freedom of Speech and Information is clear. Article 19 1(a) to 19 2 and Article 38 of the Indian Constitution clearly advocates the 'right to impart and receive communication'. Subsequent court judgments including those on airwaves are clear indications of the role expectations of State and media. Indian courts have held the people as more important than the publishers or the editors to honour the right of the people to know and be informed. Yet public policy for a balanced legislation has not been put in place. Abortive attempts of the Bharti Act of 1990 and the broadcast Bill of 1997 have been mired in controversy and have been accused of denying small players their space.

Such policy should be based on parallel concepts that are accepted by different political parties and segments of society. Decentralisation is accepted as a sound governing policy, unity in diversity as a sound principle of Socio-cultural harmony and it is in the same premise that small media and narrow casting must be encouraged as part of the public policy on media. Any attempts at legislation must be based on reality of circumstances and must be in tune with the Constitutional mandate. Any rush to borrow western models of legislation without taking the conditions prevailing here into consideration, will be a big setback to human development.

The public policy issues relating to media is now increasingly focused on the demand for the space by various stakeholders. Hitherto the line of control has been between the public domain Vs the private domain. The public domain meant the government control. Now the scope of the public domain has been enlarged by non-governmental organizations- opposed to both monopolies of government and Industry. It is in this matrix the public policy choices need to be shaped in the future. With the IT juggernaut rolling over traditional bastions of other industries, predictably it has an additional impact on the media policy.

Media in its segmented forms, as well as in the emerging convergent form, plays an agenda-setting role of the political and civil society of the future. The moot point is whose agenda it is? If it is considered as a collective agenda, what is the equation of the various stakeholders in such agenda? To answer these questions, one needs to understand the socio-political environment of a society in which the media and its attendant policies operate.

THE CONTOURS OF INDIAN MEDIA

Indian Media -in pre-independent context emerged as a powerful vehicle to fight the colonial powers. The proliferation of the 'press' by political parties, nationalist groups, labour movements, private entrepreneurs committed to the Nationalist cause focused on 'Independence' as an overarching agenda.

Politics' formed the central theme of the 'press' whereas business and other aspects had a limited space. Even 'Business meant in the large sense 'public-sector' which again was part of the government and its attendant political ideologies. The same trend followed in the broadcast sector, where 'radio' came under the complete control of the government with 'development' oriented entertainment and programmes as the focus. The new media of 'television' followed suit in its proliferation and programmes.

In such processes, the value of mass media of 'radio' and 'television' also subserved the partisan political agenda of the party, which can capture power in the centre. Print media was the exception to such dynamics and it also dearly paid for its independent voice during the emergency (later a large segment toed the government line to survive)

It was after the 90's, due to pressure and inevitable circumstances created by satellite technologies, government allowed the television broadcasting by private channels and soon found itself competing with their business and revenue model. Unfortunately the broadcast medium of ' radio' could not come out of the clutches of the government control till recently when the government opened up partly to the private sector for FM broad casts. The voluntary sector has been trying hard to permit them to broadcast through the concept of 'community radio' but in vain so far. In this context it is pertinent to analyse whether the regulatory efforts of Government is based on any valid public policy choice or governed by paranoia.

POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF MEDIA POLICY

With the proliferation of the private channels along with the print media government control in the business of information and free speech has been relegated to a distant position. Yet the mindset of controlling media with newfound values of cultural insularism has emerged in the last few years. The current crisis of the Indian Polity in terms of insurgency, cross-border terrorism has strengthened the argument of strict control of the media. What is overlooked is the advent of Internet, which cannot be easily regulated unlike the other segments of the media. Ironically the economy is also heavily dependent on promoting the Information Technology, which has transformed the traditional export scenario and even the stock market character.

In such context, controlling of the radio sector can only be categorized as a paranoia of the public policy makers. It is a misplaced notion that licensing public interest groups will jeopardize the national interests. On the other hand the massive development potential the radio offers is being overlooked.

One wonders is it such a complicated concept for the policy makers to understand when it comes to allowing the concept of community radio. The answer may be something else -like this one. It is the political advantage of having control over a crucial medium, which can be a cheap source of a propaganda vehicle, which lures various political parties. There is near unanimity across the board among the political parties that television and radio under the governmental aegis will be a handy tool for subtle propaganda in terms of

coverage in favour of the party in rule. National interest, developmental issues form a formidable cover for such an agenda.

Even buying the argument that government needs a foothold in the media segment for its development activities, freeing radio to be used by voluntary sector will only speed up such processes . This has been proved time and again including the relief work in Gujarat was carried much efficiently and passionately by the various voluntary sectors. On the one hand there is no qualms of auctioning radio stations for sums which does not even make business sense and on the other hand there is a refusal to see the reasoning of allowing voluntary and non-profit sector to use an effective medium.

At the crux of the debate is the question whether the Government wants to control or regulate the media sector. If one prides oneself as a democratic society and to strengthen the same it has to be regulatory than one that is controlling in its character. If knowledge is power then there is a huge stake in such space by various stakeholders. In such context the public policy of media assumes a crucial role. Then the question arises what parameters guide us to such public policy?

THE PUBLIC POLICY OF MEDIA AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The public policy making on a subject like media which is a crucial vehicle of freedom of information and development needs to be guided by the constitutional mandate of justice-social, economic and political. Here the policy makers have to keep the delivery of such a goals as their central theme. A media policy needs to be consistent with such goals mandated by the constitution. Regulating the media should be only in the context of achieving such goals and in such context freeing the media is just not licensing to the highest bidder. It may make a good revenue sense for the government coffers but it does not make a sensible public policy. It is the duty of the Government not just allow but to encourage the other major stake-holders, the voluntary sector to have its legitimate space which will ensure social and political justice and there by equitable economic justice.

Even in the capitalist societies there is a strong movement towards the competition policy, which calls for regulation of monopolies as they may strangulate the consumer and snuff out other players. In such parlance it is essential that the important sector neither of media which is often equated as the fourth estate to have a space for the voluntary sector or independent voice which has no overt stake in terms of profits nor in the formal political power. On the one side governmental control will tantamount to a monopoly and on the other side private players if though not a 'cartel' in economic operation but often tend to become an informal 'cartel' when it comes to programming and content formation. This can only be balanced by other sectors like voluntary organizations. Educational institutions and non-profit trust to play an effective role in the sectors of radio Internet and even in television broadcasts.

The Media in the SAARC region has to develop its own agenda which should reflect the priorities of the development issues and should not fall in the trap of the western models of news dissemination. It is important to be 'first to know' more important is 'what to know'.