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ROLE OF THE NEWSPAPERS IN THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION – A STUDY

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Abstract: Newspapers are the main source of disseminating information. They play a key role as agenda-setters in modern society. The function of newspapers in publicizing issues by giving an in-depth view of issues. Press as one of the pillars of democracy plays a constructive role in national development. Speed, techniques and nature of news delivery have changed but the basic purpose of news and newspapers has remained constant and enduring. Revolutions in technology, conglomeration and globalization have led to a paradigm shift in content and delivery of news. Because people depend on newspapers for their day-to-day information needs, newspapers should act to inform and educate people on social issues. The socially responsible press helps the citizens to be well informed on issues of immediate concern to them. Newspapers help in the emergence of public opinion and in building up images through news reporting, expressing views, informing the public and thereby facilitating public discussion on issues of importance.

Keywords: Newspaper, Role, Society, Development

Introduction

One of the objectives of a newspaper is to understand the popular feeling and give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments; the third is to fearlessly expose popular defects (M.K. Gandhi, Harijan, 25th May 1946). Newspapers attempt to provide the facts and analysis that allows informed citizens to make an effective and responsible decision in a complex, information-saturated society. The role of newspapers has evolved in response to the changing needs of their readers and is currently going through a softening of news in reaction to other media's coverage of lifestyle, entertainment and so on.

The press in developing countries, therefore, serves a multiplicity of purposes. It is a medium of news, the source of information about the world, national and local events and means of establishing mutual understanding. It is an instrument of education, contributing to the development of human resources and capital in promoting economic growth. It is a multiplier in the communication process, spreading widely and rapidly information which will aid national development (Sommerland, 1981). Nash (1998) argues that competition for audience is driving the trend toward trivial news, by chasing the passing whims of focus groups and surveys, most newspapers have shrivelled coverage of major political, economic and social issues in favour of soft features, personality profiles, how-to advice and focus on the process rather than the substance of governance.

The past few years have brought changes in the face or look of the newspapers, several new tools have become available in the hands of newspaper designers, page makers and editors. More visual content in newspapers- pictures, graphics, colour photographs and a change in the way display ads are used- can be constructed as a result of the influence of the visual media. Indian newspapers have become visually a lot more appealing, in response to the growing popularity of electronic news channels and infotainment news channels. A newspaper is a vehicle for transmitting news and ideas. The design is an integral part of that process. Every newspaper must be quite clear about its role, and its priorities between news in depth, comment, interpretation and fun. How news is displayed and news content is created is also an offshoot of the influence of visual media on print.

Yet another pointer to the trend of non-metro areas leading in newspaper circulation is the size of newspapers involved. While big publishing houses dominate in metro cities, medium and small newspapers with their local content are popular in small towns and rural areas. While it is true that the growth of television news has not cut into circulation figures of newspapers, as it was feared a few years ago, we don't know the factors responsible for this growth of the printed word. One obvious reason is the rise seen in literacy rates in many parts of the country. Nevertheless, literacy is a key driver. The second factor is newspapers have become affordable compared to other mass commodities. Barring a few newspapers, prices have tumbled to the level of two rupees and so on.

The era in which we live is often distinguished by reference to a predominance of the media in our society. A variety of words for example, 'information', 'communication', 'media' and 'digital' are used interchangeably to label the age in which we live. Such familiarity breeds contempt as we blame the media for many of our social problems. But the term becomes elusive in its definition. According to Meyrowitz (quoted in Williams, 2003), the 'most glaring problem for media studies is that there is 'no common understanding of what the subject matter of the field is. He criticizes the media scholar for their failure to explicitly confront the nature of the media, arguing many have

simply adopted 'the belief that everyone knows what the media are and that one can therefore move immediately to other research questions.

The modern challenges are to make newspapers work as both profit centres for business and vehicles of knowledge for targeted customers. Meeting these challenges requires rigorous corporate and editorial governance; accountability within the enterprise and to the community; clear demarcation of core goals, values and functions, and a sharply defined market segment. Corporate and editorial governance goes to the core of a newspaper's reason for existence but their relationship is like that of squabbling twins. Corporate leaders derive their duties from investors' right to profit while editors derive their duties from readers' right to know. The reader's right to know often places editors on a collision course not only with the corporation but also with the governments, politicians and tycoons. Where is the green line in corporate governance between the need to make money and to produce the best editorial product? (Khindaria, 2004).

Role of the Newspaper in Contemporary Society

Vajpayee (The Times of India, 2000) says newspapers were destined to play a crucial role in shaping ideas and sensibilities and that the press should undertake this responsibility with a sense of mission. He says that a newspaper was not an assembly-line production or a factory-made commodity. There cannot be an alternative to a well-planned managerial strategy. The press should inform, provoke debate, and even entertain. But it should refrain from distorting facts or sensationalizing events to attract readership. Restraint is needed while reporting sensitive incidents. While zealously guarding facts, a newspaper should have an imprint of ideas on the conscience of its readers. Such deeply-embedded ideas will inspire people to meet a crisis. Pointing out that language newspaper has a greater and more variegated role to play, Vajpayee says the responsibility of the media is commensurate with its larger role in the socio-political milieu of the country.

The role of the press in society advanced by the pro-government campaign is summarized as follows;

- a) The advocacy of a cooperative role for the press in nation-building and national development.
- b) The role of the press as a catalyst for social and political change and
- c) The duty of the press to
 - i) Educate instead of merely entertain.
 - ii) Maintaining social stability and racial harmony.
 - iii) Aid in economic development and nation-building.

These roles are prioritized in Asia largely in line with social structures b) political systems and c) cultural sensitivity and traditions d) economic conditions and historical

perspectives in Asia. The newspapers have a two-step function. First, newspapers select certain events to attract the attention of the policy-makers and set an agenda for public actions; second, newspapers also frame the issues, telling the readers what is important to know (Murthy, 2006). Following the church, legislature and executive, the press is referred to as the fourth estate or pillar of democracy due to its immense growth and outreach, which has created new uses and possibilities that harbour change in society. In contemporary times, journalism has evolved grown, expanded and departed from its spirit and mission of hard-core professionalism to crass commercialization. While yielding to the pressures of the changing markets, the press, too, has shifted its priorities and goals.

James Augustus Hickey has the credit of launching the first newspaper in India in the shape of "*Bengal Gazette*" or "*Hickey's Gazette*" on 29th January 1780. It declared itself as a "weekly political and commercial paper open to all but influenced by none". However, Hickey's paper was closed down after two years on government orders. Publication of several newspapers followed but they had a short span of life. In post-independent India, the role of the English press was designed and shaped in response to the needs for the development and modernization of the nation. The press had the responsibility of educating the masses about the functioning of administrative, legal and other departments of the government. In addition, their job was to promote communal harmony in the wake of the 1947 partition.

Changing Approaches to News

It is often said that the rise of the 24-hour news culture has changed the very nature of what people seek from newspapers. Brighton and Foy (2007) have already observed the widespread assumption that many readers are looking less to find out what has happened than help them to make sense of it-or simply to find out more detail. It may also be that we consciously or unconsciously seek aids to help us decide our options on what news is, though the consensus is that fewer people read editorials than news pages. Research on voter behaviour also tends to show a very fluid relationship between readers' voting habits and the political persuasion of the newspaper they choose. The spread of newspapers in a democratic country tends to reflect the spread of political views within the populace and although some practitioners within the industry would like to feel that they are influential agenda setters, this is rarely true. Even in (the ever-shrinking number of) overtly illiberal and dictatorial states, it has traditionally had little impact on altering the mindset of its readers.

A mass society is characterized by greater reliance on the mass media for information and news about the environment in which people live. The news media are the main sources of local, national and international news. They set their agenda for public debate and create issues. In short, mass media help in the emergence of public opinion and in building up images through news reporting, expressing views,

informing the public and thereby facilitating public discussion on issues of wider concern. The mass media play a significant role in the socialization of its members – their attitudes, preferences and mannerisms.

An appreciation of how and why we should analyze media content is important for several key reasons. First, media content is a powerful source of meaning in the social world. Second, while media content does not equate with social reality, it is essential that we examine how media content represents, or more accurately 'represents' the realities involved in social, economic and political relationships (Devereux, 2003). The availability of new media is altering people's media habits. The press is increasingly responsible for supplying the information and image through which we understand our lives. For any social movement, the media play a crucial role in shaping public consciousness and public policy. A survey of newspapers and network programs found that men wrote about two-thirds of the front-page stories (Bridges, 1989).

Merill (1995) added that the press not only reflects the ideology of the system in which it functions but supports it and cannot exceed the system's limits. As a result, the main category for systematization has been the different societies' political perspectives on government-press relations and this has often resulted in confusion between 'the actual working principles of a given media system; the theoretical ideals of the system and the dominant ideology of the society (capitalist, socialist, revolutionary, developmental or whatever)'.

As a result of opening up the market to more competition, consumers, it is argued, will be provided with a greater range of products as companies compete with each other. The emergence of more channels and outlets increased access to information and knowledge, and more control over when and what people watch and listen to appears to confirm the argument that the free market brings more choice for the individual. Thus, any concerns about increased concentration of ownership are offset by more choice. Supporters of the 'free market' see the explosion of choices making redundant old-fashioned anxieties about media monopoly as deregulation encourages competition, investment and a growing diversity of products.

From financing a newspaper to defining news in the changing dynamics of new technology and organizing the news process, newspaper executives have been involved in devising approaches to make news and newspaper very attractive for people now and in the future too. Many newspapers are now using colourful and attractive layouts with eye-catching graphics. Also reporting on the communities in which the readers of the newspaper live helps the newspaper and encourages people in their areas to see them as related to their lives regularly. Digital newspapers also have appeared on the scene which has helped in catering to the information need of the diasporic audience. The challenges are daunting as the internet user can go to any other site for news and newspaper risk losing their readers.

Along with the dominant stream of journalism obsessed with politics and concerned with urban issues and developments, there have been some strains in Indian Journalism as well. The Hindustan Times can claim some credit for starting development reporting. In the 1950s extensive reporting about the functioning and the problems of various public sector projects in India was undertaken by the Hindustan Times (Yadava, 1998). India was much ahead of all developing countries in creating an awareness of the role of communication in nation-building and development. It was also much evolving a broad perspective and strategy for communication planning suited to the goals of national development and social transformation in a country of sub-continental size and diversity and long historic tradition (Joshi, 1998:206). For Gandhi, the key to a newspaper's role in arousing social awareness was integrity and credibility. The social commitment was basic. Transparency in all its operations was essential to maintain its reputation (Bhattacharjee.2003).

Oetama (1989) likewise points out that the press cannot stand outside of society, but must exist within it and thereby be influenced by its currents and fundamental structures. Although the press plays an active role in shaping society, it can never become an autonomous power, it is significant only in terms of other institutions and it is invariably influenced by the main currents and structure of society. The press has a role in surveying and interpreting the environment for individuals in society. To perform this role, according to Oetama (1989), it must necessarily have a certain value system and this value system can only come from a critical and deep awareness of the social context and dynamics and reflection.

The relationship of the press with the government primarily depends on the existing political order. In countries, which espouse liberal democracy, the press has evolved as an independent institution (the fourth estate) acting as a moderator or watchdog on behalf of the public. In socialist and authoritarian states, the press is regarded as an 'ally' of the state and in some instances the mouthpiece of the government. Romano (1999) citing the Indonesian media theorist Ashadi Siregar notes that most discussions by academics, bureaucrats and journalists about this country's press have been normative. The normative theory identifies dominant social values and how the mass media should ideally operate if they are to encompass such values. It is the asymmetry of the flow of news based upon the asymmetry in the distribution of world power that is being challenged by the Third World which argues that ((Naesselund,1991):

1. There may be supplementary or corrective news value criteria that have not been identified or tested through the services aimed at the public of primarily industrialized countries.
2. There may be an urgent need now for recognizing the dispersion of power centres that the established institutional routines are slow to identify.

3. There may be a case for trying through public-sector initiatives to identify new demands and to create institutions and outlets that will satisfy those demands.

Field reports involve field study. They draw attention to underlining social processes, not daily events. They are remembered longer and provide a reliable index of the health of society. While the competition for circulation between newspapers has led to dumbing down of content, competition with 24-hour news channels has induced rethinking of news priorities. TV channels have cut into the advertisement revenues and circulation. Newspapers can no longer attract readers by headlining the latest spot news, not to speak of breaking news that they have already heard and seen on TV.

Conclusion

A magnificent gift to mankind and the highly indispensable, the press does a splendid job and performs a crucial role as a communicator. Because of its importance and significance, it has been highly acclaimed, admired and appreciated. And it won't be unpalatable to say that what air is to living beings, the Press is to society. In this free press scenario, the question remains what issues get prominence in the press and why are others relegated to the back pages?

Journalists being aware of their role can influence their audience and attract their attention to cooperate and participate in more equitable developmental plans. Narinder Aggarwala, an Indian journalist who advocates development journalism, believes that journalists at the development desk should critically evaluate all development plans from national and local perspectives. A news report fulfils the minimum criteria for development journalism if it consists of at least one of the following points: stresses the process and not the event, maintains a critical perspective on development plans, emphasizes people's needs, presents a background for development issues, predicts future needs, considers the effect of plans on people, compares the development process to similar processes in other places, compares the plan with implemented results, critically surveys stories of success, and points out people's needs.

Politics, as we have been experiencing all along, is the staple of newspapers. But this is not all; other issues merit an equal mention. Do other developmental issues get appropriate coverage or do they get eclipsed under a huge cover of politics? These questions assume more importance when it comes to the coverage of developmental issues by print media. Enormous space is given by our media to business and very little to social sectors like health and education. Most media correspondents attend the film stars, fashion parades, pop music, etc. and very few attend to the lives and problems of workers, farmers, students, sex workers, etc. That's why Lakme Fashion Week scores so heavily over farm suicides.

With colour comics, syndicated columnists, hefty sports sections, photograph-filled Sunday magazines, and more, the newspaper has become a mosaic of features

designed to attract as many different types of people as possible. A newspaper in a developing country ought to turn its attention quite frequently to various problems facing that country instead of being obsessed with politics and glamour. A socially responsible press will turn its attention frequently to these problems and takes a crusading attitude toward their solution. There are important roles that newspapers can play in the life of society that is not duplicated by other existing sources. To ensure the future of newspapers, though, it is necessary to make these roles clear, pursue them and find ways to support them. This is the profound challenge that the newspaper industry will have to confront for years to come.

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