
Covid 19: Signs of Sure Metamorphosis of Indian Media Structure

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Abstract

Spanning across 6 sections, this essay looks at evolving media practices in the country and their future in the post COVID-19 world. Crisis of credibility in media lies at the center of this essay to analyze the presence of an 'infodemic' coterminous with the ongoing pandemic. The essay proceeds to explore policy stances, ideology and emergence of new media platforms in an attempt to explain the metamorphosis of Indian media structure.

Key Words: Covid-19, Infodemic, Pandemic, Media, Motivation, Credibility

Introduction

Covid 19 Pandemic is proving to be the greatest factor of social and economic change which is being witnessed on our planet. It's being compared with the changes which followed the two great wars fought during the last century. The two wars may have witnessed political and economic interests crossing paths of different nation states but technology especially the matters of communication has made Covid 19 Pandemic a game changer of a very different proportions.

Metamorphosis is integral to transformation, and it's defined as, "a profound change in form from one stage to the next in the life history of an organism."¹ When we talk of change purely from an academic point of view, we try an evaluate data collected over a decently long period of time. So, we can say that our conclusion from such long-term evaluation indicates towards rise of a trend and not just aberrations, which the journalists

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often end reporting.

However, these aberrations often add up to become a trend. Therefore, if these aberrations were not reported, the trends would have never got witnessed. The rise of social media, for example, as a platform of mass communication was thought initially to be just an aberration, however, today it has overwhelmed the traditional mediums and has become a separate discipline of study. This, therefore, justifies the use of term Metamorphosis in the present context as change in the Indian media is an ongoing process and has now been only hastened by the unusual circumstances created by the lockdown across the globe thanks to the Covid 19 Pandemic.

I. Crisis of Credibility

Since Metamorphosis is a long-drawn process, it witnesses many changes in form, structure and character over a very long period of time. It sees many a crests and troughs, ups and downs during this life cycle and what we are witnessing is a 'low' which has followed an extended period of 'high' over the past three decades. Today media is witnessing unprecedented crisis of credibility, thanks to many factors, some of its own making and in some cases the contribution of the government(s) in changing the 'free and autonomous' profile cannot also be underestimated.

A very respected media veteran Shesh Narayan Singh recently commented, "लॉक डाउन की घोषणा करते समय मज़दूरों की संभावित दुर्दशा को ध्यान में नहीं रखा गया। मई महीने की तपती धूप और गर्मी से लपलपाती सड़कों पर चलते लोगों को देखकर दिल्ली के बगलों में सरकारी और बेसरकारी नेता मुस्कुरा रहे हैं। (At the time of announcing the lockdown, the misery it would bring on the wage earning labour class was not taken into account. Those staying in the comfortable government bungalows of New Delhi seem to be remorseless at the sight of poor migrant labourers walking barefoot in the scorching Sun or hot charcoal roads).

ऐसे नेताओं पर मैं लानत भेजता हूँ। काश यह लोग उन लोगों के साथ कुछ दूर ही पैदल चल लिए होते तो आज मीडिया प्रबंधन की विशेषज्ञ सरकार उन बेबस लोगों के लिए कुछ कर रही होती।"² (I want to shame such people who could have at least walked some distance with these poor labourers. This would have forced this government, which is expert at media management, to act and alleviate their misery to some extent.)

When he talks of '*media prabhandhan*' or media management he naturally is indicating towards slow death of dissent especially in the failure of the media to rise to be a watchdog in the prevailing circumstances. First the definition of dissent. **Dissent** is to

disagree with the policies, methods and goals of a political party or government; take an opposing view to a prevailing idea or an entity.³ The term's antonyms include agreement, consensus and consent.

I used this definition largely to bring into discussion what Noam Chomsky, the American linguist and political activist, had to say on consent. In 1988, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky wrote a book titled *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. The authors claimed in the tome that the mass communication media of the US were “effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces.”⁴ This line was further delineated in a documentary made in the year 1992 which was titled *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* and it presented what came to be identified as the propaganda-model of communication, which also dealt in depth with the politics of the mass-communications business. So, when Shesh Narain Singh talks of ‘*media prabhandan*’ there is a possibility that in his sub conscience he is indicating towards a propaganda model.

Coming to the Indian context, does media metamorphosis here means change of form, structure and character from a vigorously autonomous entity to a propaganda model.

Before we discuss that, the question is why the need for an independent media often critical of the nation’s leadership. In democracy, the form of governance given to us by our constitution, “an independent media is important so that the reported facts, figures, and stories can be believed and trusted as the truth. When people get information from independent sources, they are persuaded to think decisively and form their own opinions, making independent media a vital clog for any democratic set-up.”⁵

The level of trust for Media today is not as high as it was used to be say three decades ago. Right at the beginning of this paper we mentioned that internal as well as external factors including government regulations are responsible for this crisis of credibility. The crisis has only got deeper during the pandemic with government regulations becoming sterner and media showing lack of skills to rise to the challenge of fair dissemination of information. We need to discuss these factors further.

II. Government Regulation or Lack of It

There are four mediums/podia which the governments recognize today as media platforms. This is largely based on the fact that the media persons working with these platforms are recognized through a very elaborate system of accreditation through the

Press Information Bureau under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.⁶ Similarly the Ministry of the I&B through another arm -- Bureau of Outreach & Communication (BOC), which in its earlier avatar was known as Directorate of Audio Visual Publicity (DAVP), controls release of revenue from government to media houses through release of advertisements.⁷ The four 'recognised' platforms are -- a. Newspapers, b. Radio, c. Television and d. News Portals, and they together can be said to be constituting 'organised' media sector. On the other hand, with rise of social media platforms, especially the YouTube channels, the growth of 'unorganised' media sector too has been phenomenal.

The newspapers and radio are legacy of the colonial period and our colonial rulers created a detailed regulation system for the control of these two mediums. In the case of the radio, private news broadcast is still not allowed as news broadcast continues to be the monopoly of the All India Radio.⁸ The newspapers, though privately owned, are regulated through a process of Registration with the Registrar of Newspapers in Indian⁹ and certain other laws which control issue of licenses to the printing presses. In addition to this is there is the provision of the Press Council of India for redressing grievances against the newspapers¹⁰ and also newspaper/publications are covered by various defamation/libel laws.

Thus, the newspapers have over a period of time have evolved what's called a more 'responsible' genre of journalism, which, however, is not to be confused with 'propaganda journalism'. The newspapers for several years now from pre-independence era to present day have worked as watchdogs.

The government(s) of late has worked towards curbing autonomy through a preferred rather than an objective media plan for the release of advertising revenue. The preference, goes without saying, is for such media houses which supports its plans and policies. This is reflected in several highly circulated newspapers not finding a place in the government's advertising list from time to time.

Television news like radio news too was a monopoly of government till 1995, when the Supreme Court bench of Justice PB Sawant and Justice S Mohan delivered a judgment in the case between the Union of India & Cricket Association of Bengal, which said, that air waves was not a monopoly of the government.¹¹ This heralded the dawning of private television news channels in this country.

The Supreme Court order was, however, largely remained silent on the nitty gritty of regulation of television news. In fact, by saying that television should not be

confused with Press, it ensured that regulatory laws for newspapers could not be extended to television. Lack of regulation, in many ways have proved to be counterproductive for the growth of TV news. Absence of regulation meant absence of a structure for proper accreditation and also release of advertisements to these media houses, which in turn, made them greatly dependent on private advertising and thus the race for gathering Television Rating Points (TRPs) began. This adversely affected the objectivity quotient in television news, which is largely identified now with highly opinionated debates and discussions than broadcast of news bulletins.

However, the advancement of technology and advent of new media platforms with relatively low operational cost has led to rise of certain ‘dissenting’ news portals like *The Wire*, *The Scroll* and to an extent *The print*. These media houses have maintained from stringently anti-government to objectively critical stance and have managed to survive with the help of new revenue structures like crowd funding and gratis from public intellectuals and personalities. This has helped them retain what they would prefer calling their ‘objectivity’.

Their rise has also been sustained and helped by the new tools of digital media marketing. Since these entities don’t look forward to government for any kind of revenue support, they don’t either feel obliged to support the government. Thus, we may just be witnessing rise of ‘alternative voices’ to maintain balance as Supreme Court bench of Justice PB Sawant and Justice S Mohan had stated, “There is an inseparable inter-connection between freedom of speech and the stability of the society, i. e. stability of a nation-State. They contribute to each other. Ours is a nascent republic. We are yet to achieve the goal of a stable society.”¹²

The rise of technology has also made the major media houses owning newspapers and television channels to convert their products into online entities. This has ensured their presence on the new platform, which has come greatly to their rescue in this hour of lockdown when printing and more importantly distribution has been adversely affected by the pandemic.

III. Absence of Expertise

One of the biggest challenges which the pandemic has posed to media is how to report on issue in which they are not trained. The World Health Organisation (WHO) calls this situation Infodemic¹³ The WHO has defined it as, “The 2019-nCoV outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ - an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy

sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”

In the Indian media the focus has been on political news and everything else has got dovetailed into the interests of rival ideologies and political interests. Absence of expert health and science reporters, there are few in some of the leading newspapers, who could be trusted for her or his report has created a situation where trust is coming at a premium and crisis of credibility is high. This despite the fact that health communication is a major paper at the graduate level in the media schools.

What has made the situation worse is the complete ignorance of the television anchors about the disease and the virus and their inability to engage into a fruitful conversation even if they have experts on the panel as guests for discussion. Additionally, with the rise of Social Media, the surfeit of not so trustworthy news has been like never before. The Hamletian dilemma before us is not only about to trust or not to trust but it has extended to -- whom do we trust, what do we not trust. Facts are getting interpreted not necessarily according to the grammar of a pandemic but by the syntax of 'isms. An information about the virus, its spread, its containment, its economic fallout is all getting evaluated on the whetstone of political alignment.

The dissemination of such inaccurate information specially on the social media platforms has come to be defined as Bull Shit by a scholar. “Bull shit can be differentiated both from honest statements and from lies. Honest statements are grounded in the belief that they are true, and lies are grounded in the belief that they are not true. Bullshit, on the other hand, concerns statements made with little or no concern for their truth-value,” wrote philosopher Harry Frankfurt in 2005.¹⁴

The metamorphosis that we talked about here can be measured from what was said in the 19th century by then US president Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809), ‘Where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe’, to what Harry Frankfurt is saying in the early 21st century. This change encompasses the form, the structure and also the character of the media.

IV. Absence of Motivation

What is the reason for absence of motivation for journalists to be health reporters? Let’s go back to Maslow’s Motivation Pyramid. Maslow gave us a five-tier pyramid viz.

1. Physiological needs - Air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sleep.
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2. Safety needs - Protection from elements, security, order, law, stability, freedom from fear.
3. Love and Belongingness needs - Friendship, intimacy, trust and acceptance, receiving and giving affection and love. Affiliating, being part of a group (family, friends, work).
4. Esteem needs - Achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, self- respect, and respect from others.
5. Self-Actualization needs - Realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.



Maslow's hierarchy of needs

(Source: [https:// www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html](https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html))

What's important is that you would reach level five only if you have achieved levels three and four, where the policy and the programmes of an organization are of utmost importance. The rise from here is only possible if the individual is part of the company's thrust areas. With politics being the predominant theme in matters of mass communication, a serious practitioner of health communication would seldom come to enjoy the confidence of delivering on media houses' goals than somebody working on the political beat.

V. Ideological Divide/Information War

The discussion in media ecosystem of late has focused on government(s) taking a stern view of those not amenable towards its programmes and policies. Over the years we have witnessed that this phenomenon becomes dominant in times and phases when opposition gains in strength. The most famous of the cases is the one between owner of *Indian Express* Ramnath Goenka and then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. “In 1975, in the first year of the Emergency, Goenka and the *Indian Express* were severely penalized. Some reports suggest this was done in retaliation for the paper supporting Jaya Prakash Narayan for prime minister,” says an article in *The Quint*.¹⁵ The article goes on to add, “When she was re-elected in 1980, *Express* was targeted with a barrage of tax- and property-violation notices. A truce was finally called after her assassination in 1984.”

However, this case was different from what is being witnessed today. Goenka’s case was dissent against the establishment. The same cannot be said about what we are witnessing in the matters of *NDTV* and *The Republic TV*. The ideological alignment of the two channels, for that matter several others too, are obvious. Known for their proximity to the Congress and ideological opposition to the BJP, *NDTV* has faced tax and other financial irregularity notices from the various arms of the government.¹⁶ Similarly, there are channels which have received support from government(s) for taking a pro-establishment stance.

In such a scenario of ideological divide, information cannot remain, “knowledge communicated or received concerning a particular fact or circumstance.”¹⁷ What we get is, misinformation and/or disinformation. Misinformation is false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead.¹⁸ On the other hand, disinformation is a case of deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; a clear piece of propaganda.¹⁹ Creating narratives underlines current trends in Indian media today.

VI. Influencer versus Reporter

The biggest threat to the credibility of media today comes from within, its physiological organs. From being faceless ‘bylines’ coming out with scoops, a reporter today believes in being a celebrity. An article in *Millennium Post* makes an interesting observation. It says, “First and foremost, a newsperson should never become news, s/he should report the news. ...The challenge is not to score high on TRP or about holding a better media trial. The challenge is whose report would people - common, apolitical people - refer to with greater confidence. And this feedback can never come by raising a storm on

social media. The feedback is part of the respect and affection (not awe) that one earns as a reporter after spending years in the trade of news.”²⁰

The reporters of the day have been bitten by the bug of being an influencer on social media. Influencer is essentially a digital media marketing term. Simply explained, “an influencer is someone who has the power to affect the purchasing decisions of others because of his or her authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with his or her audience. A following in a distinct niche, with whom he or she actively engages. The size of the following depends on the size of his/her topic of the niche.”²¹

The two definitions mentioned above run contrary to each other. Unfortunately, the marketing term has come to greatly over shadow the journalistic ethics. The newsmen today are little embarrassed at showcasing their political and social biases. They readily agree to play propagandist for the ideological establishment they may be aligned with is fast becoming the new normal in Indian journalism. Unfortunately, even the established media houses have made changes in their recruitment policy by giving credence to social media following more than the reporter’s ability to come up with a good report.

Conclusion

The spread of Covid 19 virus and the economic and social turmoil which the subsequent lockdown has brought has the potential of giving Indian media a makeover. A disaster, a misfortune has affected the globe and the country in equal measure.

The pandemic did not make any class distinctions but policies aimed at containing the effects of pandemic failed to address the social and economic divide. There are indications that the way life is being lived is all set to change, so will be people’s choice of gathering information.

This change in choice could lead to reestablishing the credibility of media or conversely media for a long time would lose its prima donna status being the fourth estate. Catharsis for media, to my understanding, lies in the dissemination of information shedding the prefixes of mis and dis, and overcoming the desire to be a celebrity. It must be remembered that metamorphosis doesn’t always turn carbon into diamond; more often than not it converts carbon into low grade coal.

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