

# Media commercialization

Media



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Commercialization of Indian media The media industry across the globe has witnessed spectacular changes in the recent years. There has been a considerable change in the perception of media in the olden times, as revolutionary instruments and powerful political players. Today, the media is perceived more as businesses with a motto of 'remaining profitable'. The growing competition along with the trend of confinement of media ownership to a few major transnational conglomerates has further intensified the commercial pressure in the terrain.

This has also resulted in media proliferation, wherein numerous emerging media products embark on catering to the needs of a more fragmented market. Commodification of news has become a serious issue today. " The news has become a product, packaged and sold to the economic elite, designed to satisfy the needs of the advertiser first, and audience second. " The mounting competition adds on to this connotation which stimulates the media genre to adopt strategies which may even disfigure and deface the relationship between editorial content and advertising.

As the media dome becomes commercial, it relies more on advertising revenue for its survival, which, in turn increases pressure to develop media content that appeals to the advertisers. This, in fact, results in an elevated amount of conflicts with the media's accountability towards public in terms of supplying information, in public interest. In fact, the very purpose of the existence of the media, i. e. , informing the public is overshadowed by such commercial concerns.

The increasing pressure also leads the media houses to be choosy about their audiences with regard to the advertiser appeal, and hence the focus is

shifted to wealthy, elite audience. In India, the media careens between froth, marketing, reporting, opinion, and reacting. Seriousness is often dislodged by commercialism: editor of leading national daily turned gourmand and celebrity interviewer; front page coverage of celebrity weddings, gastric troubles; fatter "lifestyle" supplements; hour long adulatory shows on news channels about an Indian superstar who frankly claims to have no ambitions other to have fun and entertain the masses etc.

Predictably, the preponderance of coverage of the attacks and its aftermath is superficial too: trending to human interest, pandering to mass emotional outrage, instead of focusing on systemic problems. "Serious" reporters are doing talk shows of sorts, calling on their guest panel former soap stars, actors, and socialites. Reports are rife with accusations of the administration's callousness, dropped balls, and self-righteous calls for more heads to roll. Journalism in the face of a real crisis is laced with passionate rhetoric, not real questions and solutions.

The strength and importance of media in a democracy is well recognized. Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution, which gives freedom of speech and expression includes within its ambit, freedom of press. The existence of a free, independent and powerful media is the cornerstone of a democracy, especially of a highly mixed society like India. Media is not only a medium to express one's feelings, opinions and views, but it is also responsible and instrumental for building opinions and views on various topics of regional, national and international agenda.

The pivotal role of the media is its ability to mobilize the thinking process of millions. But in today's highly commercialized market, the press is losing its

main focus. Journalism had deviated from the path of responsible journalism to more saleable journalism. There is more news about the “rich and the happening” rather than the poor and dying. The gap between mass media and mass reality is growing at an alarming pace. Nowadays media is primarily focusing only “the elite” section of society. How much does the unforgettable tour of the Bachchans affect us?

And how much would a disaster like Bihar floods affect the people? Yet, the media is more interested in focusing on what should be printed on page 3. Ask yourself, does page 3 mean more than the realities of life? Though the role and importance of media is increasing in our lives today, it's sad that its accountability and professionalism is dwindling. “With great power comes great responsibility”. Television channels in a bid to increase their TRP ratings are resorting to sensationalized journalism with a view to earn a competitive edge over the others.

Sting operations have now become the order of the day. We are a democracy of a billion plus people with the largest youth population in the world, large sections poor and uneducated, inadequate social services, and a country in transition. It is imperative that our influential intelligentsia focus unfailingly on meaningful issues since the opportunity cost is enormous. The government is increasingly sidelined by private enterprise; unprepared peasants are migrating to straining cities; and the nouveau riche anxious to express their nascent individuality is turning to incongruous consumption.

Our academia is intently focused on the graduate's financial remuneration, and naturally, commercial interests don't provide any discipline. Entertainment czars consume our attention, shape public opinion, and

increasingly control our daily life by forming a nexus with private industry, and entering the administration. We have mall adjacent to mall adjacent to mall, and almost no democratic recreational space. Mostly the middle-class Indian comes in contact with one another to consume, an individualistic pursuit, thus developing no collective voice or opinion.

Further, democracy in India has many pitfalls: the educated vote counts as much (or as little) as the uneducated. Nepotistic, political power is concentrated; political will is weak, and further emasculated by our coalition government structure. Any one can start a new political party, garner a few electoral votes, cobble together a patchwork government, and sporadically threaten to fell the government if their personal demands aren't met. As a country we can't afford to feed or educate our children. We use our poorest as cattle, carting heavy burden on their backs in crowded urban markets.

Our farmers are committing mass suicide. Religion is a recurring flash point. There is so much going on in India that we can't afford to dilute our focus on the important issues with front page/prime time coverage of entertainment. Moreover, print media, especially national newspapers are newspapers of record, and the current news standards will leave many important events that shape our country undocumented for our future generations. The state runs on taxes, and is liable to its citizenry, however the individual is unable to demand accountability.

The Indian citizen has no serious platform to voice her concerns, of harnessing institutional power to fight systemic battles. Consequently, we now have a country where citizen activism is either all or nothing. It's an all

out battle, which the common person struggling just to survive, exhausted amid the delays, chaos, chronic infrastructure shortfall/failure and pollution cannot wage. Activism cannot and should not be at the exclusionary cost of personal life, and livelihood. Media must provide serious relevant coverage, accurate information, and democratic access to voice public concerns. This is media's non-negotiable obligation to society, by virtue of preferential access, mass reach and the ability to shape public opinion. Yes, the Mumbai attacks are a wake up call to our government, but also to our media, one of the original and last bastions of democracy. India urgently needs renewed civic engagement, and it is the media's responsibility to create that platform, not as a temporary reaction to some outrage, but as a permanent social structure. India is witnessing a rapid commercialization and diversification of media (news).

One only needs to glance at the leading national dailies and 24/7 channels to understand the extent of its impact. Reality is nothing more than a series of moments. And in these very moments one can find elements of all that is strange, frightening, colourful, funny, ludicrous and fantastic. Who needs fiction when fact offers it all! But when it comes to the Indian media, there is sometimes simply too much being offered. Johann Wolfgang Van Goethe had felt that very few people have the imagination for reality.

One wonders what the great thinker would have felt compelled to say after an evening spent surfing contemporary Indian news channels. Would he perhaps have concluded that too much imagination can mist reality, shrouding it in unnecessary layers of melodrama and exaggeration? Our so-called news channels fall into this erroneous routine with alarming regularity.

The concept of 'breaking news' in the age of 24/7 broadcasting has led to a tectonic shift in the paradigm- the spotlight has shifted from what matters to what sells. So the media is constantly on the prowl for fresh fodder-anything that exhibits potential to arrest eyeballs will do.

Minor matters such as the relevance of the story, sensitivity towards the subject or the viewers, news prioritization, etc. get relegated to corridors of obscurity. Here are some moments from the recent past which were pounced upon with glee by the story-starved 'infotainment' networks; moments which made the day for India TV and its ever-growing brethren; in short, moments which were made for the media. Terrorism, terrible as it may sound, is made for television. The dawning sense of horror, the magnitude of destruction, the agony of human loss is captured with maximum precision and lasting imagery through the electronic media.

The terrorist needs the oxygen of publicity to survive and TV provides with him that. 26/11 haunts our collective imagination both because of the scale of terror and TV's explosive coverage of the attacks. The commercialization of the Indian media takes many forms. It has been known for some time that a few of India's leading media conglomerates — including Bennett, Coleman & Co. , the publisher of The Times of India and The Economic Times — offer what that company calls "innovative" and "integrated" marketing strategies that blur the traditional line between advertising and article content.

Bennett, Coleman's Medianet division, for example, lets advertisers place articles on certain pages in the paper without clearly marking them as advertising. One of the company's more aggressive offerings is a product

known as a Private Treaty, which offers companies a certain amount of advertising space in exchange for equity stakes in those companies. According to the Private Treaties Web site, Bennett, Coleman now holds such equity stakes in more than 100 companies. Officially, the companies are only given advertising space.

But at least one businessman confirmed to me that it was made clear that he could also expect favourable news coverage. At the very least, it seems evident that Private Treaties set up a very serious conflict of interest, a point highlighted last year when the Indian stock market regulator, the Securities and Exchange Board of India, wrote a letter to the chairman of the Press Council expressing concern about the business practice. Private Treaties are an example of the commoditisation of business news. But much of the recent attention in India has focused on paid political content.

Over the past year or so, there have been a growing number of reports of politicians paying media houses for favourable coverage or to skirt restrictions on campaign financing. Embracing commercialization seems to pose a threat to the quality of content communicated by the media, which, in turn, is questioning the fundamental objective of its very existence. Commercialization has a positive impact on the financial performance of media in the market, but it indeed shows the way to certain unpleasant upshots, mainly on the quality of the content of dissemination.