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Understanding the Shift,
Confronting the Challenge

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Preface

India's media landscape has undergone an unrecognisable transformation in the last few decades. Moulded by the Independence movement, Indian media saw its role as a public service; now, the media seems to be getting increasingly shaped by big advertisers—state as well as private—and by corporate interests.

The 1990s saw not only economic liberalisation but also the increasing corporatisation of the media with increasing concentration of media ownership. Those who control business also control the media today, across platforms—from newspapers and television news to digital portals.

There has been phenomenal growth in media outlets but a diversity of views has gone down with news becoming increasingly homogenised. The hinterland of India as well as the marginalised communities receive little attention, while those with already dominant voices have their message magnified manifold.

Editors no longer have the same role in shaping news and views as they did earlier with marketing directors and corporate honchos directing the market and political orientation of the media. Such is the dependence of media on advertising that some media owners proudly see themselves as vehicles of advertising. Indeed, one of the owner/managers of *The Times of India* told a correspondent for *The New Yorker*, 'We are not in the newspaper business, we are in the advertising business' (Auletta, 2012).

Indian media seems to be gradually losing its role as the fourth pillar of democracy, as a watchdog that holds the state to account. Some would claim that it has become compromised because of commercial, legal and political pressure.

Media thrives on access, on the willingness of those in positions of power agreeing to be scrutinised and questioned. However, over time, it seems that the Indian media's access to the corridors of power—especially Parliament and the Executive—has distinctly shrunk. Government communication is slowly becoming more controlled and there are fewer spontaneous exchanges between ministers and the press, either in the corridors of Parliament or outside it. These developments can impact accountability and transparency essential to the functioning of democratic societies.

Investigative journalism has virtually vanished from Indian media. Surveillance and intimidation of journalists, shrinking newsroom budgets, corporate and political entanglements of media houses, and erosion of editorial independence have all contributed to this.

Meanwhile, there is a proliferation of misinformation facilitated by the race for ratings, political influence over the media narrative, social media amplification of sensational and often false news, and audience vulnerability because of low digital literacy.

There are still bold journalists who are engaged in critical reporting but they are on marginal platforms and often operate under a lot of pressure.

How does one understand these changes and what can be done to counter these tendencies? It was to answer these questions and suggest solutions that the India International Centre set up the Sectoral Policy Group on Media.

Through this series of articles we try and answer some of these questions to better understand the emerging media landscape in India.

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1. The Changing Role of the Editor as the News Business Loses its Sheen

BHARAT BHUSHAN

The role of the editor in Indian newspapers has transformed over time. Editors still oversee large newspaper empires but their job description has changed to encompassing facets of marketing and revenue generation, as well as micromanaging news operations.

These changes can be attributed to the shifting demands on editors as well as structural transformations in the newspaper business. Earlier there was a firewall between the editorial, ad-sales and marketing departments. The editor was a God-like figure, an éminence grise who was virtually unapproachable, almost other-worldly, and yet had the final word on what went into the newspaper. Most important of all, editors were positioned above the mundane, engaged with only the big issues facing the nation, and each of them believed that their newspaper had a major role in determining the direction of the country. They were erudite and displayed an uncanny political understanding of the functioning of the political class. Political leaders listened to their advice, even if they did not always follow it. They had unparalleled access to the corridors of power. Even if this does not accurately

describe every newspaper editor, it was what they aspired to become.

Three identifiable factors changed all this: changes in hiring policies; the impact of pricing on market expansion; and the gradual erosion in the print media's share in the advertisement-based revenue model that became standard for the media after the 1990s.

Newspaper editors were hired either through internal promotions or open market hiring for three streams: leader writers, reporters and the desk. Leader writers wrote daily editorial comments under the direction of the editor and often graduated to columnists based on their specialisation in edit-writing. In *The Times of India*, for example, the leader writers were often Oxford or Cambridge graduates and were directly hired as assistant editors. Many of them went on to become editors of their own or other newspapers, while others became eminent commentators, joined the non-government sector, or even left for other professions after a brief stint as leader writers.

Reporters, on the other hand, began with city reporting, graduated to the national bureau with specialised beats and even to foreign assignments as correspondents. The editors who graduated through the reporting stream had a better understanding of their city, its civic problems and politics. The political correspondents amongst them normally had a much larger vision and empathetic view of politics and political processes. Some remained trapped in the briefings of politicians and their incestuous networks, while others elevated their understanding of the political system to a higher level. Some of the latter became editors.

The desk stream comprised sub-editors who polished or rewrote reporters' or news agency copy, crafted headlines and composed pages. They worked

their way up to news editors and supervised sub-editors or the desk. When newspapers started satellite editions, news editors became the first choice to head them as resident editors because of their familiarity with the workings of newsrooms.

However, not all editors achieved their position purely because of their brilliance. To get the top job some leveraged political connections while others got on well with the newspaper barons, as happens even today. Some were appointed editors because of their networks and ability to 'fix' things with the bureaucracy and government agencies.

The dominant stream of hiring has now shifted in favour of those who can package news in innovative ways, give smart headlines and rewrite major reports—those who can micromanage the news pages both in terms of their form and content, i.e., exactly what a good sub-editor is expected to do. The new avatar of the editor was not someone on a pedestal because of his ideas but a shirt-sleeved person who roamed the shop-floor shaping the news columns, changing headlines and approving pages before they were sent to press—a super news editor.

It is difficult to assert that such a person is more amenable to manipulation and taking directions from the management. However, such editors take fewer risks, are less sure of the direction of the polity, and often politically more conservative than the preceding generation of editors. Their source of prestige, status and power is not the respect they receive from their journalist colleagues but their closeness to the management and owners of newspapers. Although their names appear on the print-line as editor, unlike their predecessors they have no public persona or presence. Today, no one is familiar with the names of the editors of major newspapers, leave alone recognising their faces.

The editor has been reduced to a faceless apparatchik who publicly stands for nothing and has little or no notion of the newspaper as an instrument of public interest. They represent management interests to the journalists rather than the other way around. They lack intellectual confidence and a worldview, and seek approval from the newspaper owners rather than from journalists and the public. However, this is not the only change in the persona of the editor.

II

The second factor that changed the persona and the role of the editor was changes in newspaper economics, specifically the unrealistic pricing of the daily paper.

The price wars that Indian daily newspapers, especially between the two leading dailies—*The Times of India* and *Hindustan Times*—as a copycat marketing strategy had their origin, quite strangely, in the United Kingdom. In 1981, Rupert Murdoch's News International bought *The Times*, London. Murdoch wanted *The Times* to be the sole market leader, displacing *The Daily Telegraph*. In August 1993, Murdoch decided to go for the kill and dropped the price of *The Times* from 45p to 30p. Within a couple of weeks, the circulation of *The Times* went up from about 350,000 to 430,000 copies per day.

The Telegraph resisted the temptation to cut its price but succumbed after a year, cutting its price from 48p to 30p. By mid-1996, the price cuts had gone deeper with both *The Times* and *The Telegraph* being available for 10p on Mondays, while the Saturday edition with all its supplements was selling for 20p. By 1996, *The Times* circulation had gone up to 850,000, and while *The Telegraph* was still the market leader, its circulation had slipped below one million per day. In June 2001, *The Times* raised its price to 40p and although both competitors

had deep pockets and were losing money because of predatory pricing, in September 2003 *The Times* further increased its price to 50p on weekdays and 90p on Saturdays. While in 2003, *The Times* with a circulation of 698,043 was still lagging behind, *The Telegraph,* which led the market at 912,319 copies per day, in terms of fully-paid-up sales (which is always less than the circulation) *The Times* (504,568) surpassed *The Telegraph* (500,214 copies per day) in November 2004 (Reid, 2005). Had *The Times* won the price war? Perhaps it had.

What did this have to do with India? *The Times of India* under the dynamic leadership of the next generation of the Sahu Jain family was raring to bring its rivals to their knees. They copied the Murdoch strategy, dropping the price to unrealistic levels to boost circulation and take over as the market leader. Up to 1994, *The Times of India* was the market leader in Mumbai and *The Hindustan Times* in Delhi. Then *The Times of India* dropped the price of its Delhi edition from ₹2 to ₹1.50, forcing *The Hindustan Times* to follow suit within weeks. In 1999, *The Hindustan Times* dropped its price from ₹1.50 to ₹1 on weekdays and priced the paper at ₹2 on the weekends, ostensibly to celebrate its 75th anniversary. *The Times of India* joined the war by dropping its price as well to ₹1.00 on all weekdays except Wednesday, when it was priced at ₹2.00. Slowly, the price war in Delhi started affecting other newspapers, forcing them to drop prices to gain circulation. It decimated rivals whose loss was double because of reduced revenue from subscriptions and higher costs incurred due to larger print runs.

The price reduction strategy expanded the market for English-language newspapers. The expansion took place in two ways: many households started buying two newspapers for the price of one; and a proportion of regional language newspaper

reading households started buying an additional English-language newspaper for a marginally extra cost.

The availability of indigenous printing presses virtually off the shelf or at a few months' notice instead of imported machines that took a couple of years for delivery, as well as revolutionary changes in communication technology also helped in market expansion. They allowed newspapers to open editions in markets other than those they dominated or functioned in earlier. With minor adjustments in pagination and local printing, major newspapers that had editions only in Tier I cities (population of 100,000 and above) started local editions in Tier II (population of 50,000 to 99,000) and even Tier III cities (population less than 50,000). Thus, for example, *The Times of India* went up from two editions in Mumbai and Delhi in the early 1990s to 55 editions currently and *The Hindustan Times* from one edition in Delhi to six (it had gone up to 10 editions but then closed four of them). The regional language papers also saw massive expansion with *Dainik Bhaskar* going from one edition in 1958 to 65 editions at present. Advertising revenue underwrote this market expansion—each new edition added new advertisers locally and expanded the reach of national advertisers.

The increase in circulation of newspapers and its consequent impact on ad revenue in the 1990s was a marketing and technology-driven phenomenon. It was not the result of newspapers suddenly becoming better but of their becoming unrealistically cheaper.

The immediate consequence of the market expansion was that the marketing directors of newspapers started exerting greater control over news content. They had to sell readership profiles of their newspapers to advertisers to generate revenue.

Therefore, they pushed the direction of news and other editorial content to suit the readership which had the income and lifestyle to buy the products that the advertisers wanted to sell—the younger salary earning class or what marketing managers refer to as socio-economic categories A1 and A2—households with large disposable incomes and matching aspirations.

Since this directly affected profits, the shift in control over news content from editors and journalists to marketing managers suited newspaper owners very well. One of them was emboldened enough to tell *The New Yorker* that he saw newspapers essentially as a vehicle for carrying advertisements, saying, 'We are not in the newspaper business, we are in the advertising business, ... if ninety per cent of your revenues come from advertising, you're in the advertising business' (Auletta, 2012). New technology not only allowed newspapers to become multi-edition but also enabled a shift to visually appealing colour pages. Colour advertising expanded the market further, allowing glamour and lifestyle ads to be presented better, and also opened up sponsored and vanity content packaged as 'entertainment industry promotional feature', 'advertorial' and other such ambiguous descriptions.

Editors who could not cope with the content demands of the marketing departments made way for others who were willing to be guided by the directions they were given, becoming, in effect, adjunct functionaries of the marketing departments of their newspapers. For a while, the premier newspaper, *The Times of India*, even began to give dual designations to its editors, emphasising their additional role in marketing. Eventually, this was not necessary as—irrespective of the designation—the role of the editor had changed unrecognisably.

Successful editors became brand ambassadors for their publications. Even before the market

expansion in print media, several editors had come from marketing and advertising backgrounds—Pritish Nandy, Vinod Mehta, Dilip Thakore, Anil Dharker, to name a few. But now marketing has become an essential part of the editor's role. Those lacking marketing skills became liaison persons for newspaper owners looking to diversify their business interests either within the media sector or outside—smoothening their interaction with government agencies, ensuring customs clearances for licenses, and authorisations from various ministries and departments.

The structural changes influencing the role of the editor facilitated the development of a nexus between the media and corporations on the one hand, and between the media and the state on the other. This had profound consequences for editorial job descriptions. Many newspaper owners and their progeny decided to give themselves editorial designations, calling themselves either editor, editor-in-chief or editorial director. The actual journalist was designated resident editor responsible for a particular market, which was a ruse to escape legal liability under Section 7 of the Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867. The Supreme Court took away this fig leaf through a judgement in 2013.[1]

The editors saw their affirmation coming not from their readers but from the recognition they received from the corporations and the state. Many started becoming facilitators for corporations in dealing with the state—the Radia Tapes, recorded by the Income Tax Department in 2008–2009 and leaked to the press in 2010 implicated several editors. Others sought national Padma Awards, nominated seats in the Rajya Sabha from the state, vice-chancellorships of journalism universities, nominations to the top jobs in the public broadcaster Prasar Bharati, or diplomatic and semi-diplomatic assignments abroad.

These were the rewards for services rendered to the party in power and not always for excellence in journalism or public service.

Simultaneously, with the introduction of the contract system in the late 1970s, editors in particular started seeing themselves not as journalists but as managers. With the right to hire and fire being shared between the editors and the management, they began withdrawing from the membership of journalists' unions.

The Working Journalists and Other Newspaper Employees Act of 1955 defines a 'working journalist' as 'a person whose principal avocation is that of a journalist' and 'includes an editor, a leader-writer, news editor, sub-editor, feature-writer, copy-tester, reporter, correspondent, cartoonist, news-photographer and proof-reader'.[2] However, it does not include any such person who is either employed mainly in a managerial or administrative capacity or is employed in a supervisory capacity and performs 'functions mainly of a managerial nature'. This is what most editors do today and can justify their distancing from the concerns of working journalists.

Here it is pertinent to note the case of *Hartosh Singh Bal vs. Open Media Network*, which dealt with Bal's termination without any notice by *Open Magazine* in November 2013.[3] The court ruled that as the political editor of the magazine, he was a working journalist and awarded him severance pay wages in lieu of six months' mandatory notice as well as ₹10 lakh compensation. The case highlights that editors, despite their contracts, can—if they are not mainly hiring and firing people—claim to be working journalists. The contract system neither removes the protection granted under the Working Journalists and Other Newspaper Employees Act, 1955, nor does it force editors to choose sides.

The distancing of editors from the journalists they supervised was a deliberate choice in keeping with their identification with the management and its interests.

III

There was a time when editors were happy writing their opinion pieces, guiding their leader-writers on what view to take on a particular national issue, and leaving the rest to the other department heads like the resident editors, chiefs of political and business bureaus, chief reporters, state correspondents and photo editors for filing news copy or photographs and leaving the production to the news editor and the desk comprising sub-editors, designers, graphics department, etc. That is no longer the case.

Now editors are involved in every page and detail of production and design. Ironically, while news production has become more editor-centric, the editors have become more market-centric. Today, the management expects them to keep the 'bottom line' in mind. This has led to newsrooms being downsized or being unrealistically short-staffed. Editors are given a budget, have to operate within it, and downsize when the management or market conditions demand a reduction in expenditure.

The 'top line' or the gross profit and loss estimates of the media company determine the necessary actions that editors have to take to protect it. Thus, in the recession of 2008, salary cuts were imposed in newsrooms, annual bonuses and performance incentives were denied to journalists, and news gathering budgets shrank drastically—air travel was replaced by train travel, there was a reluctance to send journalists to news sites if it involved travel, etc. The reduced budgets became the new baseline for news management even after economic conditions improved.

The editor's responsibility for the revenue stream that evolved as a result of unrealistic pricing became increasingly onerous with the explosion of electronic media. Further, free and round-the-clock access to social media content meant that a newspaper was no longer the first source of news. The advertising revenue-based model of the steeply priced newspapers set in place in the 1990s had failed. New resources were carved from revenue-generating events with editors expected to play a central role in organising them. Leadership summits, yearly power conclaves, or annual awards ceremonies hosted for various sectors including business and leadership, F&B, education, entertainment, etc., are organised to get sponsors and invite political and corporate leaders to speak and present awards. Editors are expected to use their social capital to approach political leaders to participate and also to bring in corporate sponsorships for these events.

The profits from an event are quite disproportionate to the effort put in by the media house. Events have, therefore, become a very important source of revenue. Actively proposing and participating in such revenue-generating events is an essential part of the editor's job description today.

Editors are expected to maintain good relations with corporations and the government's political and bureaucratic leadership. This translates into a dilemma: should news be determined by public interest or by corporations and the ruling dispensation? An indication of the extent of PR expected of editors is the phenomenon of opening up the opinion pages of newspapers to propagandists of political parties. Government ministers, party spokespersons and even those who hold constitutional positions—with access to parliamentary, government, party and public forums to express their opinions on official policy or

expounding party views—now write for the editorial pages of newspapers and is now considered par for the course. Most of these are ghost-written and editors allow the dominant political discourse to capture this public platform too. Editorial pages have lost their sanctity and it is no longer clear whether they are purveyors of independent opinion or the dominant political narrative of the day.

Under these circumstances, it becomes difficult to answer the question, do editors still set the news agenda, as the number of stakeholders who need to be pleased have increased. All that one can claim with some certainty is that editors no longer have the freedom they enjoyed earlier on national issues but they have retained relatively more control over municipal concerns. Essentially, editors have become executives who implement the company's policies without having much of a role in formulating them.

In terms of circulating original ideas and objective analyses of social and political developments, newspapers and traditional news spaces have become bankrupt. New developments are taking place in the digital news space but they do not have a viable revenue model as yet and rely on crowd-funding, donations, or grants from foundations and CSR initiatives. Some have succumbed to what one might call 'eventitis'—having to organise almost one to two revenue-generating events a week!

Can the news business and the role of the editor be salvaged? For that to happen, the news business has to redefine itself both in terms of ideas and content as people are migrating from newspapers and news magazines.

At the same time, there is an explosion of news and an overload of information and misinformation. To stand out in this crowded space, the news business and those running it have to be extraordinary. There is no reinvention of news and news delivery in India at

present, with everyone joining the same bandwagon. There is a paucity of new ideas and a greater scarcity of entrepreneurs willing to back them. This is also the scenario the world over.

Notes

1. *Gambhirsinh R. Dekare v. Falgunbhai Chimanbhai Patel*, (2013) 3 SCC 697, 2013 AIR SCW 1590, 2013.
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2. India's Media Industry
Has Freedom Become a Victim of Growth?

R. SRINIVASAN

INTRODUCTION

'I think freedom of the press and its independence has come under considerable pressure in the last two decades. Not so much from the government, but from "market forces". So the commercialisation and corporatisation of the media has affected the quality of journalism in a variety of ways. There is less space for serious introspective reportage, and many subjects don't get the kind of coverage they need because proprietors and media houses don't consider them important. There's no censorship, nobody is saying "you can't do that", it's just that the resources aren't available', said journalist and editor Siddharth Varadarajan in an interview.[1]

The year 2022 may have gone down in history as the time of hostile takeover attempts in the media industry. While global headlines were dominated by the hostile takeover bid of social media platform Twitter (now X), by the world's richest man, Elon Musk, the Indian media was flooded with coverage of the takeover of one of India's leading independent television news channels, NDTV, by the world's then third-richest man, Gautam Adani.[2] Although widely

different in approach and intent, the two share a common factor: corporatisation.

Twitter's US$1.8 billion initial public offering (IPO) of shares in November 2013 made it a public company and armed it with the resources to take on other social media rivals like Facebook. It also made it vulnerable to precisely the kind of hostile raid mounted by Musk, who offered (then subsequently withdrew) US$44 billion to take over the social media platform patronised by presidents and prime ministers.

'Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated,' Musk had said when he announced his bid. But his position that there should be no controls on what is expressed on the platform—above and beyond what the law demands—triggered a global debate between 'freedom of speech' and the need to curb hate speech and disinformation. A US civil rights advocacy group, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in response to Musk's statement, said: 'Mr. Musk: free speech is wonderful, hate speech is unacceptable. Disinformation, misinformation and hate speech have NO PLACE on Twitter.'[3]

A similar debate broke out in India after the acquisition bid by Gautam Adani for NDTV in 2022. Vishvapradhan Commercial Private Limited (VCPL), a company initially owned by a close associate of industrialist Mukesh Ambani, had loaned ₹403.85 crore to NDTV promoter company RRPR Holding Private Limited. Against this interest-free loan, RRPR issued warrants to VCPL entitling it to convert them into a 99.9 per cent stake in RRPR in case of failure to repay the loan.[4]

An Adani Group firm acquired VCPL and exercised the option to convert the unpaid debt (it is

to be noted that even if the debt had been repaid, the original terms of the loan allowed the retention of the right to convert the warrants into equity shares in perpetuity) into a 29.18 per cent stake in the news channel company. Thereafter, it made a ₹493 crore open offer to buy an additional 26 per cent stake from the public in line with the takeover norms. The takeover of NDTV by Adani was completed in December 2022 when the Adani Group announced the acquisition.[5]

This has triggered a debate about the role of free and independent media in an open democracy like India and the extent to which corporatised ownership of media by business houses, along with the attendant linkages to the establishment and the susceptibility to pressures from the establishment, can have on freedom of the media.

Are corporatisation of the media and its freedom inherently incompatible? To understand this question better, we need to first define what we mean by corporatisation. One could argue that essentially all media is corporatised, since they are mostly owned and published by corporations that legally fall under the Companies Act (in the case of India, and similar legislations in other countries). There are, however, a few exceptions like *The Statesman* of Kolkata and *The Tribune* from Chandigarh which are published by trusts.

Since they are incorporated as for-profit business entities, it is not surprising that when a conflict arises between bottom or top-line requirements and the larger responsibilities of an independent media towards other stakeholders in a democratic society, their commercial interests trump the larger social interest.

That, however, would not only be a simplistic, but a disingenuous interpretation of the role—nay the necessity—of a free and independent media in

democratic and free societies. The UN's Windhoek Declaration (the anniversary of which is celebrated as World Press Freedom Day on May 3 every year) clarifies this point lucidly. Noting that 'Consistent with article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development', the declaration explains: 'By an independent press, we mean a press independent from governmental, political or economic control or from control of materials and infrastructure essential for the production and dissemination of newspapers, magazines and periodicals.'

The Windhoek Declaration also noted, 'By a pluralistic press, we mean the end of monopolies of any kind and the existence of the greatest possible number of newspapers, magazines and periodicals reflecting the widest possible range of opinion within the community,' and that '*The world-wide trend towards democracy and freedom of information and expression is a fundamental contribution to the fulfilment of human aspirations*' (emphasis added).[6]

In effect, there is an inherent contradiction between the exercise of 'political or economic control' and the ability of the media to express itself in a free, independent and untrammelled manner, without fear or favour. This conflict is why the transition of NDTV from a journalist-promoted-and-run news organisation to one controlled by one of the largest business conglomerates in India, with alleged proximity to the Narendra Modi-led BJP government at the Centre, is widely viewed with scepticism.

This conflict between narrow business interests and the larger interests of society lies at the heart of the debate over corporatisation of media and its implications for media freedom. It is not just a

concern in India but is a near-universal problem in all democratic societies, or societies that aspire to become democracies. Mahfuz Anam, Editor and Publisher of the leading Bangladeshi newspaper *The Daily Star*, summarised this in a 2021 column, 'Predatory Corporatisation of the media'.[7]

> As our business houses increase in number, they are investing resource and power, into newspapers (read media in general) that can serve as a part of their arsenal for business growth, fighting rivals and frightening others from exposing their malpractices.... So professional journalism be damned, and along with it, the ideals of freedom, democracy, truth, people's rights, public interest, collective good, unearthing corruption, fighting for justice, equality, fairness, building a just society, etc. The vital role of the media in holding power to account vanishes as does the notion of accountability and transparency.[8]

In order to understand the urgency of this conflict, one needs to understand the place that the media occupies within the economic framework of our country.

MEDIA AS A BUSINESS

India is one of the world's most active and fastest growing media markets. According to the Registrar of Newspapers for India and the Union Ministry for Information and Broadcasting, there were 146,045 registered newspapers and periodicals in India (as of 31 March 2022), published in 189 languages and dialects, including not only all the myriad tongues spoken in India but also foreign languages ranging from Afrikaans to Japanese, Burmese, and Bahasa Indonesia![9]

While print media—particularly daily newspapers—have seen their circulations decline around the

world, India has been an outlier, showing rapid growth in newspaper circulation till the onset of the COVID–19 pandemic. In 1991, newspapers in India sold a combined total of around 2.4 crore copies per day. By 2017–18 this had risen to 4.3 crore. While the pandemic saw this take a hit, the recovery has been rapid. From the pre-pandemic ₹9,000 crore circulation revenue, the industry showed a recovery in 2021 with ₹7,600 crore. The FICCI–EY Media and Entertainment Report 2022 estimated a return to 90 per cent of pre-pandemic levels by 2024.[10]

Apart from this, there were 905 satellite television channels in 2022–23, as per a government report.[11] News is still a prohibited category for private radio broadcasters, so there is only one government-owned news channel, All India Radio. More significantly, the rise of broadband internet has led to an explosive rise in the number of internet users in India. According to government data there were 954.40 million internet subscribers in India in March 2024.[12] India is one of the world's largest markets for social media with 462 million active users across platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter in January 2024.[13]

India's media and entertainment sector is growing twice the rate of the overall economy. According to EY's report,[14] the total revenues of the media and entertainment industry had touched ₹1.61 lakh crore in 2021—still below the pre-pandemic level. But EY forecasts the sector to grow 17 per cent in 2022 to reach ₹1.89 lakh crore ($25.2 billion) and subsequently grow at 11 per cent to reach ₹2.32 lakh crore ($30.9 billion) by 2024.

Of course, while these are aggregate numbers for news and entertainment put together, the news business isn't doing all that badly. News channels accounted for a 28 per cent share of all television revenues.

Print is not doing too badly. The FICCI–EY report estimates 2022 revenues for the print industry to be in excess of ₹24,000 crore. Overall advertising revenues were still 27 per cent below pre-COVID-19 levels, but advertisement volumes recovered 32 per cent in 2021, while circulation revenues recovered 12 per cent. But this is expected to taper off, with revenues reaching the ₹25,000 crore mark only by 2024.

Another estimate by consultancy major PwC estimates that by 2026, India will be the word's largest market for print newspaper readership. It will be the world's fifth largest print market by value, as well as the fifth largest by value in broadcast television.

However, the rise of online news has blurred distinctions for news players. According to data compiled by online website traffic monitor Comscore, online news had a reach of 467 million; by 2025 this is forecast to touch 750 million, with an overwhelming 95 per cent in regional languages.

This has spurred massive growth in digital spends and revenues. Digital media, with an estimated revenue of over ₹38,000 crore in 2022, is now India's second-largest media segment after television.

This massive growth of media into an industry generating billions of rupees led to its growing

Table 1

Year-wise Industry Size in ₹Billion (₹100 crore)											
	FY 14	FY 15	FY 16	FY 17	FY 18	FY 19	FY 20	FY 21P	FY 22P	FY20 growth over FY19	FY21P growth over FY20
Digital	32	47	65	86	121	173	218	254	338	26%	17%
TV	433	490	552	595	652	714	778	708	769	9%	–9%
Print	248	268	288	308	319	333	306	188	296	–8%	–38%
Radio	17	20	23	24	26	28	25	12	17	–11%	–50%

Source: TRAI Consultation paper on Issues Relating to Media Ownership, 12 April 2022, https://www.trai.gov.in/sites/default/files/2024-09/CP_IRMO_12042022.pdf

Table 2: Advertisement Spends (₹billion)

Segment/Year	2019	2020	2021
Television	320	251	313
Print	206	122	151
Radio	31	14	16
Digital	191	191	246

Source: EY-FICCI M&E Report, 2022.

corporatisation. The costs of launching, maintaining and growing a news-based media vehicle—whether print or broadcast—have skyrocketed over the years. This has necessarily brought large conglomerates and corporates into the media business as they have deep pockets and access to finance necessary to get started.

This rise in advertising revenues has been matched by a concomitant decline in the importance of subscription revenues, i.e., the money that consumers actually pay for the content. This trend is particularly visible in print media, whose business model has now become heavily dependent on advertising. In 2022, while print media in India generated ₹16,595 crore in advertising revenues,[15] circulation revenues were only a fraction of this at an estimated ₹7,630 crore.[16]

This has led to the rising criticality of corporate advertisers for the survival of media entities. This, in turn, has led to inevitable pressures on news coverage, the prioritisation of commercial over public interest content, and the breakdown of the 'Chinese walls' between the management and editorial—in other words, the growing 'corporatisation' of the media as a purely business venture which places profits above public interest.

However, the early history of Indian media—defined as owned and operated by Indians—is largely one of editor–entrepreneurs. While the earliest Indian

newspapers were started by the British, a number of Indian newspapers in English were launched after the passage of the draconian Vernacular Press Act of 1878.[17] These included *Amrita Bazar Patrika* started in 1868 by brothers Shishir Kumar and Motilal Ghosh, initially in Bengali but transformed into an English language daily to avoid the provisions of the Act (which covered only Indian language publications), and *The Hindu* in 1878 by a group of six lawyers and professionals who also functioned as editors of the newspaper.

Later, many stalwarts of India's freedom struggle also saw the power of the media to shape and mobilise public opinion and launched newspapers. Perhaps the most famous was Mahatma Gandhi, who, starting with *Indian Opinion* in South Africa in 1903, went on to launch six publications, including the *Young Indian* and *Navjivan*, both of which he edited. Later, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak brought out *Kesari* in Marathi, and Jawaharlal Nehru started *National Herald.* They too functioned as owner–editors.

After Independence, however, there was a gradual transformation of media ventures (newspapers and periodicals) into family or business house-owned enterprises. Editor–entrepreneurs like Puran Chand Gupta, who founded what is now India's second largest Hindi daily *Dainik Jagran,* became increasingly rare.

Starting and running a newspaper still required a hefty amount of capital, which, in the investible capital-starved India of the post-Independence decades of 'planned development' meant that control passed into the hands of those with access to finances. *The Times of India*, started in 1863 by British owners, passed into the hands of industrialist Ramkrishna Dalmia in 1946 when he purchased the paper and its holding company, Bennett Coleman & Co. Ltd. In the

1960s, control passed into the hands of his son-in-law S. P. Jain. It has remained in the hands of the Jain family since then.[18]

Similarly, *Hindustan Times,* founded in 1924 by Sunder Singh Lyallpuri, founder of the Shiromani Akali Dal party, passed first into the hands of Madan Mohan Malaviya and eventually into the hands of industrialist G. D. Birla, who initially underwrote some of its expenses. Likewise, *Indian Express*, founded by P. Varadarajulu Naidu, eventually passed into the hands of Ramnath Goenka, who originally came in as an investor when the paper was facing financial difficulties.[19]

In the history of Indian media, this transfer of ownership from the hands of initial editor-entrepreneurs into the hands of owners who initially entered the picture as financers is a recurrent theme, up to and including the takeover of journalist-entrepreneur Raghav Behl's Network18 media empire by billionaire industrialist Mukesh Ambani and the 30 December 2022 acquisition of NDTV by Gautam Adani.

IPOs AND THE RISE OF LISTED MEDIA CORPORATIONS

In September 1993, Zee Telefilms Limited (now Zee Entertainment Enterprises Limited) offered 8.2 million equity shares of ₹10 face value for public subscription at a premium of ₹20 per share, becoming the first Indian media company to be listed on a stock exchange. This trend—of owner-entrepreneurs diluting partial or majority ownership by selling stakes to a distributed public ownership—has also profoundly transformed the nature of media entities and how they operate. Today, there are as many as 44 publicly listed and traded media companies,[20] of which more than half operate news media vehicles in print, television and digital media.

This corporatisation has profoundly transformed the organisational structure of media ventures. From being run by individuals, publicly listed media companies—as it is with all companies that go public—have to comply with the provisions of the Companies Act, as well as the listing requirements of the exchanges where they are traded. Apart from the greater scrutiny of management actions by independent directors and external auditors, enhanced disclosures (actions which have a direct impact on the business of the company have to be disclosed to the exchange and shareholders), the necessity to have shareholder approval of major executive actions, there is also the pressure to maintain the price of the company's shares in the market, which is directly related to the financial performance of the company.

Consequently, the pursuit of profit becomes the primary objective of the company. This is a profound departure from the role that the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, envisaged for the media. 'In my humble opinion, it is wrong to use a newspaper as a means of earning a living. There are certain spheres of work which are of such consequence and have such bearing on public welfare that to undertake them for earning one's livelihood will defeat the primary aim behind them. When, further a newspaper is treated as a means of making profits, the result is likely to be serious malpractices. It is not necessary to prove to those who have some experience of journalism that such malpractices do prevail on a large scale,' Gandhi wrote.[21]

Gandhi's views would be laughed out of present-day media boardrooms. The growing corporatisation of media and the pressure for profits and revenues has led to a fundamental shift of power in the newsroom. Top-line and bottom-line considerations increasingly drive editorial decisions. The institution of the Editor has weakened in newsrooms, with

managements having the last word on most decisions, including content.

Media experts at EY who authored the EY-FICCI Media & Entertainment Report 2022 delineated the challenges faced by Indian media companies: 'For Indian media companies, it means a re-think of their business across four core areas: Content (what needs to be produced and in which format?); Distribution (how does content need to be distributed, across which media, and using which partnerships?); Transaction (what pricing will work for consumers, what windowing strategy, and what other ancillary/transaction revenue streams are possible?); Consumer (what are the consumer needs around escapism and information, which format (audio, video, text, experience), what price, what type of advertising will they view, what utility does the content provide and what talent do they prefer?)'.[22]

Note the absence of words like credibility, public trust, the need for a plurality of voices and opinions vital for a functioning democracy or indeed the primacy of news. News is no longer about readers or viewers but about content. As Ashish Pherwani, Media & Entertainment sector leader at Ernst & Young LLP pointed out: 'Never have Indian consumers been more powerful in determining what content and experiences are produced, when and where they need to be delivered, and how they need to be marketed'.[23]

This transformation of the reader/viewer from a citizen and a key stakeholder in the democratic process to a mere consumer who is an easy target for advertisers using the media vehicle only affirms the supremacy of advertising over news and the service of brands over the service of public interest. A far cry from Thomas Carlyle's definition of the press as the 'Fourth Estate' charged with holding the government accountable and keeping citizens informed of important issues which impact their lives.

MEDIA AS A MARKETING MACHINE

Corporatisation has brought about significant and far-reaching transformation of the media in India. From vehicles serving the Gandhian ideal of public service and members of the Fourth Estate speaking truth to power, media today is a high-cost, high-revenue business. News publications have changed from being trusted purveyors of news, information and opinion to mere 'brands' and 'products' focused on leveraging the maximum revenues from the 'consumer'.

Perhaps nothing exemplifies this more than the transformation of India's largest and most profitable media company, Bennett Coleman & Co. Ltd. They publish India's largest selling English language daily, *The Times of India* and the largest selling financial daily *The Economic Times,* as well as a host of Indian language dailies and periodicals. They own a clutch of news television channels (*Times Now, ET Now*), and the largest chain of FM Radio stations (*Radio Mirchi*), as well as India's largest news-based Internet company, *Times Internet*.

And no two individuals have had a greater impact on the transformation of the media landscape in India in the post-reforms era than the brothers who own and run the Times Group—Samir and Vineet Jain, Chairman and Vice Chairman, and Managing Director, respectively, of Bennett Coleman & Co. Ltd.

'What Samir Jain thinks today, the rest of the Indian media willy-nilly thinks tomorrow or even the day after—and curses him for it,' wrote[24] veteran journalist R. Jagannathan. Samir Jain's decision in 1994 to slash the cover price of his flagship publication *The Times of India* from ₹4.50 to ₹2, while simultaneously ramping up advertising rates profoundly changed the economics of newspapers. It not only paved the way for an explosive growth in the number of copies sold—which in turn pressured

others to follow suit so as not to get priced out of the market—but also fundamentally altered the power balance between editorial and marketing in media organisations.

Although the rise of online digital media has led to some revival in subscription revenues, today, nearly three decades later, the equation continues to be weighted heavily in favour of advertisements as the primary source of revenue for a media enterprise. The financial results of HT Media Limited, for example, which publishes *Hindustan Times* and *Mint,* are typical of the industry. In the quarter that ended 30 June 2022, HT Media reported[25] operating revenues of ₹348 crore, of which ₹240 crore came from advertisement revenue and ₹60 crore from circulation and subscription.

The dominance of advertising as the principal means of sustenance for the media entity has, over time, led to the erosion of the supremacy and independence of the editorial department. Today, the management of a media entity not only works closely with editorial, but often directs it, shaping 'content' to maximise revenues. According to ethnographer Somnath Batabyal, who conducted an embedded four-month field study of the operations of two leading television news channels—*Star News* in Hindi and *Star Ananda* in Bengali—as part of his PhD thesis, 'The assumed traditional divide between corporate and editorial no longer holds in Indian television. Each also does the job of the other and a distinction between them is purely rhetorical.'[26]

Vineet Jain put it more bluntly. In an interview[27] to *The New Yorker*, he said: 'We are not in the newspaper business, we are in the advertising business,' adding, 'if ninety per cent of your revenues come from advertising, you're in the advertising business.'

The Times Group also institutionalised certain forms of paid news through two initiatives. One

is Medianet, a division that simply sells editorial coverage to those who pay for it. The content is produced by staffers, but is sourced from entities which supply the information they wish covered. While the Press Council of India, as well as a report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Information and Broadcasting define paid news as 'any news or analysis appearing in print or electronic media for consideration in cash or kind,' the Times Group considers it as an innovation aimed at furthering information flow to consumers! In an article on its website, the Group declares: 'To capture the mindspace of the reader—the target customer—it is imperative that the product not only feature in delineated commercial spaces, but also as part of a celebration or event that can engage the reader's mind.'[28]

The other 'innovation' is private treaties. Private treaties are essentially businesses yielding a part of their equity shares to a media company to promote them in their media vehicles. While on paper this is supposed to be restricted to advertisements which are paid for in kind (equity shares) instead of cash, in reality the partner companies are promoted in editorial columns as well. The Times Group's private treaties division, now rebranded as Brand Capital, a subsidiary company, says on its website:[29] 'The process includes involving our teams, contributing intellectually and supporting the creation of a suitable brand strategy and planned media-spread.' According to the website, the Group has such 'private treaties' with over 850 companies, comprising major business houses and marquee brands.

Together, the two 'innovations' pioneered by India's largest and arguably most influential (in terms of reach) media group have fundamentally altered the way media enterprises view their primacy purpose

and function in society. In effect, they represent the extreme outcome of what corporatisation of media has done to the business of media. As journalist-turned-academic Savyasachi Jain observes,[30] 'The fact remains that the practice of paid news is normatively aberrant and also illegal. It represents the media operating outside the established norms and reach of the economic and legal system.'

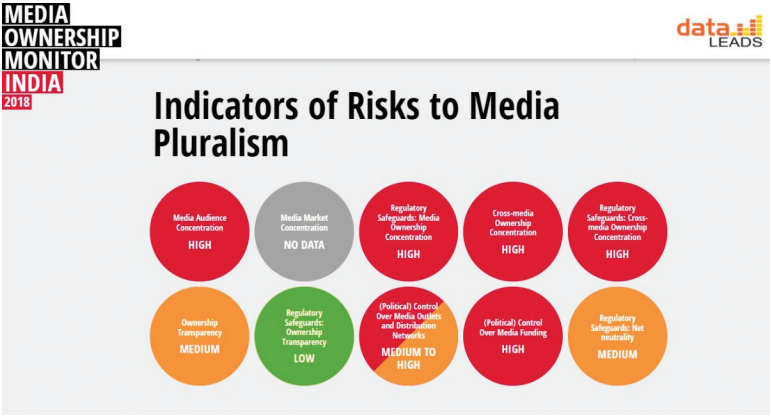
CORPORATISATION, CONCENTRATION AND CONTROL

> Media ownership structure is crucial to maintaining the freedom of the press. If the ownership rests within the hands of a certain group that have specific political or business affiliations the consequences are a compromised press freedom and unhealthy democracy—Reporters Without Borders, *Media Ownership Monitor.*

A key aspect of the growing corporatisation of media has been concentration of ownership. Of course, this is not a purely Indian phenomenon. According to the Media Ownership Monitor's report, 'just four companies—Comcast, Walt Disney, 21st Century Fox/NewsCorp and Time Warner Holdings, at present, supply about 90 per cent of world's media content.'

In India too, the rising concentration of media ownership has led to the overarching dominance of just one or two groups in various markets. A 2018 research project carried out in India by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Delhi-based digital media company DataLEADS found[31] that the print media market is highly concentrated. Just four publications—*Dainik Jagran, Hindustan, Amar Ujala* and *Dainik Bhaskar*—capture three out of four readers in Hindi.

The top two Tamil dailies account for two-thirds of the total readership of Tamil newspapers. In Telugu too, the top two draw over 71 per cent of the audience. A similar trend was observed across all major regional languages. In fact, the MOM report ranked both market concentration and ownership concentration as high-risk. In India, according to the data it analysed, the top eight owners together control more than 70 per cent of the audience across all media—print, television, radio and digital.



Source: https://india.mom-gmr.org/

What is the downside of concentration of ownership? The biggest risk is the loss of plurality and diversity of voices in the media. The economically and politically dominant sections of the media tend to override other, less enfranchised and marginal voices, leading to a 'democracy' that is of the few, by the few and for the few.

As a consultation paper[32] issued by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India on issues relating to media ownership noted: 'The need for viewpoint plurality arises from the premise that in the marketplace of ideas, the readers, viewers, and listeners seek to read, view and listen to diverse

opinions. In case an entity owns a newspaper, television channel and radio channel, it is likely that the consumers would get same or similar views across the three forms of media leading to an undesirable situation... the media entity is required to portray diverse opinions and perspectives because the readers/viewers deserve to get holistic analysis/commentary.'

A 2009 study[33] for the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting by the Administrative Staff College of India found significant crossholding across various media in the five major media markets studied—English, Hindi, Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam. It also found a significant degree of 'vertical integration' where the same controlling entity dominates the entire value chain from production to distribution to the end consumer.

The study recommended placing restrictions on cross-holding as it had an impact on plurality and diversity of opinion. While noting that diversified ownership is no guarantee of diversified views, it said that ownership diversification provided a 'reasonable proxy'. The study also recommended a cap on vertical integration and the creation of an empowered regulatory authority.

Significantly, these recommendations were ignored by the government and the draft report was never finalised and placed in the public domain.

The loss of plurality and diversity of voices is perhaps the most damaging fallout of the growing corporatisation of media in India, which has been accompanied by a growing concentration of media ownership. This has made it easier for the political class and the economic elite to not only shape and direct public discourse, but control or crowd out independent contrarian and minority voices.

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3. The State of Investigative Journalism in India

SANJAY KAPOOR

The first investigative journalist in the United States was a woman—Ida Tarbell. She was inquisitive, brave and very angry. Her ire was directed at the way the world's richest man, John Rockefeller, had corrupted public officials and eliminated competition through dishonest practices. The year was 1903 and the US was struggling to find a balance between predatory capitalism and constitutional and public morality. Ida Tarbell's path breaking investigation in a publication, *McClure's*, created a countervailing force to the unaccountable and informed the world about the critical role a free media can play in society. Her relentless investigation resulted in the US government initiating anti-trust proceedings against the behemoth, Standard Oil Company, and splitting it up into 34 different companies that includes today's oil major, ExxonMobil. Though she got support from the administration, President Theodore Roosevelt was not really charitable when he called investigative journalists 'muckrakers'. Others used Tarbell's name to suggest how journalism was used for 'tarring' reputations. That may not be the case as investigative journalism became the soul of modern journalism, and the success that Tarbell's relentless probe achieved became the inspiration for an entire generation of

journalists. Little wonder that her work figures in the top five stories in the United States.

There have been other media investigations in the US and elsewhere that have brought grief to many governments. The most famous was the Watergate scandal that involved the burglary of the Democratic National Convention, whose permission could be traced back to President Richard Nixon, who was looking for a re-election. Nixon was trying to cover up a tangled web of money making and deceit, and also trying to tarnish the reputation of the Democratic party by using the burglars to plant evidence of pay-offs from communist North Korea and North Vietnam at his opponents. An expose by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in *The Washington Post* compelled Nixon to resign, as he feared that more harm would visit him if the investigation into his conduct went deeper.

The truth is that such scandals involving people in high places can be exposed in democratic societies when there is institutional protection for those who expose suppressed truth. In Costa-Gavras's classic film, *Z*, an investigating magistrate and a photo journalist bent on unearthing the truth about the sneaking fascist takeover come to grief when the army takes over the country. After the coup, all those who were fighting for democracy and truth disappear. The same disturbing reality has played out innumerable times in other flawed illiberal democracies that are replete with institutional infirmities.

In Russia, for instance, there have been innumerable cases of journalists coming to grief as they chose to probe those in power. Anna Politkovskaya was killed in 2006 for probing excesses in Russia's attempt to quell uprising in Chechnya. Wikipedia shows an endless list of journalists who died after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and more so since President Putin took over.

The major learning that can be drawn from these incidents is that independent investigative journalism is a dangerous way to earn a living in societies that have pretensions of being law-based democracies, especially when they are not.

Unlike many authoritarian societies, India has had a glorious tradition of independent journalism. Its freedom movement was led by those who took great pride in running their own publications. There were five journalists/editors who used the medium of a newspaper to create awareness. They were Bal Gangadhar Tilak, G. Subramania Iyer, Sisir Kumar Ghosh, Moti Lal Ghosh and K. Ramakrishna Pillai. These intrepid journalists fought sedition laws and stereotyping by the British elite to dismiss Indian journalism as scurrilous and frivolous. Nearly all these courageous journalists left a rich legacy for others to question the British rulers and also laid the foundation of independent postcolonial newspapers in India. *The Hindu* and *Kesari* have survived the passage of time and rapidly changing technology and tastes of newspaper readers. History bears evidence from even the state of Oudh that after the 1857 mutiny, newspapers in Lucknow were questioning the British rulers about the civic decay that had followed the uprising and how they had been inadequate in providing quality governance.

Later, Mahatma Gandhi used his publication, *Young India*, and Jawaharlal Nehru, *National Herald*, to raise awareness on many issues. Many a time, Nehru also wrote columns under a pseudonym to stealthily express unhappiness over some issue.

With such a hoary past, it was easy for the media to be more daring and ask hard questions from the government of post-independent India. In the early years, the newspapers were largely supportive of the national government and its endeavour at nation building. Stories of government corruption,

which was the legacy of the Second World War, continued to be reported, but care was taken to ensure that Nehru's government was not really destabilised. Journalists were an integral part of governance as their reportage or exposes of official inaction or malfeasance were responded to promptly by a sensitive Indian state.

A tabloid from pre-independence days, *Blitz*, captured the imagination of the masses. It backed Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, his non-aligned policies and his efforts to make the country a socialist state. Those who did not fit into this framework were severely attacked, including Acharya Kripalani, Morarji Desai and all those who represented, in the words of the editor/owner of Blitz, Russi Karanjia's the jute lobby. Expectedly, Karanjia, collaborated with Nehru's son-in-law, Feroze Gandhi, husband of Indira Gandhi, to launch an anti-corruption crusade against some of the very rich. Gandhi compelled Nehru to appoint a commission of inquiry to look in to the Haridas Mundhra scandal under the Chief Justice of India, M. C. Chagla. To ensure that the decisions were fair and impartial, Justice Chagla conducted an open inquiry into allegations of using Life Insurance Corporation premiums to help Mundhra companies. This probe led to the arrest of Mundhra from Delhi's Claridges Hotel. Such a robust engagement of ruling party parliamentarians and the media helped empower democracy and made media more adversarial towards the government. This was truly an exercise in nation building, but many media commentators saw it differently—as a rupture in the Nehru family.

Similar exposure by the press of corruption in the government raised the profile of Parliament and the government as being truly democratic and sensitive to criticism. The press, too, was seen to be independent and unsparing of the corrupt. The manner in which

Nehru treated the press, as an equal partner in building a constitutional democracy, stood the test of time. It was only when Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister that the constitutionally guaranteed rights of the citizens were withdrawn for 18 months in the name of national internal emergency. Ostensibly imposed to tame fascism and checkmate the threat of Balkanisation, the imposition of internal emergency caused a lot of harm. Till that happened, publications like *The Indian Express* and *The Statesman* were at the vanguard of a campaign against the PM and her son, Sanjay Gandhi. Besides, there were many anti-corruption agitations that were sweeping different parts of the country. The biggest, though, was the Nav Nirman movement led by socialist Jayaprakash Narayan. The important contribution of the media was visible in every aspect of the nation's democratic life. Newspapers broke stories about corruption and cronyism around Indira Gandhi. Reports of her using her personal government staff to manage her constituency in Rae Bareli, Uttar Pradesh, during elections finally led to National Emergency and her incarceration and exit.

During the period of Emergency, all newspapers were subjected to strict censorship and large portions of the front pages were blackened. Many journalists were arrested or lost their jobs as their work did not find approval with the management of the newspaper. For the media, these were indeed dark times. Displaying discomfort with the censorship that her government had imposed on the media. Indira Gandhi, in less than two years, lifted the Emergency and censorship on the media. What followed was the golden period for Indian journalism. Circulation of newspapers zoomed to new heights and readers seemed eager to read everything about politics and more. *The Indian Express* and *India Today* magazine were beneficiaries of this newfound freedom to

report and write hard hitting stories. Investigations led by Arun Shourie and others about what really transpired under the Gandhi government fired the imagination of the masses. This was also the period of introspection in the press. Building on a remark by L. K. Advani, who took over as the Information and Broadcasting minister of the new Janata Party government, the question many editors asked was: Why did the newspapers crawl when they were asked merely to bend? 'Never again', the newspaper editors resolved after Emergency. Editors Guild of India was an outcome of this painful realization. Were the lessons of Emergency really learnt?

After Emergency, the government zealously endeavoured to make Doordarshan and All India Radio independent of the government by creating a facilitating regime under the Prasar Bharati Act. This proved to be short-lived as satellite technology pushed by large corporations overwhelmed it.

Barely ten yeas after the end of Emergency rule, Rajiv Gandhi with a brute majority began to stumble. His fall from grace was precipitated by a media expose. On 16 April 1987, Swedish radio revealed pay-offs to Indian and Swedish politicians and bureaucrats as kickbacks from the 155 Howtizer gun deal (or Bofors scandal) worth $1.4 billion. The Swedish radio report sent shockwaves through the Indian establishment. Later, Chitra Subramaniam ran a series of investigative reports in *The Hindu*.[1] Later, when *The Hindu* and its editor, N. Ram, came under pressure from the government to stop the reporting on Bofors, *The Indian Express* provided space to journalistic probe into the Bofors gun deal.[2] Many years later, the whistleblower, a Swedish policeman, revealed that he leaked details about the corruption in the deal. The Congress party under Rajiv Gandhi lost the elections and the two leaders who signed the deal were assassinated—seemingly

for different reasons. Both are a subject matter of a detailed investigation.

Rajiv's death in 1991 was preceded by two reports that appeared in the weekly *Blitz* and became the key material for the Jain Commission that inquired into the wider conspiracy into the former Prime Minister's death. Just a week before he was assassinated during the election campaign, *Blitz* reported a conspiracy to kill Rajiv Gandhi. This was not the first story that they did on a threat to Rajiv's life. In 1987 they scooped a letter from Heritage Foundation in which a scenario was explored to ascertain what would happen if Rajiv was removed from the scene. These reports lend credence to a view that Gandhi was assassinated by a human bomb as part of a global conspiracy.

In 1991, *Blitz* broke a scandal that resulted in the fall of the Congress government in 1996. Known as the Jain Hawala scandal, this was first scooped by this author, who got a tip off about the presence of a diary with details of pay-offs to top politicians and bureaucrats being quietly stored in the CBI storeroom. The diary had names that included former President, former PM, and many other ministers and bureaucrats. This report in *Blitz* was followed by many other newspapers and video magazines like Kalachakra. Subsequently, a public interest litigation was filed in the Supreme Court that forced the government to order an independent probe. A bench headed by Chief Justice of India supervised the investigation to ensure a fair probe, considering the powerful recipients listed in the diary. This supervision by the Supreme Court, a fractured polity and an aggressive news media seemingly helped to take the scandal to its logical conclusion, but it was not enough. The case was thrown out of court on what constitutes an account book. The diary, as maintained by the Judge, was not a book of account.

Quite evidently, the fear of the petitioners that the probe agencies may come under external pressure proved right.

This was a period of great turmoil in Indian politics. Two governments fell in rapid succession. The restlessness in Indian society was exacerbated by the Ram Janmabhoomi movement—a *rath yatra* which was led by BJP leader L. K. Advani. This march was leaving a trail of violence all over and it climaxed with the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Brilliant photojournalism by *The Indian Express*'s Praveen Jain[3] revealed that the demolition was not so much a spontaneous act as was made out to be, but a well planned one. Many journalists and commissions of inquiry probed the demolition, but truth became captive to the politics of the day. Demolition led to bomb blasts in Mumbai stock exchange and more. The radicalisation of Indian politics, aggravated by the rise of Islamic terror and greater control exercised by intel agencies on what gets reported, began to dominate the headlines. The state became more obsessive, intrusive and exclusionary.

The turning point was the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York on 9 September 2001. The grand spectacle caused by terrorists of Al Qaeda launched the war on terror. This was not just empowering the state by using surveillance technology, but it also began to give primacy to fighting terror at the expense of human rights and the existing criminal justice system. The draconian terror laws saw police displaying utter disregard for individual liberty and trying to copy the practices of the US in the name of providing homeland security. Ordinary people were arrested on mere suspicion under these laws and incarcerated without being allowed to seek bail. Many reports in the media brought to the fore the devaluation of citizens,

especially from the minority community, but it had little impact on the government's policy of 'pre-emption' to stop terror acts from taking place. It's a different matter altogether that Indian Muslims were the most peaceful and divorced from radical Islam that was sweeping the Middle East.

The biggest incident that blighted India's image of a secular nation and which became the reason for radicalisation in the country took place in Gujarat. With the benefit of hindsight we can say that it also shaped politics in a manner that not many expected in those days. The rise and rise of right wing politics on the crest of the global war on terror cannot be minimised. That's the reason why the BJP speaks ad nauseam about terror and its government insists on including the issue of terrorism at every bilateral or multilateral meet.

The Gujarat riots and the organised pogrom against minorities became a subject matter of investigative journalism. Despite the fact that there is a methodical scrubbing of our past, by removing the Gujarat riots from curriculum, for instance, public memory remains of courage displayed by some investigative reporters like Rana Ayyub to record the statements of those who were self-confessedly involved in ghoulish acts of cutting the bellies of pregnant mothers and putting their men to the sword. It is Ayyub's reporting that has led to merciless hounding by the state. Even journalist Teesta Setalvad realised the inadequacy of reporting and followed up on the brutal violence that had taken place during the riots through activism. Her recent arrest after a flawed judgement of the Supreme Court on Zakia Jafri's submission that her husband, Ehsan Jafri's investigation was inadequate revealed that even those who espoused the cause of the victims were no longer safe. Allegations of grand conspiracy were repackaged to show that nothing happened

in 2002 despite the fact that hundreds of witness accounts had been given to the various courts.

What followed in 2004 and thereafter was a period of empowerment for the media. True to its promise, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government brought in the Right to Information Act (RTI) on the lines of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) of the United States. It became possible for journalists to demand information from the government on any issue, except on matters pertaining to national security. Though this facilitating act was useful for a new generation of journalists to investigate infirmities or malfeasance in decision making, they were at risk from corrupt police in various states. Many reporters were killed for blowing the whistle on venality that prevailed at the local level. Despite this, many truth seekers in the media have soldiered on.

A plethora of stories against corruption surfaced during the UPA years. RTI and a facilitating environment created by a coalition government with a liberal view of the media resulted in a series of stories against government corruption in the organisation of the Commonwealth Games and in the award of 2G spectrum. Interestingly, the bigger scoops came from the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on sale of coal mines and 2G spectrum. Newspapers and the aggressive TV channels, which had become the go-to platform for anti-government reports, contributed in revealing the abysmal corruption that had gripped the government and society. It was TV news again that catalysed the opposition to the Congress party and paved the way for the rise of a government that had a different perspective on everything, including the contribution of the founding fathers of the Republic like Jawaharlal Nehru.

By creating a large ecosystem of supporters in social media, the ruling party ensured that the

achievements of earlier governments were diminished and any criticism of the present incumbent was shown as biased or inspired by the government's detractors. This sustained campaign was not limited to social media, but found expression in many other publications. Surveys by the Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy (CMIE) show that the number of people working in media had fallen dramatically. This was either due to falling popularity of traditional media and availability of free content, or reduction in space to exclusive reports or investigative journalism. Over the last eleven years that the BJP government has been in power, it has shown greater control on the narrative. Though this has been a tumultuous period with the government bringing in policies that have blown away other regimes, like demonetisation, GST, Citizen Amendment Act (CAA), the abrogation of Article 370 and the Farm Bills, the government managed to hang tough primarily due to its ability to use every new technology to manage media and consequently dissent. Exposes in the foreign media revealed that the government had imported surveillance military grade software to keep track of journalists and civil society dissenters. Expectedly, the government denied the claims, but there was enough evidence to suggest that Pegasus had stealthily intruded into the phone software of journalists like Siddharth Varadarajan, M. K. Venu and many others.

The biggest challenge to investigative journalism came during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government, as it is it's wont, tried to control what got out in the media on the importance of the lockdown and how well the administration had managed this calamity. Reports on many online publications like *Scroll*, *The Wire* and *The Print* punctured these claims. The biggest story that was investigated by Hindi newspapers like *Dainik Bhaskar*[4] was about

the deaths in the second wave of the pandemic. The government has tried to show how much they were able to control adverse events through good management, but circumstantial evidence was visible to everyone. Bhaskar showed thousands of bodies floating anonymously in the waters of the Ganges. Similar numbers of death came from other parts of the country, but the government refused to accept these numbers of the pandemic and vaccination. Its efforts were largely limited to controlling headlines to show how proactive the administration was.

The obsequiousness displayed by some TV channels which only attack the opposition parties and never question the government has not escaped many discerning viewers. Some of them have coined a Hindi version of 'lapdog' media to describe this genre of journalism in the country. These supporters of the government have also given legitimacy to disinformation that has started a new breed of fact checkers. These fact checkers are deeply resented and perceived as the enemy of the state. Recently, a fact checker from Altnews, Muhammad Zubair, was imprisoned on manifestly specious charges after he had blown the lid off an interview by a BJP spokesperson, Nupur Sharma, who had criticised The Prophet on a TV show. The channel had tried to firewall the interview so that it did not reach the public domain. Zubair disturbed their plans.

Despite these threats to journalists and their random arrests, they soldier on. For instance, in Kashmir, Fahad Shah, who was released from in jail after a few years; Siddique Kappan from Kerala who found himself in a UP jail for daring to report on a rape in Hathras. He was released from jail after almost two years. These are difficult times, but many young reporters and freelancers are doing a great job ferreting out the truth. *Newslaundry*, News Minute, Article 14, Reporters Collective and many

other online publications and Facebook reporters are at the frontline trying to report news as it happens rather than tainted by those who are in power. Due to the efforts of the Editors Guild of India, the law of sedition against journalists has been put on hold. However, the bigger challenge to investigative journalism is not just from a majoritarian politics, but also from how artificial intelligence and new surveillance technologies have been harnessed to manage the narrative and keep a tight leash on reporters.

The purpose of detailing the history of Indian investigative journalism is to establish some of the conditions that are necessary for impartial journalism in any society:

1. Investigative journalism is only possible in a democracy. In autocracies a journalist is like a stenographer. Anyone more ambitious could face a threat to life.
2. Democratic institutions like an independent judiciary are critical to protect journalism. In the absence of the protection of free speech, there would be no independent journalism.
3. Investigative journalism largely flourishes in an environment of competitive politics where politicians are participants in the exposure of large-scale corruption, as happened when CPM leader Jyotirmoy Basu exposed cases of corruption.
4. Ownership of the media, is central issue that ensure freedom, but not the only one that ensures a reporter's write to say what they want . A well-funded media entity can look the government in the eye, but could be reluctant to report on venal acts in the private sector.
5. The state should work towards protecting the media from the harmful impact of social

media, artificial intelligence and surveillance technology. This is crucial to make the media credible and to prevent it from becoming a pawn in the hands of political or business interests.

6. Parliaments displaying sensitivity to news reports are invigorating for the media. When Parliament or assemblies meet for only few days, it is difficult for the press to draw strength from parliamentary democracy.
7. Journalists need to be well paid and should have the skill set to investigate and arrive at the truth.

Notes

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4. Misinformation as an Epidemic

SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

In an essay titled 'Truth and Politics', philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt made a distinction between 'factual' and 'formal' truths. Factual truths referred to observations by living subjects of a constantly changing reality. Formal truths, on the contrary, were part of received wisdom, which few would challenge. Nobody could question the formal truth that two and two make four. But factual truth was always prone to challenge as being no more significant than opinion, the record of one person's observation (1968: 232).

Truth and politics, Arendt conceded, had always been 'on rather bad terms with each other' and 'truthfulness' was never counted 'among the political virtues'. This reality had a profound bearing on the practice of politics, since 'facts and events', the outcome of the collective life of humanity, were the 'very texture of the political realm' (ibid.). A shared perception of facts was in a sense essential to creating a politics of reasonable consensus.

Cinema is a form of creative expression which nobody would hold up to strict standards of veracity, unless work in the medium comes with an explicit truth claim. *The Kerala Story* was released across India on 5 May 2023, by which time its poster had been widely circulated in physical and digital form,

with the claim that it revealed 'a truth long hidden'.[1] Visually, the poster portrayed the transformation of four joyful women in the prime of youth to a state of desolation. There was also a sartorial transformation from the freely chosen garments of youth to the harsh impositions of religious orthodoxy. The accompanying narrative, widely promoted by the producer and director, spoke of the film as a portrayal of the tragedies that 32,000 young women in Kerala had lived through after being lured into matrimony by men of the Islamic faith and trafficked into the service of global terrorism.

'Love jihad' was the theme: a widely diffused conspiracy theory that Muslim men are on a purposive mission to woo and wed women from other faiths to convert them and boost the number within their fold, with the ultimate mission of capturing political power. Despite all the political patronage it has enjoyed and the indifferent media effort to debunk it, love jihad remains a conspiracy theory, exactly where it began.[2] All the same, *The Kerala Story* received a promotional boost from none less than Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as he campaigned in Karnataka prior to a hard-fought election to the legislative assembly. The film depicted the true consequences that Kerala had to bear on account of terrorism, he said, and it was no surprise at all that the opposition Congress was trying to ensure it was not seen.[3]

State governments headed by the BJP were quick to grant the film tax exemption—a privilege normally reserved for cinematic work of great cultural or educational value. Though under pressure to prevent the screening, the Kerala government chose the path of forbearance. A petition before the Kerala High Court was heard on an urgent basis before the scheduled release of the film, when the judges refused to entertain the prayer for a ban, but only after securing a commitment that the figure of 32,000

would not be projected as an accurate estimate of the number of women who suffered the fate depicted.[4]

By now under media scrutiny, the film director claimed rather strangely that the number of 32,000 women from Kerala being trafficked into the jihad was 'arbitrary, but backed up facts'.[5] By then, it was well established through a rigorous fact-check that the film's truth claims were based on 'misquotes, flawed math, (and) imaginary figures'.[6]

In neighbouring Tamil Nadu, exhibitors balanced risks and gains and determined that they would rather avoid the film than bear any part of the risks. In West Bengal the state government went right ahead and decreed a ban.

Despite its dubious truth claims, the film's creators—buoyed by support from the highest political office—approached the Supreme Court for lifting all restraints on the film. The Supreme Court stayed the West Bengal ban while pleading an inability to intervene with the commercial decision of Tamil Nadu's film exhibitors. It conceded that the vilification of an entire community was to stretch free speech rights, but reasoned that it had to follow the path of restraint, when the film had been cleared for public exhibition by all relevant authorities. While asking the West Bengal state government to rescind its ban, the Supreme Court bench volunteered to view the film to determine if the limits of free speech had been breached.[7]

While taking on this burden, the Supreme Court asked for explicit disavowal of the 32,000 number, a demand the senior advocate representing the film's producer, was quick to concede. There was no 'authentic data', he said, 'to back up the suggestion that the figure of conversions is 32,000'.[8] This disclaimer omitted another of the film's extravagant claims, that conversions to Islam necessarily meant recruitment into the cause of the jihad.

Misinformation is a moving target that the fact-checking enterprise can barely keep pace with. *The Kerala Story* was retrieved from its embarrassment by simply brushing away precision in numbers as irrelevant. This was the equivalent of insisting, in defiance of Hannah Arendt's construct of the 'formal truth', that 3 is equivalent to 32,000. Yet, for any reasonable person, the difference is in several orders of magnitude, no less than 10,000. It is also about the exaggerated portrayal of isolated instances of a certain social pathology as a potentially explosive problem.

Stories mined out of India's deepest communal fault-line—even if loosely based on fact—have a tendency to spread rapidly through the densely networked country. India's worst railway disaster in years on 2 June 2023 in Balasore district of Odisha provided multiple illustrations. Among the first to suggest a conspiratorial angle was a Twitter(X) user who posted a visual of the accident site with what seemed a mosque-like structure adjoining the railway track. Accompanying this visual was the cryptic statement that Friday, the weekly day of prayer for Islam, was when the accident occurred.

Within two days, fact-checker *Boomlive* verified that the structure was a Krishna temple.[9] The priest had offered his premises for the rescue effort and also participated in it. He played no part in the stories circulating through social media, most through WhatsApp messaging, about the possible sabotage angle. Soon embroiled in a war of words with Mohammad Zubair (@zoo-bear), part of the factchecking team *AltNews*, the Twitter(X) user who started the cycle seemed to relent, deleting his original post. By then, though, the falsehood had acquired a self-sustaining momentum (Bhattacharya, 2024), embellished by a fresh flood of concoctions. A video of a young boy being upbraided by railway guards after he was found placing pebbles on the track

was circulated as evidence of minors being initiated into acts of sabotage.[10] And an empty gas cylinder abandoned by a person who panicked at the rapid approach of a train as he crossed a railway track in Uttarakhand was proven to have occurred from a time long past, with no sinister motive.[11]

Misinformation, or at least news inflected in ways that could disrupt established conventions and practices, is known to spread when there are political stakes involved. In the case of the Odisha train disaster, there seems to have been a serious motive at work. Just a week before the event, Prime Minister Modi had proclaimed while inaugurating a train service in the state of Uttarakhand, that the real work to transform the railway system began after his ascent to power.[12] And soon after the accident in Odisha, media attention turned towards a report by India's watchdog over public finances, the Comptroller and Auditor-General,[13] which spoke of money allocated for safety systems being diverted for cosmetic purposes.

A recent work on journalism and truth in times of social media emphasises at various points that truth is a 'social consensus' (Katz and Mays, 2019: 257). And beyond the need for wide recognition of what truth is, there also has to be agreement on how it matters in public life. Liberal democracies function on the dynamics of electoral contests, but do not permit violations of numerical logic, such as conflating the figure 3 with 32,000. It may be part of a liberal democracy's guarantees of freedom to permit any individual to make that claim, just as it was for Donald Trump to insist after he was roundly beaten in the 2020 presidential election in the US, that his margin of defeat of 8 million was inconsequential. Liberal democracy in such situations imposes the obligation on all who contest the veracity of numbers, or question whose truth is the greater, to submit to institutions that stand above and beyond partisan competition.

Typically, we are told, 'political speech and behaviour are buoyed by institutional norms'. And part of the current crisis of misinformation is that the environment does not necessarily reward adherence to 'truth-telling norms'. It was not so much about truth, but about politicians being held to 'factual accountability' (ibid.: 9).

In the case of the Odisha train tragedy, the cue for the tidal wave of fake news may have come from the Prime Minister's statement very early on, that the causes, whatever they may be, would be identified and those responsible punished very severely.[15] Soon afterwards, signalling the active search for some sinister intent behind the tragedy—rather than a systems failure—Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnav bypassed all institutional processes by bringing in a police agency—the Central Bureau of Investigation—mandated under the normal division of institutional responsibilities to conduct criminal and corruption inquiries.[16] That was perhaps the signal for a large army of social media operatives—all committed to the partisan cause—to animate the information ecosystem with varieties of conspiracy theory.

Liberal democratic institutions—and this includes the media—function in normal circumstances within a manageable spectrum, where facts are generally agreed, though inflected differently depending upon ideological orientation. When social polarisation becomes sharp and political fortunes begin to ride on widening the divide, there are no inbuilt safeguards preventing the media organised on commercial principles from following the herd. And that is especially so in a situation of transition, when traditional media formats are being undermined by new forms of connectivity, and the advertising subsidy for news gathering and reporting is shrinking.

Much of this was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, a transformative event that left no part

of the world untouched. The stock-taking of how it impacted communities and their institutions is still underway. And so far, no agreed basis has been found for a dialogue that could contribute towards greater preparedness for any similar contingencies in future. In times when the world can go about its business without the anxiety of the pandemic months, an assessment of that traumatic experience—what was done right and where the world could have done better—remains a distant prospect. The information registered in public memory is either coloured by bias or tailored to mislead.

As the virus cut its swathe of destruction across the world, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres bemoaned that the airwaves and cyberspace were suffused with a 'global "misinfo-demic"' that caused a proliferation of 'harmful health advice and snake-oil solutions'. 'Wild conspiracy theories' infected the internet and hatred went viral, 'stigmatising and vilifying people and groups'.[17]

In India, the epidemic of misinformation was manifest in the clamour over a congregation of the Muslim faith in Delhi's Nizamuddin area. Though called out as hate mongering by various independent authorities and found totally lacking in substance after a range of legal cases were brought against the participants, few of the media channels that propagated the story about a deliberate effort at spreading the infection were compelled to retract or apologies (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Following a lockdown that was perhaps the most severe in the world, India seemed to be emerging out of the worst of the risks early in 2021, when it was caught completely off balance by a second wave. The second quarter of the year saw an uncounted number perishing to the virus. And roughly a year later, when the World Health Organisation attempted a stocktaking, it estimated India's death toll at close to

five million. The Indian government objected, sticking to its tally of no more than one-tenth that number as the death toll (Banaji, 2022). There was another 'fact' that was infinitely malleable in accordance with the identity of the observer.[18]

Truth is often regarded as a metaphysical construct, something given down by a superior (and supernatural) wisdom. Fortunately, it also has a pragmatic dimension, as a process of recording perceptions, ascertaining which among them rises to the level of 'facts', and recording them as part of an agreed social consensus. Agreement on facts is key to evolving modes of collective action that serve the social good. But if every perception has a right to be recorded in the register of agreed facts, what is to stop a collective descent into relativism, where everybody feels entitled to his or her own 'fact'? Perceptions are moulded by culture, and observation statements are conditioned by language. Is truth then culturally determined?

There is a good case to be made, in accordance with the classic liberal democratic argument for free speech, for allowing a large variety of views to be heard in the public square, so that the most convincing argument wins the day. This is a doctrine with a long history, and one of its clearest articulations in the second half of the 19th century was by John Stuart Mill, who made a case for allowing every point of view its space, no matter if it was hopelessly isolated and demonstrably in error. The possibility of the majority being in error could not be ruled out, Mill said, and even if indisputably in the right, the grasp over truth could only be sharpened in a collision with error. To prevent itself from lapsing into the 'deep slumber of a decided opinion', society needed always to encourage those who would express contrarian opinions (Mill, 1969: 127).

This perspective has had a long life and surfaced in very recent times when Facebook, after a long

honeymoon with the public, began facing deep scrutiny. In 2016, the social media platform was believed to have played a role in spreading waves of misinformation that jolted two seemingly stable liberal democracies out of their accustomed grooves. The UK decided by a narrow though decisive margin in a nation-wide referendum to quit the European Union after over four decades of deepening integration. And then, the US—by a minority of the national vote, though by a decisive majority of its 'electoral college'—picked Donald Trump as president, a person widely regarded as unfit for the job.

Unable to ignore growing public apprehensions, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg issued a 'manifesto'[19] titled 'Building Global Community'. Though mindful of the hazards of growing misinformation, he was unwilling to accept the remedies proposed. There was justified concern over the 'diversity of viewpoints' a typical Facebook user would be exposed to, as also about 'accuracy of information'. Certain powerful effects induced by social media also needed to be addressed: 'sensationalism' for instance, and 'polarisation leading to a loss of common understanding'.

Yet there was reason to proceed with caution, since there 'is not always a clear line between hoaxes, satire and opinion'. It was important that Facebook should respect the principle that people in 'a free society' would have the 'power to share their opinion even if others think they're wrong'. The best approach then was not one of 'banning', but of the enabling of 'additional perspectives and information'. This also meant that fact-checkers should have ample opportunity to weigh in on any item on social media when its accuracy was disputable.

Zuckerberg here argues, very much in the John Stuart Mill tradition, that the best remedy for abuses of free speech would be more free speech, since the marketplace of ideas could be relied upon

to arbitrate a fair outcome. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that these ideas, though steeped in tradition, are hopelessly outdated. They may have served robustly through the heyday of liberalism in world politics. Since the triumph of liberalism was proclaimed in the early-1990s by an array of redoubtable political scientists, not least of them Francis Fukuyama (1992), information flows across borders have increased by many multiples and barriers to participation in the marketplace of ideas have crumbled. If this was a linear progression, global circumstances around now should have been perfect for finally sealing the victory of liberalism. Except, they were not.

In 2015, well before Trump's election to the US presidency, Fukuyama was fretting over the 'democratic recession' that was undoing his early prediction of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 2015). The capacity of nation states that embraced the democratic ethos, he worried, had failed to keep pace with 'popular demands for democratic accountability'. The state enjoys a monopoly over legitimate coercion but is necessarily constrained by the rule of law. This counterpoise to the coercive power of the state could only come from civil society, and required 'the organization of social movements into political parties that can contest elections', and beyond that, the building of 'state capacity'. With an uneasy glance towards the growth of inequality since the supposed triumph of liberalism, Fukuyama warned: democratic government would only survive if it were to really govern, i.e., 'exercise legitimate authority and provide basic services to the population'.

Early in 2022, as Russian forces marched across the border into Ukraine, Fukuyama found some reason to celebrate. Russia was headed to certain defeat and that would have a salutary impact on others cut from the same cloth as Russia's

populist ultra-nationalist president, Vladimir Putin. 'The invasion has already done huge damage to populists all over the world, who prior to the attack uniformly expressed sympathy for Putin', he wrote. Following a listing of the political leaders who he saw as impediments to the triumph of liberalism, Fukuyama celebrated the exposure of 'their openly authoritarian leanings' in the crucible of the war (Fukuyama, 2022).

Populism was the new menace in the feast of concord and progress that liberalism represented. Always a powerful political force, populism gained new impetus in the network society. Anti-elitism is one element of the mix that creates a successful model of populist politics. Another is an aversion to pluralism or social complexity. Populism believes that every problem has a straightforward solution and celebrates the simple, matter-of-fact approach. Accommodating diversity on any matter is a pointless indulgence. Populism grows on the fertile soil of socio-economic differentiation, with large gaps between various groups. An 'us versus them' duality is easy to conjure out of this mix, alongside the populist assertion of a monopoly in terms of representing the 'people' (Muller, 2016: ch 1).

For all its insistence on the will of the people, populism is exclusivist since 'only some of the people are really the people', as political scientist Jan-Werner Muller notes. The people 'speak with one voice and issue something like an imperative mandate that tells politicians exactly what they have to do in government', without the unnecessary media interface, dispensing especially with the older news outlets that distort what should be a pristine relationship (ibid.: 21).

The new phenomenon then is the replication of news, irrespective of its authenticity or reliability, at micro-second speeds. After the 17th general election

to the Lok Sabha in India concluded and the million plus electronic voting machines that register the popular will were being clustered for the count, the *Columbia Journalism Review* on 22 May 2019 posted an article on its website, rich with cross references, titled 'Results expected in India's "WhatsApp election"' (Allsop, 2019).

Exit poll results released on 19 May, after the last of seven rounds of polling and a 38-day campaign, indicated a surprisingly comfortable win for incumbent prime minister Narendra Modi. Though several vital issues were at stake in the election, what had been most riveting was 'the rampant proliferation of disinformation and hate speech online'. It was a situation that 'traditional media' with its significant presence in the public sphere was partly responsible for, though by far the greater aggravation had come from the social media platform Facebook and its wholly owned messaging service WhatsApp.

Three days later, after gaining a victory even more decisive than forecast, Modi addressed the senior leadership and newly elected members of parliament of his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Alongside the call to duty, Modi issued several explicit warnings about the media. Print media and TV may seem a good way to project ideas onto the public stage, he said, but there is a risk of falling victim to their magnetic power. 'Off the record' statements particularly were a hazard, since nothing in today's world met that description, especially with media persons who could be carrying hidden recording devices. Referring to speculative stories on the combinations he could possibly adopt in constituting his cabinet, Modi warned of 'ill motivations' and the intent to create divisions.[20]

The signals were clear: the Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy was disinclined in his second term to retreat from the contentious

relationship established with the media through his first. Modi's first term in office has been described by media analyst Sevanti Ninan as transformative for the Indian news media, a time of eroding public credibility and relevance. The explosion of media—enabled by growing access to new communication techniques—played a part, though one that is yet to be fully estimated. Yet for all the power they are ascribed, the greater contribution to the 'de-legitimisation of the media as an institution', Ninan argued, came from its 'cooption by the ruling establishment' (Ninan, 2019).

Modi's unique political success and his impact on the social fabric are widely believed to rely in great degree on the use his core constituencies have made of the internet and new media.[21] It is a strategy that relies heavily on the weight of numbers and the power of repetition. Another key tactic is to overwhelm opposition voices through a massive show of rhetorical force.

James Madison, one among seven 'founding fathers' of the US Constitution, whom Arendt quotes in her essay on truth and politics, believed that finally, all governments 'rest on opinion'. Yet an individual's opinion tended to be 'timid and cautious' in its expression, and only acquired 'firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated'. Numbers could be a guarantee of strength, though not of authenticity. For Arendt, this seemed thoroughly unsatisfactory, since there was nothing that prevented a majority 'from being false witnesses'. Rather, 'the feeling of belonging to a majority may even encourage false testimony'. The 'wisdom of the crowd' was not a guarantee of factuality and like all forms of power, majoritarianism could threaten the truth (Arendt, 1968: 235–37).

In 1971, soon after the Pentagon Papers were published in *The New York Times*, exposing a long

trail of official deception on the US war in Vietnam, Arendt saw reason for fresh hope. She wrote about how "vulnerable" the whole texture of 'facts' is, in which people live their daily lives: 'it is always in danger of being perforated by single lies or torn to shreds by the organized lying of groups, nations, or classes, or denied and distorted, often carefully covered up by reams of falsehoods or simply allowed to fall into oblivion.' The Pentagon Papers revelations were heartening in this context, because it showed how even the most elaborately woven web of falsehood, spun using powerful accessories such as computers, is 'defeated by reality'. A fact could be removed from the world if a sufficient number of people 'believe in its non-existence'. But the 'immensity of factuality' meant that this would require a process of 'radical destruction', an experiment that totalitarian regimes had undertaken with frightening consequences, though without the intended result of 'lasting deception'. The lessons from the Pentagon Papers, and the 'extraordinarily strong' opposition that had emerged to the US war in Vietnam, was that a government intent on intimidation to secure its ends was unlikely to succeed (Arendt, 1971).

A readily identifiable aspect in which things have changed since, is the sheer ubiquity of the computer, which Arendt believed, even with all its prowess, could not quite conceal factuality. Earlier modes of harvesting attention and securing assent for any perception of reality have been transformed in this intensely networked milieu. In a 2018 study on the 'politicisation of fake news', a group of researchers employed network analysis methods to identify how social media influences the 'marketplace of ideas'. Far from the liberal ideal, social media does not create conditions for the free exchange and interplay in which the best ideas rise to public attention while others sink. Rather, it fosters a state of 'homophily',

or a tendency for users to cluster together in groups that share 'similar traits and ideologies'. Definitions of fake news themselves tend to be polarised, and the term is used invariably by members of rival groups to 'disparage opposition and condemn real information disseminated by the opposition party members' (Brummette et al., 2019).

Another study from 2018 has shown that a negative social media chorus diminishes article credibility through the 'bandwagon effect', the tendency to fall in line when a large number of peers belittle the worth of a news report or comment. There is a likelihood similarly, of an issue fading out of news priorities when it is seen to attract little positive attention. The traditional functions of news media, the study finds, 'may be hindered by audience incivility' (Waddell, 2017).

Anecdotal evidence is available of how some of these factors played out in the context of India's 2019 election. On 15 February 2019, just prior to elections being notified, N. Ram, then chairman of The Hindu Group of news publications, tweeted out the link to an article on his Twitter(X) timeline.[22] Written by the military historian and strategic affairs commentator Srinath Raghavan, the article argued that the Comptroller and Auditor-General of India (CAG) was on infirm ground when it certified a 2015 deal for the acquisition of Rafale fighter jets from France as the most advantageous option the Indian Air Force (IAF) had. This followed a number of articles published in *The Hindu*, which spoke of a purchase decision that was seriously compromised by arbitrariness and questionable procedure. Beginning mid-January, *The Hindu* reported in a series of front page stories that the Rafale deal caused a 41 per cent spike in the unit price of each aircraft in relation to an earlier agreement (18 January, 2019); that Defence Ministry officials dealing with the acquisitions process had

protested against the intrusive attentions of the Prime Minister's Office (8 February, 2019); and that customary sovereign guarantees and integrity clauses had been waived as the Modi regime hustled the deal through (11 February, 2019).

Ram's tweet was met with outright abuse. The more civil responses chose a tone of abundant scepticism, while advising Ram, among other things, to change his name to reflect his supposedly covert religious identity.[23] Several among the responses questioned the propriety of pursuing a story ostensibly banished from public attention the previous day, when a suicide bombing in Pulwama district in the Kashmir valley had killed over 40 personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF).

Over the next few days the news cycle was dominated by an escalating spiral of unreason, for vengeance against the neighbouring state of Pakistan, always a convenient scapegoat for security failures on the Indian side of an uneasy line of separation, and the boycott of all Indian citizens of Kashmiri extraction. Public figures, journalists and social media users who argued that this feverish over-reaction aligned perfectly with terrorist objectives faced a tidal wave of abuse.[24]

An immediate consequence of the explosion on TV channels and social media was the silencing of disclosures on the Rafale deal that had been coming at a most inconvenient time for the Modi regime. Around midday on 26 February 2019, India's Foreign Secretary, head of its diplomatic service, announced that IAF fighter jets had struck alleged terrorist training camps deep within Pakistani territory, causing extensive damage to men and material intended for deployment against Indian targets. That evening, Modi went to a campaign rally in a district of Rajasthan, vowing in the course of a half-hour long speech, that he would never allow the nation to 'bow

down'.[25] In later speeches, he took up the refrain of a 'New India' that under his leadership would repay every injury and indignity 'with interest'.[26]

The Indian media erupted in perfervid celebrations but was perhaps caught unprepared for the retaliatory action that Pakistan mounted within a day. Despite contrary claims from both sides and a pronounced disinclination on the part of the media to ascertain facts, a summation of gains and losses from the entire series of exchanges just did not seem to favour India. On the day of Pakistan's retaliatory strike, India lost one fighter aircraft and a combat pilot was taken captive as he bailed out. India claimed to have shot down an intruding Pakistani jet, but struggled to provide convincing evidence. One helicopter of the Indian Air Force went down the same day with six military personnel and one civilian killed.[27]

Writing in the *Washington Post*, two Indian scholars concluded that coverage of the entire cycle of events had been 'contradictory, biased, incendiary and uncorroborated'. All of the information recorded by the news organisations was attributed to anonymous sources, variously described as 'forensic experts', 'police officers' and 'intelligence officers'. This played right into the Modi government's own strategy of shunning any kind of open interaction with the media or the public: 'Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not address the nation directly. The two press briefings by the foreign secretary and Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson entertained no questions. But the number of anonymous sources willing to disclose classified and conflicting information to reporters who cited them without corroboration points to a serious crisis in how information is reported to the public (Vijayan and Drennan, 2019).

The pattern of online trolling, including physical threats against journalists seen to be critical of the

government's approaches on security and other policy issues, surged in a particularly nasty form after the Pulwama terror attack. On 18 February, veteran TV anchor Barkha Dutt posted a tweet that read: 'Deluged with what's app [sic] messages since yesterday that are abusive and threatening. Seems an organised hate campaign against some of us. One sender confirms my mobile number being circulated in groups. @DelhiPolice bringing this to your attention'. Three days later Dutt filed a criminal complaint against partly identified persons who had been persistently trolling and harassing her. Dutt alleged that her number had 'been shared on all social media platforms' following which she had been the recipient of grossly morphed pictures and 'sexually abusive text messages'.[28]

Prime time fury in India after the Pulwama attack may well have silenced critical voices and narrowed the news gates, which determine the range and variety of reporting that can gain space in the news universe. On being called out for milking political capital out of the retaliatory military action, despite its ambiguous results, Prime Minister Modi responded with harsh condemnation. The front page of the *Times of India,* India's largest circulated English daily in its edition of 4 March, had Modi charging the opposition with 'breaking the morale' of India's soldiers. His cabinet colleague Arun Jaitley was reported to have written in a blog that the opposition statements 'hurt India's national interest', gave 'smiles to Pakistan' and brought 'discredit' to India's righteous fight against terrorism.

Halfway through India's general election cycle in 2019, the publisher of an Indian news portal wrote about 'fake news' as an epidemic raging across the country. The Election Commission of India, a nominally autonomous body, had thought of regulatory responses and technological fixes, but

with little success. The answer, the writer suggested, might lie in changing tack: treating the fake news epidemic as a public health problem, which called for both a technical response and a mass education programme (Patil, 2019).

The prospect of a mass education programme to tackle fake news flounders on the old question: who will educate the educators? A public out-reach programme has to be administered by an agency that enjoys trust and moral authority. This becomes something of conundrum when the partisan interest of an elected government in sustaining a fake news ecosystem is factored in. Fake news, it could be said, is little else than the commercial counterpart of old governmental techniques of propaganda.

The epidemic of fake news could be understood in terms of a determined exercise in ensuring strength in numbers, to capture the entire width of the 'news gate'. Social media has led to journalists seeing themselves as disseminators rather than interpreters (Burggraaff and Trilling, 2020). And when the likelihood of earning audience clicks exerts a powerful influence on gatekeeping, traditional media may be drawn towards shedding older rules and emulating cyber-world trends.

Governmental agencies, given the partisan stakes involved, are unlikely to participate in good faith efforts to check the fake news epidemic. A more realistic strategy may involve a partnership between the older media and public authorities with a measure of independence and autonomy, such as the Election Commission of India and the higher judiciary. 'Algorithmic amplification' is how social media operates. It is a game played on the terrain of the attention economy and involves securing the largest number of clicks on any piece of news. The contest has shifted in favour of fake news over the last decade or so, but the numbers game could be

driven in favour of a reasonable appreciation of truth by sufficient effort from the other side.

Is there a case study in recent times of the fake being driven out of the public sphere by the real? Perhaps there are many which remain to be recorded, but one that emerges from the social terrain of Kerala state may be worth recounting, since it involved a coalition between fact-checking websites, civil society, and the political leadership. Towards the end of October 2021, social media in Kerala specifically and more broadly went viral with news about a restaurateur in the city of Kochi being roughed up because she made 'non-*halal*' food her specialty. Around the same time, a video clip of a Muslim cleric seeming to spit on a plate of food made for a religious feast was widely shared over WhatsApp.[29]

Through the month of November, *halal*, a dietary code practised by orthodox Muslims, not very different from the Jewish observance of *kosher*, began trending all over India and particularly in Kerala.

The claims made on behalf of the 'non-*halal*' restaurateur who had actually assaulted a neighbouring establishment over a territorial claim, were exposed as fake soon afterwards by a fact-checking website accredited with the Poynter institute.[30] Likewise, the spitting on food prior to a festive meal was shown to be little else than a quaint ritual practised by some Muslim sects, involving the consecration of food by the recitation of a prayer and the breath of a cleric.[31]

Towards November-end, the mainstream media began to notice that an unravelling of civil concord was a possible consequence—in the real world—of these cyberworld trends. Calls for the boycott of establishments owned by people of the Muslim faith resonated across social media. The leader of the BJP, which is for all its power at the national level a marginal presence in Kerala, spoke of *halal* as a

dietary practice implanted by 'terrorist forces' in the culture of the state.[32]

The pushback soon began. Commentators with recognised public profiles decried the social media campaign to stigmatise the dietary practices of an entire faith (Jacob, 2021). And the Kerala chief minister called out the BJP and its wider constellation of political allies for fomenting the hysteria.

Concurrently, activists of the left-wing party that governs Kerala began organising 'food festivals' at prominent street intersections, declaring that dietary choice was integral to citizen rights, calling out the sectarian political motivation in the campaign to stigmatise the *halal* practice. The next month, the *halal* trend abruptly melted away.

It will take deep forensic skills in the uncharted universe of the social media to trace the origins of these trends about the *halal* dietary code. Certain broad generalisations though, could be drawn from the rapid deflation of this effort at creating public revulsion at the dietary practice:

- The cyberworld has a snowballing momentum that feeds on political polarisation.
- Because of mutual distrust between the two sides, both succeed in portraying the other as 'fake news'.
- In this contest for attention, force of numbers is key.
- If key actors in civil society and political leaders speak up from platforms that ensure they are heard, the cyberworld campaign could well be deflated.

Mohammad Zubair joined a long list of journalists imprisoned for the crime of truth-telling in late in June 2022. The case against him, always reeking of falsehood, was embellished with multiple other

concoctions over the three weeks that followed. Yet the effort flagged soon afterwards, and he has since been a free man. An effort to silence his social media participation as part of his bail conditions failed, since the Supreme Court held that as an essential part of his identity as a citizen.[33] Zubair's experience perhaps underlines the value of optimism, particularly of listening once again to Hannah Arendt, and her conviction that the lie invariably will be 'defeated by reality', that 'factuality' is too immense a canvas to be obscured by the artifices of technology (Arendt, 1971).

Notes

1. The promotional poster for the film can be viewed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Kerala_Story (accessed 9 July 2025).
2. For details on how the theory originated and spread wide, see Jain et al. (2024).
3. See, *Hindustan Times*, May 5, 2023: PM Narendra Modi invokes 'The Kerala Story', says 'anti-India' plot exposed in film, extracted July 9, 2025 at https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/bengaluru-news/pm-narendra-modi-invokes-the-kerala-story-says-anti-india-plot-exposed-in-film-101683277711799.html.
4. See *India Today*, 'The Kerala Story producer agrees to remove "32,000 women converted" from teaser', May 5, 2023, extracted July 9, 2025 at: https://www.indiatoday.in/law/high-courts/story/kerala-story-row-producer-agrees-remove-teaser-conversion-isis-32000-women-2368914-2023-05-05.
5. See *India Today*, 'Arbitrary number but backed by facts: The Kerala Story director on "32,000 women missing" claim', May 2, 2023, extracted July 9, 2025 at: https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/the-kerala-story-director-sudipto-sen-women-missing-figure-row-2367723-2023-05-02.
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32000-kerala-women-in-isis-misquotes-flawed-math-imaginary-figures-behind-filmmakers-claim/.
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19. The full speech can be viewed on the Youtube channel of India's upper house of parliament, extracted July 9, 2025 at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XIqnmtowns. The specific quotes mentioned above can be found at minutes 38:50, 40:44 and 46:08.
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22. The first of the responses visible (as of July 9, 2025) said as follows: '@nramind Read first the sentiments of all Indians who are asking you to change your name and then take a hike! Do that first'.
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26. The defence analyst Ajai Shukla offered the first reporting on the loss of an Indian helicopter to friendly fire in a regular column he writes for the *Business Standard*. His findings were later reproduced on his blog, Broadsword. See: 'IAF findings that India shot down own helicopter put on hold until after elections (Updated with IAF rebuttal and my response)', April 27, 2019; extracted July 9, 2025 at: https://www.ajaishukla.com/2019/04/damning-iaf-findings-on-india-shooting.html?m=1. A year after the events, Shukla provided an overall assessment of the strategic consequences of the cross-border exchanges of February 2019, again on his blog. See 'Balakot, a year on: What has changed for India after the airstrike?', February 26, 2020, extracted July 9, 2025 at: https://www.ajaishukla.com/2020/02/balakot-year-on-what-has-changed-for.html.
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5. Media Access Restricted

POORNIMA JOSHI

Instead of promoting healthy criticism, is the government restricting journalists from accessing crucial information about the functioning of the Indian democracy?

A vast majority of working journalists believe that their sources of news about the functioning of the government and of various institutions of Indian democracy are drying up. Many tend to think that this is due to the deliberate media policy of the government. This paper examines whether that is really the case.

There seem to be some clear and distinct strands to the present government's strategy towards different categories of news media personnel. And media owners seem well aware of them.

There seems to be an active promotion of those media platforms and journalists who provide positive publicity for government policies. Media owners also tend to prefer such journalists with 'preferential access' to the government for the top jobs and offer them the best salaries.

Then there are those who have not yet become part of this system of preferential access. These are journalists who are either outright critics of the government or middle-of-the-road journalists who have neither joined the preferential access system nor can they be slotted with the activists/critics.

The functioning of journalists who are seen as outright critics seems to be getting hobbled by the central investigating agencies and the local police starting investigations against them, lodging of FIRs, coercing them out of their jobs, and shutting down platforms which increasingly include the digital space, alternative websites, YouTube channels, etc. These things cannot happen on their own and at a heightened level.

Defamation cases have become routine but police searches/raids are also becoming increasingly common, as was seen in the case of the news portal *Newsclick* in February 2021. The Enforcement Directorate conducted searches for over five days at the office premises and residence of the portal's Editor-in-Chief Prabir Purkayastha and author Githa Hariharan, who is a stakeholder in the company that runs the portal. These raids were carried out on alleged charges of money laundering.[1]

On 31 October 2022, the Delhi police conducted searches at the homes of the editors of the news portal *The Wire,* Siddharth Vardarajan, M. K. Venu and Sidharth Bhatia, and deputy editor Jahnavi Sen after an FIR was registered by the BJP IT Cell Chief Amit Malviya against the publication for 'defaming' him.[2] According to an *Article 14* database, over 13,000 Indians have been booked in about 800 sedition cases since 2010. At least 21 of these cases involve journalists, 40 of them named. In the last year alone, 20 journalists have been slapped with sedition charges.[3] Sedition charges can be filed only by the state.

Journalist Sashi Kumar has filed an intervention application in a writ petition before the Supreme Court challenging the constitutional validity of the sedition law, i.e., Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code, 1860. In the application, the applicant profiled all 21 cases of journalists who are being tried under the sedition law.[4]

For the unaligned journalists, they have been made less effective by starving them of the oxygen for their craft—primary information needed for filing news reports, editorials, commentary, etc. It would seem that the practice of one-way communication by the state is sought to be normalised, while cross-checking and verifying are not encouraged. This practice facilitates only that communication which originates from official sources and not from others.

In other words, only information that the government *wants* to make public is made available and not any other information that may be relevant for assessing whether the government is functioning in public interest and is accountable or not. There is plenty of information available in the form of press handouts and visual bites disbursed through social media, but that does not serve the purpose of authentic journalism which is about public interest and unearthing what governments/people in power may be trying to hide.

We are chiefly concerned here with the category that includes the vast majority of journalists with mainstream newspapers and television channels who are adversely impacted by the manner in which access to information is being restricted by regulating entry into government offices and parliament. This prevents journalists from accessing and authenticating information that they believe to be in public interest but which might be construed as anti-government.

PANDEMIC CENSOR ON PARLIAMENT ACCESS

All pandemic-related restrictions have been lifted except those imposed on journalists who cover parliament. Access to parliament is important because roughly for four months in a year—during the Budget, Monsoon and Winter sessions—Parliament House is

the central hub of all information concerning executive and legislative business.

The government as well as the opposition parties function from parliament, all routine press conferences are conducted in Parliament House, and the scrutiny and cross-verification of information, which happens through informal interactions with ministers, MPs and members of the opposition parties, takes place in these precincts. MPs who are members of various departmental standing committees have information that may not make it to the final committee reports but is invaluable as input to a newspaper story. Curtailing access to parliament is, therefore, a significant restriction for news reporting.

Till 23 March 2020, when Parliamentary Affairs Minister Prahlad Joshi informed journalists that the second part of the budget session had been curtailed 'after having consensus across party lines keeping in view the situation arising out of the spread of COVID-19 across the world including in India',[5] access had not been barred but the practice of ministers and MPs, particularly those of the ruling party, engaging with the media was slowly winding down.

This had started from the year before, from the summer of 2019, when the BJP won its second term in office and its chief media strategist and communicator, the then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, passed away. Jaitley had kept up the tradition of engagement, formal and informal, with the news media and he would routinely be seen, especially during parliament sessions, sitting in either Central Hall or his own chambers with journalists. Because he had retained this institutional sub-culture in the BJP, it normalised such interactions for other leaders. But after his passing, a more circumspect culture started emerging and COVID-19 clearly hastened the process of institutionalisation of this culture within the ruling party and the government.

The practice of issuing Parliament Central Hall passes, which enabled journalists to interact with MPs and ministers—crucial to eliciting information and confirming news—has been suspended by the Lok Sabha secretariat. The Rajya Sabha secretariat, which is a separate entity, is still issuing passes to the Central Hall because of the more democratic manner in which former Rajya Sabha Chairman M. Venkaiah Naidu operated.

Central Hall passes are issued to senior journalists and regular correspondents who are deployed in both Houses of Parliament in two different shifts for holistic coverage. After the first strict lockdown announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 24 March 2020, the monsoon session of parliament, that usually commences in the middle of July, was delayed. The government decided to convene a curtailed monsoon session towards the end of August 2020 and restricted entry for media persons. A statement issued by the Lok Sabha Secretariat on 28 August 2020, mentioned:

> There is a proposal to limit the number of media persons to be allowed entry in parliament. The proposal is to keep this number at 100 and make it mandatory for all to get an RTPCR test done before entry.[6]

There were naturally no objections to such restrictions given the pandemic, but this practice continued throughout the year even though lockdowns had eased by the winter. On 19 January 2021, 10 days before the next session of parliament was scheduled to begin on 29 January, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla held a press conference. Journalists, especially the then President of the Press Club of India Umakant Lakhera, raised the issue of continuing curbs on the media. Lakhera told this writer,

> I asked the Speaker why, when curbs were being lifted even on public meetings, the media was still being prevented from covering parliament. An arbitrary lottery system has been devised through which correspondents are randomly picked and given passes. The newspaper system by which correspondents are assigned morning and afternoon shifts to cover parliament is not operational anymore because we simply do not get access.

Public gatherings had started and campaigning for the upcoming West Bengal elections had begun where all prominent political leaders were attending public meetings. In fact, in February 2021 the BJP held a meeting of its national executive and declared that India had 'defeated COVID-19'.[7] However, journalists were, and continue to be, denied free access to parliament. On 2 December 2021, the Editors Guild of India (EGI), Press Association, Indian Women's Press Corps (IWPC), Press Club of India (PCI), Working News Cameramen's Association (WNCA) and various other organisations of journalists participated in a protest against curbs on media entry in parliament.

Senior journalist Rajdeep Sardesai, addressing the protest meet on the premises of the PCI, said:

> This [restriction on the entry of media persons into parliament] was started in the name of COVID in 2020 but now it has gone too far. I think if it is not protested now, it will become a tradition. Media is going to be kept out in the name of COVID.[8]

Sardesai said that a lottery system being followed at present to issue passes to journalists for entry into parliament is giving 'no access' to scribes working with smaller newspapers.[9]

But the restrictions continued with virtually all representative media bodies lodging their protest with the Lok Sabha Speaker, MPs and the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs, intermittently, to no effect. Pointing to a pattern of isolating parliament and parliamentarians from media scrutiny, the Press Association, EGI, Delhi Union of Journalists, WNCA and others wrote a letter to the Lok Sabha Speaker in July 2021, saying that the 'advent of the pandemic has seen unprecedented barriers on those who can access parliament buildings and its work in committees'.[10] The journalists' organisations said only a 'handful' were being allowed access while the 'vast majority' had been kept out. In fact, such restrictions go so far as to impact the employment prospects of journalists. Their letter to the Speaker of the Lok Sabha further stated,

> Especially news organisations in various languages employ journalists on a part-time basis for the coverage of parliament. When access for parliamentary reporting and coverage is slashed, these journalists lose their jobs. Across India, journalists have been rendered unemployed in very substantial numbers on account of the pandemic (ibid.).

However, despite these protests, the restrictions on journalists continue till date with less than 150 correspondents being allowed access to parliament during the sessions. There are about 3,000 security personnel and about 4,000 clerical/secretarial staff in parliament, all of whom have continued access to parliament. Entry is restricted only for journalists.[11]

BAR ON ENTERING GOVERNMENT OFFICES

Besides growing anecdotal evidence of ministers routinely reprimanding officers for interacting with

the press, access to government offices has become more restricted. Communication over the phone is generally assumed to be accessible to monitoring and personal interactions are sought to be curtailed. Closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras that have been installed in all government offices and visitors' rooms as a security measure, also act as a deterrent since the journalist seeking access and the officer giving it can be easily identified.

Information gathering requires a specific appointment with an officer, which is the practice followed in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), defence ministry, finance ministry and now even the commerce ministry. The thumb rule earlier was that if you were an accredited correspondent with the Press Information Bureau (PIB), you could enter any government building except the PMO or the defence ministry which, it was understood, had restricted access given the profile of the departments concerned.

In the second term of the BJP-led government, Nirmala Sitharaman assumed charge as Finance Minister on 31 May 2019. The finance ministry was quarantined as usual for two months for preparation of the Union Budget. However, after the Budget was presented, the usual practice of lifting the quarantine and letting correspondents interact with officials to understand the intricacies of the Budget was discontinued. The ministry issued a statement that a procedure has been put in place to 'streamline' the entry of journalists.

According to the new procedure, journalists, even those accredited with the PIB, could enter the ministry only after prior appointment with the officers. The practice of allowing correspondents access only after a certain officer has been identified goes against the grain of news-gathering where source anonymity and protection are crucial. This practice curtails the free flow of information.

Subsequently, in February 2022, the PIB issued new guidelines for grant of accreditation to working journalists at the headquarters of the Government of India.[12] For the first time, it specifies reasons and conditions that can result from a journalist losing accreditation. As per the guidelines, accreditation can be suspended or withdrawn if a journalist

> acts in a manner which is prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement of an offence.[13]

This from the general terms of accreditation specified in the previous Central News media Accreditation Guidelines issued by the PIB, as amended on 13 September 2012, which had stated that 'accreditation shall be withdrawn as soon as the conditions on which it was given cease to exist. Accreditation is also liable to be withdrawn/suspended if it is found to have been misused'.[14]

The 2022 policy has 10 points that may result in the accreditation being suspended/withdrawn. These include:

1. Using accreditation for non-journalistic activities.
2. If a journalist has been charged with a serious cognisable offence.
3. If he/she or the news media organisation whom he/she represents is found to have furnished false/fraudulent/forged information/documents.
4. If a journalist acts in a manner which is prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations

> with foreign states, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.[15]

The earlier practice of leaving the courts to decide on each of these offences and de-linking the business of journalism, which includes accessing information, from each of these offences has been stopped.

The basic practice of journalism is to expose wrongdoings by those holding public office, big business and people in positions of power, and to interrogate the state on how it exercises powers. Whether it is the government using the sedition law frequently or using police and investigating agencies to intimidate journalists or people challenging those in power, or big corporate groups using the defamation law to silence journalists, the fact is that law is used to bring pressure to stop information flow that holds people in power accountable.

If journalists are barred from accessing information that results in each of these actions which constitute wrongful exercise of power by the state, it is a crucial *preventive* course the present-day government has adopted for information that challenges its policy/executive decisions/legislative actions. The *remedial* course, of course, includes harassment, filing of criminal cases and using investigating agencies to intimidate those who still manage access to public information that challenges and scrutinises the government.

Before the present guidelines were passed which effectively authorise the government to withdraw the accreditation of any journalist who has a defamation case against him/her, attempts were made to restrict the flow of information.

In 2018, the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B) under Smriti Irani had similarly threatened to cancel accreditation if a journalist was

found to have spread 'fake news', a term that was also used by Prime Minister Narendra Modi who said to BJP workers in 2019, 'the opposition has made "spreading fake news as their agenda"' and told BJP workers 'Make sure that you don't share fake news'. He added, 'The opposition will try to mislead you to negativity'.[16] Later in 2022, Modi said, 'A small piece of fake news can kick up a storm across the nation... We will have to educate people to think before forwarding anything, verify before believing it'.[17]

While the I&B ministry had to withdraw its guidelines about cancelling accreditation of journalists found spreading 'fake news' after protests in 2018,[18] the exercise has continued with special 'media consultants' being appointed by the I&B ministry to give advice on how newspaper quotas on the number of PIB passes should be brought down and how, in each meeting of the committee that decides on allocation of passes, media houses critical of the government should have their access and PIB accreditation restricted.

These means of restriction are being used to prevent constructive criticism of the government of the day, which is not a healthy sign for a country that takes pride in describing itself as the world's largest democracy.

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6. Prasar Bharati: A Disguised Pretender, Not a Public Service Broadcaster*

SUHAS BORKER

In May 2014, after the Narendra Modi government was sworn in, Prakash Javadekar, the new minister for information and broadcasting is on record to have promised to give Prasar Bharati (PB) full autonomy. The Minister said the days of 'government fiefdom' were over.[1] Prasar Bharati would be restructured to resemble BBC, not only in administrative terms but in terms of editorial freedom, parliamentary accountability and its internal control over manpower. But nearly 10 years later PB is on a tight leash. Forget *Mann Ki Baat* which broadcast its 111th episode on 30 June 2024.

It is ironic and a reflection of our times that the promoters of an institution attack the mother model of their creation. While PB was to be modeled on BBC, the latter was under severe attack by the Government of India for alleged omissions and commissions. It is alleged that government's retaliatory targeting with raids on BBC offices in New Delhi and Mumbai by Indian revenue officials was in the aftermath of the release of the BBC documentary *India: the Modi Question*. BBC was accused of a 'continuing colonial mindset', pushing 'a particular discredited narrative',

* This article has been updated as of 1 July 2024.

and 'propaganda and anti-India garbage, disguised as documentary'.[2]

The story does not end there. To survive in India, starting 10 April 2024, BBC had to split its Indian news operation to meet India's foreign investment rules—a move which came within a year of searches by Indian income tax officials. While the news gathering team in India for its English language digital, television and radio services has been retained and shall continue to report to editors in London, BBC has handed over the content production of its six other Indian language services—Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Tamil and Telugu—to a new, independent, Indian-owned entity called the Collective Newsroom. BBC shall hold a 26 per cent stake in the new company, a first for the broadcaster's global operations anywhere. BBC said it remains 'committed' to India with an average weekly audience of 82 million across its English and other language services.

The story goes back to the Emergency enforced by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. At this time, her minions were equating her with the nation–Indira is India and India is Indira—and All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan (DD), the only available broadcast channels to the Indian public, had been reduced to obedient lapdogs of the government. When Indira Gandhi was ousted in 1977, there was a public outcry against the trauma of the Emergency aided and abetted by the misused voices of Emergency—AIR and DD. The Janata Government set up a committee under B. G. Verghese to examine the functioning of the two media and make recommendations for granting autonomy to both. The Verghese Committee's recommendations of a public broadcasting model like BBC formed the basis of the Prasar Bharati Bill which was introduced in the Lok Sabha in 1979. However, the Bill lapsed with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha.

India had to wait another 10 years for the

introduction of a new version of the Prasar Bharati Bill by the National Front Government in 1989, when it was introduced as 'a charter of freedom to give voice to the people of India, through the broadcast medium in fulfillment of their fundamental freedom of speech and expression as enshrined in Article 19(1)a of the Constitution.'[3] It took another seven years after the Bill received the Presidential assent in 1990 to be enforced in 1997 by the United Front Government of I. K. Gujral with Jaipal Reddy as the minister for information and broadcasting.

Today, in 2024, after 27 years of being set-up, PB is not a public service broadcaster but a pretender—a pretender and an obedient mouthpiece of the government of the day. In no way is it even remotely near the BBC model.

Over the years since India's independence, every time the idea of freeing radio and TV from government control arises, albeit in fits and starts, BBC is cited. In 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru had remarked in the Constituent Assembly, by then the only authoritative pronouncement on the British model of broadcasting: 'my own view of the set-up for broadcasting is that we should approximate, as far as possible, to the British model, the BBC, that is to say, it would be better if we had a semi-autonomous corporation under the government, of course with the policy controlled by the government, otherwise not conducted as a government department.'[4] In 1964, in the first few months of her taking over as Information and Broadcasting Minister, Indira Gandhi had appointed the Chanda Committee to go into the issue of *Broadcasting and Information Media.* The Chanda Committee report presented in 1966 was critical of the state's financial and administrative restrictions imposed on AIR and noted that the independence of AIR had been compromised by 'successive Ministers (who had) usurped the policy-making functions of the directorate-general and started

interfering even in matters of programme planning and presentation'.[5] It strongly advocated 'liberation' of AIR and being turned into a 'creative medium in the Indian context'. But during the 1975 Emergency and the years leading to it, the very reverse had happened and AIR and DD had been turned into 'His Master's Voice'. BBC was expelled during the Emergency following its refusal to fall in line with the government's censorship regulations and its then Delhi Bureau chief Mark Tully was given 24 hours to leave the country. This expulsion lasted until the Emergency ended.

Over these 27 years, the PB Act has not been deliberately implemented fully. A truncated PB has been set up so that it cannot function independently of the government. Critical sections 13, 14 and 15 of the Act remain unimplemented to this day and the politico-bureaucratic nexus is fully responsible for this.

Section 13 of the Act envisaged the constitution of a 22-member parliamentary committee to supervise PB on behalf of parliament. Its members are to be from both houses of parliament, through proportional representation. Jawhar Sircar, a former CEO of PB, put it in a nutshell: 'No government has set up this committee as it does not want to give up powers and allow Prasar Bharati an opportunity to explain, a bit like the BBC, its problems and projects directly to parliament, thus bypassing the ministry. This militates against the prevailing narrative as every minister is coached by babus to insist that he alone is responsible to parliament. Thus, he can summon officials of Prasar Bharati, Doordarshan and AIR and to question every act of theirs, until they succumb.'[6]

Sections 14 and 15 of the Act require the setting up of a Broadcasting Council to 'receive and consider complaints' and ensure political impartiality. The Broadcasting Council is to consist of 15 members: a president,10 members from amongst persons of eminence in public life, and four members of

parliament, two from the Lok Sabha to be nominated by the Speaker and two from the Rajya Sabha to be nominated by the Chairman. This has never been done.

The PB Board is to be 'a professionally managed body' to effectively guide the organization, but has been filled by pliable bureaucrats and time servers. There has been no transfer of ownership and management of assets and HR to make PB financially and administratively autonomous of the government.

Under section 10 of the Act, PB is to set up its own recruitment board to ensure complete autonomy of the selection process and non-interference in appointments by the government. Nothing was done until July 2020, when the present government decided to constitute PB's recruitment board. But a person with known direct links with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was appointed as chairman, compromising its autonomy. He is Jagadish Upasane, who heads Bharat Prakashan, which publishes *Panchajanya* and *Organiser*, which are regarded as mouthpieces of the RSS.

In January 2014, the Sam Pitroda-led expert committee on Prasar Bharati had recommended a comprehensive manpower audit of DD and AIR. No action was taken on this until November 2018, when the PB Board sought the assistance of Ernst and Young India for the audit project. The results came out in February 2021.Interestingly, the findings showed that the audit used the BBC benchmark for comparison. PB had nearly half of the 25,000 workforce employed in the engineering division, whereas the corresponding figure for BBC was a little over 10 per cent. PB's content team had less than 20 per cent of the workforce, while BBC's content team accounted for 70 per cent. PB's manpower costs accounted for over 60 per cent of its expenses, and the BBC's just around 30 per cent.

Most critically, under Chapter 3 of the PB Act the board was to have its own fund for its functions. Part of

this fund was to come from the property and assets that the central government would transfer to the board. But even after 27 years no such transfers have taken place. Lack of its own funds has emasculated the board, which is at the mercy of the government for funds to perform even elementary functions.

Prasar Bharati has been reduced to a mouthpiece of the ruling dispensation. It comes nowhere close to the definition of public service broadcasting (PSB) by UNESCO and World Radio and Television Council (2001): 'Neither commercial nor State-controlled, public broadcasting's only raison d'etre is public service. It is the public's broadcasting organization; it speaks to everyone as a citizen. Public broadcasters encourage access to and participation in public life. They develop knowledge, broaden horizons and enable people to better understand themselves by better understanding the world and others.'[7]

In fact, in 2000, the government declared 12 November as Public Service Broadcasting Day (three years after PB had come into force) to commemorate Mahatma Gandhi's first and only broadcast on All India Radio on 12 November 1947, as conceptualised by the author of this article. Gandhiji held no public office, yet he addressed more than two lakh refugees gathered at Kurukshetra over radio from Broadcasting House, New Delhi, and brought succor and reassurance to their lives. This truly was an act of public service broadcasting. But over the years this day has been reduced to mere tokenism, so very symptomatic of the mindset of the powers that be. Even that tokenism was reduced to a farce in 2022, when a Christian hymn in English sung by school students, was sought to be dropped from the special national broadcast to mark Public Service Broadcasting Day.[8]

There are public service broadcasters across many countries with different broadcasting obligations, governance structures and funding arrangements.

BBC (Britain), SABC (South Africa) and NHK (Japan) depend on licence fees; ABC (Australia) is funded by government grants; and CBC (Canada) is funded primarily by annual appropriations from Parliament. But there is a general recognition that financial autonomy is critical to protect the broadcaster from arbitrary government control.

In India, the values and principles of PSB have to be brought to the fore. Universality, diversity, inclusiveness, independence and distinctiveness are essential goals for public service broadcasting. PSB has to be accessible to every citizen throughout the country and offer quality content. PSB has to rise high above the private TV channels which goad the viewer through gloss, glamour and razzmatazz to 'splurge', and the PLU (people like us) syndrome plays out in studio after studio of private TV channels, with anchors in replay after replay mode, strutting around offering instant solutions and pocket remedies to national crises from farmer suicides to terror attacks. These private channels also repeatedly put out fake narratives in support of the powers that be to divert viewer attention from pressing issues.

The 'social contract' in PSB highlights its role in democracy, primarily its obligations to inform, educate and entertain the public, scrutinize the government, and speak truth to power. A contract means the exchange of rights and obligations. In this exchange, PSB has the right to free expression and broadcast, and it is obliged to truth, accuracy and impartiality, keeping its independence from commercial pressures and political influences, and providing citizens with information they need to perform their role as enlightened citizens. In this contract, reciprocity is central, primarily based on the relationship between the public service broadcasters and their audiences. Here comes into play the increasingly proactive audience participation which can transform a radio or television

platform into a live democratic process of public accountability powered by the Right to Information Act and social audit. Yet, over the past nine years, the idea that the prime minister can be questioned by journalists in a live press conference on national television has been reduced to a forgotten memory.

What needs to be done? This is an old 'to do list' but there is no political will to implement it.

- The constitution of the Parliamentary Committee to ensure the PB Act is followed in word and spirit.
- Reorganisation of the PB Board into a professionally managed body.
- In order to safeguard complete administrative and financial autonomy of PB, the government has to completely transfer ownership and management of assets and HR.
- Setting up of the Regulatory Body to ensure public accountability of PB with respect to all content broadcast on DD and AIR.
- A funding mechanism for PB without government strings.
- Officers of the Indian Information Service (IIS) have an inherent conflict of interest and compromise the autonomy of PB, and have to be divested from playing any role in it.

The Prasar Bharati Act, 1990 has to be suitably amended to tide over the pitfalls identified in the past 27 years of it being put to work. But for this a consensus has to emerge, pushing the old political syndrome from playing out: when out of power critique it all the time; when in power forget it.

It must begin from where it all began. The Chanda Committee had concluded in 1966: 'A psychological transformation is necessary'[9] in the government's approach to broadcasting. The government mindset

has to undergo a paradigm change now. After the 2029 General Elections and convening of the new Lok Sabha and formation of the new government, a fresh start has to be made to revamp PB from being a hand maiden of the government to becoming a credible public service broadcaster in India.

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7. Media and Kashmir

ANURADHA BHASIN

In June 1983, Delhi-based and Kashmir media reported massive rigging by National Conference (NC) and violence during the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) assembly polls.[1] Rare exceptions like the Editors Guild of India, which accused the journalists of erring on the side of judgement while reporting the elections, were forcefully challenged by journalists in and outside J&K.[2] The Guild report, interestingly, was much in line with Farooq Abdullah's tirade against journalists where he threw newspapers into the dustbin and announced boycotting the press.[3] Media both in and outside Kashmir also gave wider coverage to violence, massive arrests and rigging in the 1987 elections (Bhadwar, 1987; Bose, 2003: 48, 49). In August 1989, when the Farooq Abdullah-led coalition government tabled the controversial censorship bill that gave government sweeping powers to vet news and editorial content of publications, local journalists strongly opposed it and enjoyed the support of national level journalist bodies.[4]

The same year, as Kashmir embarked on a new journey with armed and trained gunmen returning from across the Line of Control to turn Kashmir's landscape into one of arson, shoot-outs and blasts, the Indian state responded with excessive militarisation and proactive counter insurgency operations. What changed was not just the fabric

of Kashmir but also the way the media looked at Kashmir, churning out competing narratives that could not be reconciled.

Within a few months, the national and regional media stood on two sides of the fence and reportage from and on Kashmir offered fragmented and tunnelled perspectives—the inside view and the outside view. As chaos and violence became the order of the day in the days and months following Rubaiya Sayeed's kidnapping and the release of five JKLF militants in exchange for her being freed, the national press by and large became obsessed with the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits and acts of arson and atrocities by militants as well as the Islamic moorings of the street protests. On the other side, local journalists focussed more on human rights violations by security agencies, which were often minimised or not reported by the national media. Both offered simple binaries of oppression and victimhood with interchangeable protagonists, barring some journalists who brought out more nuanced images of the situation of the times.

It is important to factor in the extraordinarily challenging conditions faced by local journalists and the fact that lives in a conflict situation are so deeply entrenched in suffering and trauma that they have a bearing on almost every aspect of life. These hazards were far subtler for the out of station journalists who would camp for a few days in Srinagar and leave with their stories.

The local journalists were not so privileged. By March 1990, many Kashmir-based journalists representing national media had shifted to Jammu, some forcibly lifted (Hussain, 2019). Those who stayed back were mostly cocooned in securitised zones like MLA Hostel and Circuit House where information was gathered mostly through official handouts. Those out of the security zones were handicapped by lack of access to officials, who often

treated them with suspicion. And on the other side were the guns of the militants who dictated their terms at gunpoint. The security agencies too breathed down the necks of journalists. Curfew restrictions, arrests, kidnappings, killings and frequent cases of thrashing of journalists made it impossible for them to report fairly and reportage was reduced to table stories and producing what came to be known as a 'daily score card' of acts of arson and casualties.

The killings of Kashmiri Pandits were reported as part of the larger story of a daily ritual of violence with sketchy details of those targetted—Muslims, Kashmiris, other minorities, non-locals—with barely a mention of their political and official affiliations, if any, based on official and non-official sources, with little or no investigation. The minority killings did not figure as a major episode. They were seen and viewed as a fragment of the larger Kashmir story. Kashmir's media has also often been accused of not reporting enough on the Kashmiri Pandit exodus, triggered by the spate in minority killings and the outpouring of street protests burgeoning with Islamist motifs, if not sentiment, as an episode. However, to conclude that the local media was being selective would be a gross over-simplification which is not informed by the more complex and complicated reality of the times. Firstly, the exodus was not an episode. It started as an unnoticeable trickle in the winter of 1989–90 before chaos actually broke out on the streets adding to the vulnerability of the minorities. The flight of the Pandits, which happened in tranches, almost on a daily basis, hastened after 19 January 1990— a day that coincided with imposition of Governor's rule in J&K and Jagmohan taking over the reins of power. Daily newspapers based in Srinagar and Jammu reported almost on a regular basis the flight of Pandits to Jammu, often in busloads, where they were being registered, the rush picking up steam

between February and March 1989 when migrant camps began to sprout in Jammu.[5] When militancy started, many local newspapers would compliantly carry verbatim statements of the militant groups, virtually like advertisements, either swayed by local aspirations or out of fear. In January 1990, some Urdu newspapers carried a statement by Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, which 'demanded that all the "non-Muslims" pack up and leave the Valley'. The group later denied the wording, claiming that it had been an error and the word should have read as 'non-Kashmiris and not non-Muslims' (Hardy, 2009: 51). But the damage had been done. The local language papers by unquestioningly publishing it had helped to amplify the xenophobic call and hastened the migration of Kashmiri Pandits who had already begun leaving out of fear.

While the Kashmiri Pandit exodus began to occupy centre stage in coverage on Kashmir in national publications, at the same time what was relegated to the background was the rest of the landscape—the mushrooming growth of militant groups, competing with each other for space with contradictory or non-conciliatory statements, of killings of majority Muslims by militants and their victimisation by security forces in raids and crackdowns that had become the order of the day. Massive and large-scale arrests and allegations of excesses poured in from across the Valley but these were either reduced to sketchy stories or completely ignored. The local media, battling the odds of curfew, restrictions and an oppressive climate, was as silent about the human rights violations from both sides as it was about the Kashmiri Pandit exodus. Two of the most quoted examples of alleged excesses by Indian security forces in recent decades—the Gawkadal massacre of 20 January 1990 in which 50 people were reported to have been killed, and the Kunan

Poshpora alleged mass rapes of February 1991—were merely sketchy reports with little detail of locations. For instance, the *Kashmir Times* reported on its front page on 21 January 1990 about imposition of curfew amidst a hartal call, couple of blasts, firing, protests in several localities against random raids and searches by security forces and alleged excesses. The brief reports mention firing near the High Court complex and the Civil Secretariat by the paramilitary forces in which two people were injured. It also reports that people on the Amira Kadal bridge were ordered to raise their hands while crossing, women were physically searched, and dozens were injured in action by security forces. It also reported late evening mass dharnas on 19 January 1990 in defiance of curfew restrictions and in protest against alleged excesses and large-scale arrests. One report mentioned massive searches in Zaindar Mohalla, Chota Bazar, Tanki Pora, Kani Kadal and Guru Bazar in which 300 people, including 28 militants, were arrested. The same report quotes local residents as saying that 400 youth from the minority community were forcibly taken somewhere in trucks and buses parked near Habakadal. A report mentions that 'trouble started from Chattabal after raids by Police and announcements from loudspeakers in the mosques, calling people to join demonstrations and dharnas....Police opened fire...2 people were killed and 7 injured in Safakadal'. Some more reports of arson and casualties in various localities were also published. In its 22 January 1990 edition, a *Kashmir Times* report mentions street violence and action by security forces in various places in which 35 people were killed, though officials only confirmed 11 dead. This description is the closest to what came to be known as the Gawkadal massacre in subsequent years.[6] Senior journalists who reported from the Valley recall the unique challenges of reporting

with massive restrictions on movements, curfew, and lack of access to government functionaries or other sources that debilitated reporting, apart from the fear factor.

The going was particularly tough for the local newspapers that faced frequent bans from all sides and telecommunication hazards amid a deepening conflict. Reporting was restricted to sketchy details of the daily situation and statements of various groups and officials, which newspapers were often compelled to publish unedited under duress from one side, and, in turn, inviting the wrath of the other. The editorial and opinion pages went missing for almost two years as Kashmir turned into a landscape of chaos with protests, arson, violence, bloodshed, crackdowns, arrests and alleged human rights abuse becoming daily fare. Sanaullah Bhat, Editor of *Aftab,* a leading Urdu newspaper, almost entirely shifted his home to his office, turned it into a security prison and rarely moved out for a couple of years. Radio Kashmir and Doordarshan staffers were shifted to Jammu and Delhi from where they churned out daily bulletins that projected normalcy.

Journalists negotiated these challenges and many steadfastly stayed their course, though cautiously. By the mid-1990s, things began to ease in some ways but the media was faced by new risks including threats from surrendered ultras, locally called *Ikhwanis*,[7] who had been re-armed by the security agencies to wage war against insurgents. Unlike the men in uniform who could be held accountable, the Ikhwanis operated like shadows and spread a reign of terror both among the civilians and the mediapersons. Ikhwanis were accused of kidnappings and killings of several journalists and activists, including kidnapping and grievously injuring senior journalist Zafar Meraj and killing lawyer-human rights activist Jalil Andrabi. In July

1995, the Ikhwanis kidnapped 21 Srinagar-based journalists, a day after the then Director General of Police, M. N. Sabharwal, had ordered a probe into how Ikhwanis were using police vehicles and threatening journalists (Navlakha et al., 1996: 1927–31).

But the daily conflict by then was all too familiar and the journalists became more skilled in walking the tightrope. Reporting began to move beyond the daily situation bulletin and statements to some investigative stories and included political activity as mainstream and over ground separatist politics began to pick up. Senior journalists recall with a shudder the unsolicited and intimidating visits by uniformed personnel or gun-toting militants to the newsrooms, but also reveal stories of how they learnt to negotiate the challenges through diplomatic engagement with both sides to carry on their daily work.[8]

But the real turn came with the peace process between India and Pakistan and hopes of dialogue on Kashmir for its resolution. The restrictions and the repressive atmosphere that the Kashmir Valley had become accustomed to, began to ease slightly, paving the way for a fresh crop of journalists and a mushrooming of newspapers, both Urdu and English. A resultant impact was not just quantitative but also qualitative reportage and comment articles. News was no more confined to daily rigours of militancy, counter insurgency operations, statistics of casualties and human rights abuse. Education, health, development, gender, culture and tourism were not only inserted into the news pages but often found prominent place on them. Reporters were crossing the proverbial Rubicon by experimenting with not just a range of issues but also bringing fresh insights into the conflict, and by transcending from sketchy reports to well researched ones.

This phase was yet in its infancy when the peace process abruptly snapped midway, coinciding with the

rising street unrest by 2008. By 2010, while militancy had significantly reduced, the state began tighter and more sophisticated control of the media, particularly the regional newspapers, by squeezing their financial revenue, which was heavily dependent on government advertisements and support. Non-compliant editors and owners were punished for critical stories by stopping their advertisements and compelling them to toe the line and scale down or shut down operations. As Kashmir's local publications began to feel the heat, the flowering of talent that had begun in the previous decade was assuming a new level of professionalism. *Kashmir Times* was one of the newspapers that was worst hit. Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP) advertisements, which was the main source of its revenue, was discontinued from 2010 to both its Jammu and Srinagar editions, the Hindi edition, *Dainik Kashmir Times* and the Dogri newspaper *Dainik Prabhat*.[9] Crippled by the new and sophisticated ways of arm-twisting, the local newspapers could not retain good professionals, even if they were employed for short periods. Reporters working for national and international publications continued and improvised ways of story-telling, but it was mostly conflict, pivoting around street protests, a new crop of militants and the 'heroic' status they were assuming among the masses that returned to centre stage. Regular fare of restrictions and curfews, particularly during street agitations, imposed unannounced bans on the local newspapers. Security forces would snatch copies of the newspaper to prevent it from being circulated and newspaper presses were also raided (Rashid, 2016).[10] The government always viewed newspapers based in Kashmir with suspicion and targetted them in various ways including stopping government advertisements. In such a tussle, Kashmir's newspapers were always seen as distinct from other Indian publications, which

too faced similar government wrath for writing very critically. The report 'A New Compact with the People of Jammu and Kashmir' by the three-member team of Kashmir interlocutors, headed by senior journalist Dileep Padgaonkar, makes a similar error. Critiquing the report's findings, Seema Mustafa writes:

> the recommendations ... note that the publishers claim that newspapers are denied government advertisements if they do not toe the line, while the government 'alleges that certain newspapers publish unsubstantiated stories and engage in a vilification campaign' and suggest that these charges need to be investigated. Why? These are the same charges being made all over India, with the government always pitted against a free and fair media where it exists. So why should it become a matter of investigation in Kashmir, more so when it is widely known that the government interferes on a daily basis in manipulating the news (2012).

The interlocutors also recommended a probe into the funding of all Kashmir-based newspapers and advocated that national newspapers should be encouraged to publish J&K editions to ensure a more positive narrative on Kashmir through newspaper columns.

Apart from the legitimacy accorded to punitive actions taken against Kashmir-based newspapers, while the world was moving into a digital era, local J&K digital start-ups entered the scene even as internet connectivity through the decade beginning 2010 was unreliable with frequent shutdowns. The situation continues to be as such.

The worst and longest ever digital ban started on 5 August 2019, hours before the tabling of the J&K Reorganisation Act and its passage in the Indian

parliament, changing the political and geographic map of the erstwhile state—now bifurcated and redesignated as a Union Territory. All communication systems including the fixed line service were blocked amidst curfew-like situations, with chilling impact on the media. A phased restoration of communication lines started a few weeks later with resumption of fixed line service and post-paid mobile phones two months later. Internet connectivity remained in suspended animation for nearly six months and began to be restored in phases after a Supreme Court verdict in a petition challenging the communication ban.[11] Starting with strict firewalls and periodic reviews, the internet was fully resumed with 4G service in February 2021, 18 months after it had been arbitrarily snapped. However, it continues to be impacted every now and then with frequent but temporary internet shutdowns impacting at times the entire Valley and or a few pockets, sometimes lasting over a week. In violation of the Supreme Court verdict which laid down that restrictions cannot be imposed for prolonged periods and that if at all internet has to be shut down for some reason, the government will place all the orders and reasons in the public domain, the internet is abruptly shut down without following these due formalities.

The internet disruptions which impacted almost every facet of life, affected the mediapersons, who operate 24×7, the most (Mohammad, 2020). For months they were compelled to jostle for space behind the few computers at the Media Facilitation Centre (MFC) set up by the government where the entire work of the journalists was fully under surveillance and they were each given a meagre 15 minutes, that too after a long wait, which was not substantial for accessing online information, fact verification or for uploading their work. Often, those working and writing for national and international publications

sent their dispatches through passengers flying to Delhi on pen drives to avoid the surveillance, but often, despite all that effort, they would get lost on the way. For journalists based in other districts, even this facility was not available. A journalist based in Anantnag told me that he would sometimes travel to Banihal in Jammu region, where internet connectivity was unreliable, or to Srinagar where the MFC was already overcrowded. Sometimes, he had to return empty handed.

Operating out of that kiosk did not only impact journalism qualitatively and quantitatively, it also induced a sense of powerlessness in journalists driven out of their offices to a shabby kiosk. Working under surveillance induced fear that deepened with time. By the time the internet began to be restored, journalists were already busy dealing with regular fare of being thrashed (Zargar, 2019; IANS, 2019), intimidated by officers or being summoned to police stations (Chakravarty, 2021; Nandy, 2020; Javeed, 2020) for any critical report or even one uncomfortable word. Additionally, some journalists were slapped with criminal cases, many for their unspecified social media posts. In April 2020, for instance, in three successive days, Masarat Zahra and Gowhar Geelani were slapped with the anti-terror law, Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), for their social media posts, and Ashiq Peerzada of *The Hindu* was accused of 'fake reporting' (Shah, 2020). Things took a turn for the worse in subsequent months with journalists facing National Investigation Agency (NIA) and Enforcement Directorate (ED) raids. At least three journalists—Fahad Shah, Manan Dar and Sajad Gul—have been arrested since October 2020 under various laws, including anti-terror laws, and denied bail or re-arrested under the Public Safety Act after they were bailed by courts.[12] Aasif Sultan has been jailed since 2018 for a report that gave a

detailed analysis of how a militant organisation functioned in 2016.[13]

All these actions are in line with a Media Policy document released by the J&K government in June 2020.[14] The policy gives the government sweeping powers to examine content to identify news items that can be categorised 'fake', 'plagiarism', 'unethical' and 'anti-national activities'. Those found accused of these offences will be punished. Secondly, the government can monitor content published in newspapers and other media channels and decide what is fake news, anti-social or anti-national reporting. The news organisations involved in 'fake, unethical and anti-national' reporting would be de-empanelled and not get government advertisements, apart from facing legal action. Thirdly, the government will do a mandatory background check of newspaper publishers, editors and staffers before empanelling them for government advertisements, apart from security clearance before a journalist is given accreditation.

The Media Policy, the rules of which have yet to be framed, lays down the road-map for silencing and criminalising journalists. Things have worsened since January 2022 with even the meagre spaces of solidarity like the Kashmir Press Club being shut down and enhancement of smear campaigns against Kashmiri journalists (Masood, 2022). Some private Indian news channels and sections of the print media have been doing this for a long time (Mir, 2022). Kashmiris also often face slanderous trolling on social media and at least one journalist figured in the notorious Bulli deals (Ganai, 2022). What was new in 2022 was the increased demonisation of the local journalists not just by sections of national media and shady blogposts, but also by professionally registered local newspapers (Ahmed, 2022) who are now vying with each other to be seen on the right side of the

government to ensure immunity from being targetted and to protect their business interests.

As a consequence, local journalists are being rendered jobless or shifting outside J&K to continue their professional work; many others have chosen to maintain silence other than churning out reports that rely only on official statements and versions of any incident or issue. The Delhi-centric media is not interested in reporting on Kashmir. News from and on Kashmir has thus gone missing (Sharma, 2022).

IN PERSPECTIVE

In the 1990s, journalists faced severe challenges and threat to life from all sides but there was a buffer. The state was receptive, even some militant groups could be tackled at a diplomatic level. Today, we deal with a state that has built impenetrable iron walls around itself. Other than that there are shadowy stake-holders that either operate of their own volition or with the patronage of the state.

Amidst the trickle that reportage is now reduced to, the majority of stories from Kashmir since January 2022 are pivoted around media. When journalism and journalist become the focal story, it is a telling comment on both the situation in Kashmir and the precarious ground the journalist treads on.

In the last three decades or more, Kashmir has moved through the different stages of conflict, impacting journalism as much as it does individual and public life. The suffocating conditions of Kashmir reinforce two very different and asymmetric narratives from outside and within, both partially inspired by competing nationalism and sub-nationalism. At a media workshop in the early 2000s, I was confronted by media students and young professionals with questions about how reporting on development, education and other issues was seen as deflection from the conflict in a bid to normalise

things and were thus construed as anti-Kashmir. One passionate young journalist called the coverage to a cultural show hosted by noted dancer Malika Sarabhai as 'anti-movement'. Things changed from thereon in a very short span of time. The easing of Kashmir's situation in subsequent years allowed journalists to free themselves of the prejudices that every conflict situation imposes on its people and all sections of society, media included, and report extensively on various issues, as mentioned earlier.

Yet, editors and senior reporters in mainland India often see the Kashmiri journalist as obsessed with the conflict. They are also unable to appreciate the daily reality and challenges faced by Kashmir's media persons and the changing pattern in reportage through the many ups and downs of the conflict, even as they are comfortable with jingoistic narratives built around Kashmir. Quite often, their perspectives are coloured by an ultra-nationalist position as evinced in not only reporting a divergent and contradictory side to any situation but also in writing reams of denial of what is reported by Kashmir-based media. One of the most glaring and early examples was the Press Council of India (PCI) report on Kunan Poshpora mass rape allegations, ironically titled 'Crisis and Credibility'. In February 1991, when local and some national publications reported allegations of rape by Indian security forces in the twin villages of Kunan and Poshpora, based on oral complaints by the Indian army seeking fair review of the media reports, the PCI sent a team headed by senior journalist B. G. Verghese to probe the fairness of the media reportage in abject violation of the required rule for a 'written complaint' (Noorani, 1991). The one-man author of the report overstepped his brief and visited the two villages where he spent a couple of hours to investigate the allegations of rape, instead of the media reports (Noorani, 2002), and concluded

that there was no evidence of the allegations and gave the army personnel a clean chit (PCI, 1991).

Kashmir's truth, caught in the vortex of a volatile situation, chaos, curfews, strikes, silences and lack of access imposed by several kinds of restrictions and threats, is multi-layered. The local media often tends to fall into the trap of single-linear narratives according to the suitability of politics and sometimes laziness. While the national media, often guided by a narrow sense of nationalism, chooses to minimise or not report human rights abuses, and the prolonged strikes and restrictions faced by people caught in the conflict, the Kashmiri media tends to often report from a victim mindset and skirts atrocities and wrongdoings by militants.

Like the divergent versions of the seven blind men trying to describe an elephant, Kashmir has been conjured up in many different, dissimilar and often contradicting ways. The gap in the perspectives allows information to be processed differently by different people who read about Kashmir. Equally at fault are the journalists who, instead of professionally investigating a story and looking at an issue more dispassionately, tend to perform a balancing act.

For instance, when the PCI report on Kunan Poshpora was released, it was severely criticised, but a vast section of the Indian media gave more publicity to its findings than the critique. *Indian Express* reported a debate on the report organised by a lesser known women's group which had welcomed the PCI initiative on 10 December 1991. It noted:

> Apart from one or two speakers, nobody seemed to be in a mood to admit that just as a fact finding team can walk into public relations traps set by the army or the state, or get swayed by the rhetoric of national integrity, journalists and

> human rights activists can also be manipulated by militants in a climate of fierce insurgency or be influenced by the rhetoric of azadi. (Joseph, 2000: 41).

In 2010, when street protests broke out in Kashmir and about 100 youth were killed in police action, Barkha Dutt reporting for NDTV tried to bring out the human element of the story by highlighting the versions of families that had lost their sons as well as policemen injured in stone pelting and concluded that there is tragedy on both sides.

It is to some extent true that conflict has remained the dominant theme of reportage from Kashmir in the last three decades. But conflict is also the dominant part of the landscape, so everything else gets eclipsed or dwarfed on the news pages. Conflict and its various ramifications are the daily reality. The complexity of this situation is best encapsulated in a short dialogue in the 1997 Hollywood blockbuster *The Devil's Own*, in which the fugitive Irish rebel, Rory, tells the American cop, Tom, ' Don't look for a happy ending. It's not an American story. It's an Irish one'.

As long as the Indian intelligentsia and the media does not appreciate this difference between the mainland Indian landscape and Kashmir's, or the working conditions of the journalists in the two domains, the reality of Kashmir would not just run the risk of being buried under layers of superficially created perspectives, but also denials and silence, as is the case at present.

Notes

1. 'Large-scale Booth Capturing, Rigging and Violence Mark Polling in Several Areas', 6 June 1983, *Kashmir Times* archives.

2. 'AINEC Fact-finding Team says Press Being Used as Scapegoat to Cover up Large-scale Poll Malpractices, Excesses', 11 July 1983, *Kashmir Times;* 'Editors Guild Grilled by J&K Journalists', 12 July 1983, *Kashmir Times;* 'NUJ Seminar: J&K Poll Coverage Justified, Guild Accused of Prejudice', 23 July 1983, *Kashmir Times;* and Nayar (1983).
3. 'Farooq Vows to Boycott the Press and Pressmen, Pledges Eternal Unity with Mirwaiz', 30 June 1983, *Kashmir Times;* 'PTI, AINEC deplores Farooq's attack on press', 12 July 1983, *Kashmir Times*.
4. 'Journalists Protest Press Censorship Bill in J&K', August–September 1989, *Kashmir Times* archives.
5. Archives of *Kashmir Times*, *Daily Excelsior*, January to March 1989.
6. From *Kashmir Times* archives, 19–22 January 1990.
7. The word Ikhwani comes from one of the early militant organisations, Ikhwan-ul-Muslimeen, headed by Kuka Parray and Javed Ahmed Shah, that turned renegade by the mid-1990s and started working for various wings of the Indian security forces.
8. As witnessed by this author in the newsroom of *Kashmir Times* and as told to her by several other senior journalists. Also see Hussain (2019).
9. Both the *Dainik Kashmir Times* and *Dainik Prabhat*, the only Dogri language newspaper, were forced to shut down by the summer of 2018.
10. 'Newspapers Seized in Kashmir, Raids on Printing Presses', *The New Indian Express*, 16 July 2016, https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2016/jul/16/Newspapers-seized-in-Kashmir-raids-on-printing-press-881498.html (accessed 25 August 2025).
11. *Anuradha Bhasin versus Union of India & Others*, Writ petition 1031 of 2019 filed in the Supreme Court challenging communication ban.
12. *Article 14*, 'With arrest of editor after reporting both sides of the story, government escalates criminalisation of journalism in Kashmir', 18 February 2022, https://www.article-14.com/post/with-arrest-of-editor-after-reporting-both-sides-of-story-govt-escalates-criminalisation-of-journalism-in-kashmir-620f079a0fd00 (accessed 25 August 2025).
13. *The Wire*, 'Misuse of PSA: Press bodies condemn re-arrest of Kashmiri journalist Aasif Sultan', 13 April 2022, https://thewire.in/media/misuse-of-psa-press-bodies-condemn-re-

arrest-of-kashmiri-journalist-aasif-sultan (accessed 25 August 2025).

14. The J&K Media Policy 2020 draft and order related to it can be accessed at: http://new.jkdirinf.in/images/MediaPolicy.pdf (accessed 25 August 2025).

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