

Understanding Mass Media: Politics, Prospects and Perspectives

Communication & Journalism Research
5 (2) pp 33-40
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masscomhod@uoc.ac.in
ISSN 2348 – 5663

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Abstract

Technology has destroyed the monopoly of news. The new media field with its latest trends in mobile journalism has eked out efforts to counter the invasion. But this is not always a successful attempt. In the globalization era, media is not altogether 'Indian'. Media convergence is not at all a mofussil concept. Due to technology, the barriers of all kinds of media disappeared. Kerala being a unique state, cannot be compared to the average media behaviour of citizens of other states. Kerala has witnessed unforeseen growth in the field of print media. Truly, every facet of Malayalee's life is somehow or the other influenced by print media. The growth trajectory of Indian media too is unraveled here. The article explores the history, dimensions of politics, prospects and perspectives of mass media in the context of technological invasion.

Keywords

Globalization, Media Convergence, Politics, Invasion

Big investment wasn't there behind the letter press of Illikunnu. But Basel mission has financed the growth during the initial stages of journalism. Until the birth of Kerala, journalism was nothing but evangelization work. A great paradigm shift occurred after the liberation movement of Kerala. Newspapers developed a mysterious international agenda for themselves. They grew by dint of the capital. A thorough overhaul took place in the content and nature of newspapers. By the time of globalisation, a sea change occurred in the attitude of newspapers.

Birth of Television

Television entered the scene to give sound and light to the globalized media politics. The gadget easily overwhelmed the geographical and temporal limitations and effortlessly transformed the world into a global village. Globalisation is the economic facet of invasion. Globalisation has been termed as the most democratized invasion in history. The conquest has taken place with the consent of the conquered. This 'manufacturing of consent' takes place within the media. The consumer culture initiated by the channels has tremendously transformed the lifestyle and social outlook of Malayalees. This reminds us of the Trojan War where Odysseus made a wooden horse full of soldiers to trap his enemies. Here television is the Trojan horse envisioned by the proponents of globalization. The soldiers of market fill the wooden horse of television. No one could ever subjugate newspapers and

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television. Television is the greatest contribution of technology after the invention of printing by Johan Gutenberg. By denigrating media ethics, television has turned out as the marketing gadget of globalised consumer culture. The tag 'yellow' attached to newspapers during the tenure of Hearst and Pulitzer disappeared with the advent of C P Scott and Harold Evans who considered newspaper as a value-added product. But this value-consciousness is seldom seen in television channels. The politics of media seems to be the politics of capital. Capital forms the machine and fuel of globalisation. Capital is not something to be confiscated in the fight against power or to be diminished in the foundry of values. Swadeshbhimani Ramakrishna Pillai and Kesari Balakrishna Pillai are the doyens in the field of print media. Today media personnel are pictured as the apostles who propagate the good news of market. The main objective of media is to enhance the power of capital.

Knowledge is power. Here news imparts knowledge. Media find news or construct news. This is neither objective nor honest nor transparent. This further gets sidelined or distorted according to the interests of the newspaper barons. Understanding the power of news, the empires colonized nations and also media. Five news agencies have controlled the international news collection and dissemination. The oldest one among these is the French agency AFP. Reuters, Associated Press, United Press International, Tass etc are the other four ones. Together they divided and shared the five continents. Irrespective of the nationality of the newspaper, people of any country depend on these agencies for general news coverage. Their invasion was through the news. It's interesting that Malayala Manorama and Desabhimani accessed news from the same news agency. This continued unabated till the advent of satellite transmission. CNN brought forth revolutionary changes in this arena. In 1991 Time Magazine has selected Ted Turner, founder of CNN as the 'Man of the Year'. It was awarded as a recognition of his attempts to democratize news. Thus television emerged as a mirror of the world.

Murdochian Onslaught

Technology has transformed the media ambience dramatically. The powerful new media has put up a brave fight against this invasion. It's cumbersome to contain the tsunami waves of news disseminated with the backup of technology and capital. Rupert Murdoch has been considered as an exuberant icon of global media invasion. This Australian-born magnate has been elevated as a global citizen with his American citizenship and Chinese marriage. His media empire is spread across the whole universe. His multi-branched media empire News Corp encompasses newspaper, television, radio, internet, book, film etc. As written words are more consistent than oral words, newspapers enjoy supremacy over television. But newspapers can't survive without external support. Murdoch depends on television for this support. He considers film as a continuation of television. Not only Fleet Street and Wall Street, Hollywood is also under his control. The globally renowned Hollywood studios Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Brothers etc are owned by Murdoch himself. Murdoch has overwhelmed Lord North cliff, Hearst, Beaverbrook and Thomson who were the uncrowned media barons of yester years. Murdoch has reached Asia after his victory in Australia, America and Europe. His Asian network is baptized as STAR (Satellite Television for Asian Region) TV. Star TV which entered India in 1993 has more than 100 channels today. Murdoch has conquered the sprawling Indian subcontinent by taking over the Kannada and Telugu channels of Asianet. The repercussions were not seen in India alone. Murdoch has been fully aware of the Asian possibilities of Asianet. Murdoch has also dreams to enter the Malayalam film industry complementing Asianet. Cross ownership is the greatest challenge put forth by Murdoch. It is the unified ownership of different media. As per American law, a newspaper owner cannot start a television station in the same area. But Murdoch could manage that too. Banking on the temporary

relaxation given by Federal Communications Commission, Murdoch has evolved as the biggest cross owner in America. The peculiarity of Murdoch is that he never fights with the government and functions according to the rules of the land. Murdoch has the ability to restructure law and to appease the ruling class. In the rewritten Broadcasting Bill prepared by the Govt. of India, it was shocking to know that details pertaining to cross ownership have disappeared for good. It is a known fact that the First Press Commission had strongly recommended against the development of monopolistic trends in newspaper ownership. Newspaper monopolies slowly spreading their tentacles to internet, radio, television etc serve as an issue of grave concern. Multivocality is the lifeline of democracy. Therefore, variety in opinion is to be given equal importance like freedom of expression. Murdoch is cunning as it is evident from his discarding the Australian citizenship to embrace American citizenship. He has also married a Chinese TV anchorperson in his 68th year to dilute the legal tussles to be faced in other countries. Murdoch knows that India is a comfort and safe zone for him to play. It's a blatant strategic victory of Murdoch which culminated in the taking over of Asianet by him without any conflict. But twenty years before, Times of India's attempts to take over Mathrubhumi newspaper by buying its shares elicited much commotion. This was not there in the Asianet take over.

Advent of Media

Newspaper history is 400 years old. Indian newspaper history too is more than 100 years old. Even at the time of the birth of Kerala, newspaper journalism has completed its centenary. It has eked out its own crystal clear ways energized by experiments and failures of great newspaper barons. Newspapers have their own independent system to correct journalists who falter occasionally. Man-bites-dog syndrome is the simplified definition of news. Television has bridged the gulf between information-haves and have-nots. It is a medium which disseminated the idiosyncrasies of adolescence. The advent of television had overwhelmed newspapers. It has created unforeseen ripples in the entertainment arena. The acceptability of television had disturbed the newspaper barons. The historically great lineage and heritage of newspapers have been thrown to the winds. Along with the nature of the news, the approach and outlook of newspapers also got changed. Newspapers have started blindly copycating the news distribution and structure of television. Even before initiating channels, Manorama described themselves as the 'No. 1 channel in Kerala'. Though Doordarshan had initiated Malayalam television history, the channel culture has been the contribution of Asianet which entered the scene after ten years. The birth of Asianet came at a crucial decade of globalisation which transformed the economic foundation of Kerala. Thus, the silent nights of Malayalees got spruced up by the sound and music of Asianet and other satellite channels which followed suit. Globalisation brought forth a typical social ambience congenial for a new media culture. Television succeeded in inculcating affinities leading to cultural invasion and transformed the aptitudes of the populace. The market system borne out of globalisation has resulted in the free-flowing of advertisements which ensured the economic stability of the channels.

Foreign Direct Investment

The advent of foreign newspapers to Kerala and the foreign direct investment in Indian newspapers have become common. During the tenure of NDA, the fourth estate, the sacred pillar of democracy, has been put for sale in the open market of globalisation. As Tata is to Unilever, in this backdrop when any foreigner could legally usurp the right to ownership, newspapers have been denigrated as a mere commodity for consumption. When the opportunity meted out to print media by NDA for FDI and made more liberalized by UPA, the whole media changed dramatically. Just like Indian National Congress, the

fatherhood of Indian newspapers too rests with a foreigner. The venture begun by James Augustus Hicky, now rests in the hands of Rupert Murdoch.

Dimensions of Technology

Interactivity is the nature of internet. In the case of online newspapers, there is a provision to express the reader's opinion after each news. Out of ten lakh readers, only four people are getting a chance to express their feedback. This is a major limitation for newspapers. Now-a-days newspapers used to conduct opinion surveys through their websites and publish it in newspapers. Democratic behaviour has somehow entered the media. As the dimensions increase, the credibility of newspapers is always a debatable issue. In this backdrop, all media organisations are trying to become more credible and believable. The portals of television channels have widened thanks to the changes in technology. Channel diversity and the definitions of media ownership have changed drastically. Earlier, those with centralized economic prowess and political clout could only enter the media domain. The situation has undergone changes today. Regional channels are a common phenomenon. Anybody can launch a web journal today. In America, it has been a web writer who brought out the sexual conspiracy against Bill Clinton. In India, Tehelka has set the foundation of cyber journalism. Capitalizing on the possibilities of technology, this is not at all difficult. In the beginning, television has given priority to education-knowledge fields and general affairs. Later on when television got commercialized, entertainment came to the forefront. But close on its heels came educational channels. Knowledge has not entered the mainstream of media programmes. In print media, the focus is news and for television the focus is entertainment. Media restructured people and in turn got remodeled by the whims and fancies of customers.

Mobile Phone and Utility

When compared with desktop and laptop, mobile phone though miniature in size, has so many similarities. It is inappropriate to call this gadget a 'mobile phone' as it not only helps to call people, it also helps to listen music, play games, take snaps, watch internet etc. Now mobile phone has attained the dimension of a 'people's computer'. Today mobile phone has become more and more user-friendly. Though a medium of communication and possesses the nature of mass media, the factor which differentiates it from other media is its utility. It got entry to all spheres of social life. Like mobile phones, computers too got popularized because of globalisation. But it has not trickled down to the lower strata of society. As a medium and as a gadget, the importance of mobile phones has all the more increased. Its small screen, the limitation of mobile phone will soon be rectified by technology. Truly, mobile phone has become the king of media. It has become the medium of the common man. The government of India is planning to initiate 200 information channels through mobile phones. In the coming years, the concept of broadband will become obsolete. Broadband is a contemporary usage. In America, through the system of Internet 2, huge data could be transmitted from one continent to another. A new specialized kind of media content will evolve in future. In that new media situation, the projection of three-dimensional pictures would become a reality.

Assessing the inventions of printing machine, telephone, radio and television, it is the printing machine technology which transformed the language. It has been a herculean task to rearrange the movable types which revolutionized even the Malayalam alphabet. It has even entered the keyboards of computers. Malayalam will witness further revolutions in computers, mobile phones and other IT gadgets in the years to come. Truly, sweeping changes will be witnessed in the coming years. Newspapers will be transformed into e-newspapers. This system permits a person to read all newspapers in a material surface. The

subtle and profound differences between newspapers, television and internet will diminish forever. The IT era has ended. Now it's the era of biology. We can control the functions of living beings. It's said that by such control, printing could be transferred to the leaves of plants. It could definitely turnout as a penance from our part for destroying bamboo for manufacturing newsprint. Though it seems a little melodramatic, this is not unachievable. Today we are in an 'information overload' era. It's a war to select news, entertainment and knowledge from television. But with hundreds of channels, we are sure to fail in the war as even a judicious selection won't be possible for a customer. Channel browsing takes away the lion's share of our time like internet browsing. While checking the quality of a programme, the customer loses several other qualitative programmes. Today the media experience is so incorrigible owing to such complexities.

New Media Culture

The new media has evolved out of the older media systems and situations. Changes in technology have brought forth newer possibilities in this arena. Digitization of media content is the main reason. Earlier, different gadgets were used to collect and disseminate news in print, radio and television. Today by dint of new technological innovations, that division has been narrowed. Sound, letters and pictures get embedded in a compact disc. The content of cyber media too could be enclosed in it. The barriers between media disappeared with the possibility of media content to be saved in a digital system. This is nothing but media convergence. All this can be cybercast through a single channel. The objective of print media, radio, television and cyber media is to disseminate the same media content through the same medium. This brings forth so many differences in the media world. The positive thing is that media could mutually become models and act as a corrective of one on the other. The term Fourth Estate hints that it is part of the power circle. This observation by Burke very soon got currency among the intellectuals. But newspaper is also regarded as 'society's eyes and ears'. This means they are with the people.

Trends and Experiments

Independent Indian history is rife with revolutionary upheavals in the democratic set up. India's journalism history too got influenced by several parallel silent revolutions. Journalism and the country's politico-economic system seem to be two sides of the same coin. If one side is violent, how can the other side be serene? Today the margin between communism and capitalism gets narrowed, the politicization of religions lead people to violent combinations and political-bureaucratic mafia alliances conquer the governance. But the realities of today and yester years won't synchronise. Within half a decade, the country witnessed several vicissitudes of fortune. The India dreamt by Gandhiji disappeared during the tenure of Nehru. Nehru's India got washed away in the tsunami waves of Indira Gandhi's emergency. The Indian foundation of socialist pattern has been shaken by P V Narasimha Rao and inculcated the stones of liberalized globalization. This revamped the economic system of the country. Under the leadership of Manmohan Singh political-diplomatic traditions too have become topsy-turvy. India ignored non-aligned movement which has been our trademark and developed intimacy with US-Israel axis powers.

Journalism has become a field where paradoxical interests often come into conflict. As newspaper serves as a mirror which reflects the happenings around, its directions have undergone a change. Even before independence, journalism was firmly rooted in the soil. At times British government came up with stringent measures. Some of the viceroys were dictators too. Barring Wellesley's regime, newspapers could criticize government and

formulate independent standpoints. When Ram Mohun Roy's papers tried to wipe out the social evils in the society, certain orthodox papers came into existence in the first half of 19th century trying to maintain the traditional customs and beliefs as such. British authorities even paid heed to the expert opinions of renowned newspaper editors. C Y Chintamani, the owner of 'Leader' from Allahabad has been included in the United Province government also. In the first half of 20th century, Chintamani as an independent thinker exerted tremendous influence in the society as well as the government. The advent of Gandhiji had merged journalism and politics. Barring Vallabhai Patel, all others were either journalists or media owners. They involved deeply in the freedom struggle. Going to jail, publishing the speech of Congress President etc. seems to be the daily duties of journalists and newspapers.

Contemporary issues erupted when this alliance has to be severed for the health of journalism. A spate of untoward incidents happened as a result. The government help became mandatory for journalism to flourish. Meanwhile, it became obvious that over allegiance to government will be detrimental for the development of journalism. The interests of newspaper owners and journalists happened to be entirely different. Liberalisation brought forth new challenges and conflicts. The inculcation of values happened to be a debatable issue. Money started pouring in to the journalistic field. It opened up opportunities for those who wanted to amass money. Truly, a period of challenges and confusion for those who believed in the social awareness of newspapers. Journalists themselves diluted the newspaper style deep-rooted in social consciousness. The Trade Union movement initiated by renowned journalists like Chalapathi Rao has been the need of the hour. This to a certain extent helped journalists who have been subjected to unbelievable exploitation, to attain economic stability. After a generation, trade union movement did more harm than good to society. Federation of Working Journalists declined as it happened to be a private instrument to help half a dozen arrogant journalists. Their name and fame got tarnished in society. The selfish motives of certain mercenary journalists too added insult to injury. The renowned 'Illustrated Weekly of India' which enjoyed great popularity stooped to the level of propagating vulgar literature. Another editor restructured its content and format making it neither a newspaper nor a magazine. The owners themselves advised 'euthanasia' for the weekly which got wounded from within. Ramnath Goenka who believed that he is inferior to his newspaper too has witnessed a similar tragedy. His own editor executed his personal political agenda in the 'Indian Express' which hurt Goenka deeply, resulting in his dismissal. In the mean time, the dismissed journalist had become a political leader. When journalists themselves abused journalism, it became easier for the government and owners to misuse the freedom of journalists. Understanding the gravity of the situation, the Press Council of India had vehemently criticized the journalists, 'it's unfortunate that journalists themselves are yielding to temptations, sacrificing their freedom for petty motives.'

Emergency and its Aftermath

Emergency triggered the decline of traditions, values and beliefs. Rule of law, constitution and personal freedom which had been hitherto considered sacred were in shambles. Two years of dictatorship had wiped out our national values. Though the infallibility of constitution has been restructured, the earlier ambience could not be reinstated. People lost their beliefs in goodness and a certain type of hatred got inculcated in them. Selfish motives and trends ruled the roost throughout the length and breadth of the country. Even political parties stooped themselves for votes and power. Objective and duty bound journalists too started dancing to the tunes of Indira Gandhi. They started bowing to the beck and call of authorities. Stories of kickbacks given to journalists by a UP Chief Minister came to the forefront. From his fund, he lavishly offered almost four crores to

hundreds of journalists. This paved the way for the new corruption culture which engulfed the field of journalism. Ramnath Goenka had retorted in pungent words, 'earlier, journalists were missionaries, but now they are mercenaries'. Along with this paradigm shift, two other phenomena had initiated changes in journalism. Globalisation had brought forth sweeping changes in the field. The belief that the whole world has been changed to a market and money can change the boundaries of nations got fortified. This thoroughly changed the dreams of newspaper owners as well as journalists. Manmohan Singh had opened up regarding the arrival of new horizons in the arena. In the seminar conducted by CNBC Channel in Delhi, he exhorted all Indian media to become global powers. He added, 'we should have our own CNN's and BBC's.' Another aspect has been pinpointed by Noam Chomsky. While visiting India, he opined, 'globalisation will enhance the advertising revenue...media resources will be reduced incredibly and media would reflect the thoughts of people who have huge capital to run global media organisations.'

Changed Mediascape

Deep-rooted changes have taken place in the nature of journalism from the tenure of Indira Gandhi until the time of Narendra Modi. During the concluding decades of twentieth century, certain instances took place which revamped the journalistic yardsticks. Certain diplomatic changes took place in The Times of India run Bennett Coleman Company. The new strategies have increased the profit of the company and other newspaper organisations have been strongly influenced. This has given historical importance to the offbeat ways of Bennett and Coleman. Times of India resurrected as the new force which wiped out the hitherto approved traditions, foundation stones and permanent values of journalism. The changes which started in the 50s formed as an ideology in the 80s and restructured the media culture of the country. The consequences of this metamorphosis cannot be detected in the society clearly. The Times has been one of the six newspapers started by the British to safeguard the interests of the empire. From the 19th century to the 1970s, like all media organisations, Times of India too had functioned under expert editors. Frank Moraes, one of the greatest journalists India has ever witnessed has been at the helm of affairs in the 1950s. People viewed Moraes as the soul of the Times of India. But people with business came to the forefront and dictated terms to the journalist fraternity. Sameer Jain, the son of Ashok Jain, Chairman of Times of India, assumed charge of the company at the age of 30. He completely changed the existing pattern. It's not the journalist or the manager, the owner is the soul of the media organization was his philosophy. He has been enthusiastic to study the graphs of the profit share and the market share of newspapers as an industrial organization. But the philosophies and theories propounded by Sameer hindered media culture and national goodness. He believed that editors are not necessary for running newspapers as journalism stands for entertainment. He also believed that the responsibility of newspaper organisation is to share holders, to help them amass profit. The ideas and basic principles formed had kick started revolutions in many parts of the country. Rupert Murdoch has earlier told that journalism means entertainment. Milton Friedman had opined that the duty of the company is to produce profit. Twelve years before, Milton Friedman, the god of America's conventional economics has opined that the social accountability of business is to increase profit. But this idea has been rejected in America. During the regime of Bill Clinton, his Labour Secretary, Robert Reich had authored a book called 'Super Capitalism'. He pointed his finger towards government who has a role to control the companies. The govt. is duty bound to ensure that the companies going after profit do not hamper the society in anyway.

Sameer Jain had his own multi-pronged strategies to fulfill his responsibility of selling product and procure profit. He added ingredients to make news appealing, he reduced the rift between news and advertisements and entered into personal agreement with

companies which offered advertisements. In the guise of reducing the over-importance of politics, reporters started writing about the dress codes of actresses, banquets hosted by business tycoons and the trivia and trash of coffee shops. Equating news and advertisements happened to be more dangerous than chilly-frying news.

All other countries except India have great newspapers. New York Times and Washington Post in the US, Asahi Shimbun and Yomiuri in Japan, Le Monde in France etc. are examples. Great institutions are there in India like Tata, Infosys, Wipro etc. Outlook and perspectives of the founders make these companies unique. Second Press Commission had strongly warned against forbidding industrialists from starting newspapers. But certain people have taken media as their only industry like Kasturi and Sons of The Hindu, Sarkar family of Anand Bazar Patrika, Poorie family of India Today etc. These publications reflect great social awareness and higher standards. They would definitely bring forth great publications in future. Social accountability is the path towards greatness. The growth trajectory of media through this path will lead to absolute success. India too is passing through different phases of growth. Though at certain points of time, it does falter, in the long run it would become triumphant as it has not severed ties with people and culture.

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