The Changing Role of the News Media in Contemporary India

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The global scenario

The news media are in crisis across the developed world. Journalism as we know it is being described, obviously with some exaggeration, as ‘collapsing’, ‘disintegrating’, in ‘meltdown’. In this digital age, there is gloom in most developed country, or ‘mature’, media markets over the future of newspapers and also broadcast television. Two decades after a call issued from a conference in Windhoek, Namibia for the establishment of World Press Freedom Day, ‘the arrival of the digital revolution – the evolution of the Internet, the emergence of new forms of media, and the rise of online social networks – has reshaped the media landscape and made “the press” of 2011 something that those gathered in Windhoek in 1991 could not have imagined’ (UNESCO 2011). There is a strong sense that ‘the news industry is no longer in control of its own future’ (Rosenstiel & Mitchell 2011) and that it is technology companies like Google and the social media that lead the way and look set to hegemonize the public space that once belonged to the news media.

The global financial crisis and economic slowdown of 2008-2009 sent several western media organizations into a tailspin. Advertising revenues, the lifeline of the newspaper industry, took a body blow during this period. Many big newspapers, whose strengths had been sapped and whose situational advantages had been undermined over the years, went into bankruptcy or protection against bankruptcy. *The New York Times* was bailed out by an emergency loan of US $250 million from Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim: ‘to help the newspaper company finance its businesses’ (NYT 2009). Tens of thousands of journalists lost their jobs in the United States, where newsrooms are 30 per cent smaller than in 2000 (Rosenstiel and Mitchell 2011), and across Europe.

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There has been some recovery, or to be more precise, a slowdown in the decline beginning mid-2010. But printed newspaper circulation and readership are in irreversible decline across the developed world; they have been in steady, long-term, secular decline much before the recent recession hit these countries and their news media. ‘Circulation is like the sun. It continues to rise in the East and decline in the West’, Christoph Riess, chief executive officer of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), told those assembled at the World Newspaper Congress and World Editors Forum in Vienna in October 2011 (Riess 2011). His presentation of World Press Trends 2011, the annual survey done by WAN-IFRA, focused on ‘six key areas’: the media consumption shift; economic developments; newspaper circulation and number of titles; advertising expenditure by media; newspaper revenue; and internet versus mobile (Ibid. 2011).

There was a clear sense in the Vienna gathering that a historical era for the news media was coming to an end and they had entered, even if differentially across the world, an indeterminate period of uncertainty. With the changes in audience behaviour and news consumption accompanying the migration to the web and to mobile platforms gathering pace, the big challenge for the traditional news business is engagement of the audience that is getting away, with grim financial implications. ‘We have always been extremely efficient in using the time of our readers’, Riess told his audience in Vienna. ‘But now we are in a more challenging environment, because readers are more promiscuous, they have more choices, they read newspapers with less frequency. We have to do more to attract them, find new ways to garner loyalty’ (Ibid. 2011).

These industry-wide trends, and the accompanying stresses, pessimism, and disarray, have already taken a big toll of independent and resourceful journalism in the developed world. According to a report titled The Reconstruction of American Journalism, commissioned and published by the Journalism School of Columbia University, New York, ‘the era of dominant newspapers and influential network news divisions is giving way to one in which the gathering and distribution of news is more widely dispersed’ and the economic foundation of U.S. newspapers is ‘collapsing’. Newspapers, ‘the country’s chief source of independent reporting, are shrinking – literally’, with fewer journalists ‘reporting less news in fewer pages’ (Downie & Schudson 2009).

The situation and prospects of broadcast television, which still commands a big audience across the world and remains the world’s premier advertising medium,
do not seem much brighter. I do not propose to enter into a discussion of why, which would require a separate extended discussion. I shall merely note the assessment of experts that in developed countries, broadcast television – for several decades the ‘dominant organism’ in the ‘media ecosystem’ – has been in ‘inexorable decline’ (Naughton 2006), and that commercial television news, in parallel with printed newspapers, has been ‘losing its audience, its advertising revenue, and its reporting resources’ (Downie & Schudson 2009).

**Digital age paradox**

This brings us to a paradox, which seems to be central to this transformational age. In the midst of this old media crisis, more and more people are reading newspapers digitally and it is a global audience for the best publications. Worldwide, printed newspapers, with a reported circulation of 519 million, reach an estimated 2.3 billion people every day, 20 per cent more than the internet (Riess 2011). But the ‘terms of trade’ are shifting remorselessly in favour of the web, mobile, and newer interactive digital platforms. Many newspapers have excellent websites offering rich, many-sided, multi-media content, including long-form features, investigative articles, and thoughtful analysis. Several journalism schools round the world now take digital journalism seriously. It still comes mostly free-to-air but some major western newspapers have begun to price their digital content and some new revenue streams have opened up. Mobile platforms and tablets led by the iPad hold promise, with several newspapers and television channels coming up with innovative and attractive apps.

But all this does not add up to a viable revenue and business model for digital journalism. The internet advertising model is doing exceedingly well but it is the search engines, above all Google, that take the lion’s share of the revenue; the paid-content model is also well established on the mobile platform, what with hundreds of millions of users accepting ‘monthly contracts, pre-paid phones, and paid-for apps’, but here too, the new kids on the block, Apple and the mobile operators, take the bulk of the revenue (Riess 2011).

The newspaper industry faces a double squeeze: the print business continues heavily to subsidize digital journalism, which cannot pay for itself by attracting enough advertising or subscriptions or a mixture of the two; and the new digital players put increasing pressure on newspaper circulation, readership, and the business itself.
Two Media Worlds and India

Let us now turn to the differences in the situation of the news media across the world. These differences, which mirror the larger patterns of the world’s uneven economic and socio-political development, run wide and deep and can even appear dramatic. How long this duality will endure is a matter of conjecture.\(^2\) Let us call this situation ‘The Two Media Worlds’ and see how India figures against this backdrop.

While daily print newspaper circulation has been in decline globally, by 17 per cent between 2006 and 2010 in the United States, 11.8 per cent in western Europe, and 10 per cent in eastern and central Europe, it has risen 16 per cent in the Asia-Pacific region and 4.5 per cent in Latin America over the same period (Riess 2011). With nearly three-fourths of the world’s 100 top-selling daily newspapers now published in Asia, India and China are regarded as ‘the world absolute leaders in the newspaper industry’ (WPT 2009: 6), with current daily circulations in the vicinity of 110 million copies in each case. In India, the growth trends in circulation and readership are especially strong in the Indian language sectors of the press, led by Hindi. But the buoyancy and implications of this development need not be exaggerated, as it comes on the back of extreme underpricing of cover prices and the dumping of hundreds of thousands of copies that go straight to the radhi market.

Side by side, satellite television has been in buoyant growth mode in South Asia, in China, and in other parts of the developing world. In 2011, television households in India are estimated to number 141 million, with 116 million of them served by cable and 26 million by direct-to-home television (TAM 2011). And since the total number of households in India is estimated to be 231 million, there is considerable space for growth (Ibid.).

From a low base, internet use and broadband access are growing rapidly, although unevenly, across the developing world. China’s development in this

\(^2\) There are plenty of signs of complacency in Indian media circles about the time frame available. According to Jacob Mathew, current president of WAN-IFRA, ‘some studies predict that, by 2040, the Indian print industry would meet the fate of the American print media industry’ but by then Indian media publishers should be in a position to ‘get a good share of the [advertising] revenue’ (Mathew 2011). It seems to me that these studies miss the whole point and the assumptions and perceptions behind them reflect a widespread attitude of denial of the immediacy of the digital impact. It seems highly improbable that India has until 2040 for the tipping point to arrive.
area has been quite spectacular: it has upwards of 500 million internet users – by far the largest number for any country in the world – most of them served by broadband, minimally defined by western standards (Fu 2011). India, by contrast, has only something like 100 million internet users (Internet World Stats 2011), most of them poorly served by bandwidth. One would think the number would be much higher, given the country’s fairly advanced capabilities in the software field but this is typical of India’s political economy paradox, large swaths of backwardness amidst high economic growth rates. The most revealing indicator in the comparison is the internet’s penetration of the comparable populations: China’s 36.30 per cent, which is still only about half the developed country norm, contrasts sharply with India’s 8.40 per cent (Ibid.). What this means is that the impact of the digital revolution on the print press and on broadcast television is considerably stronger and the tipping point is likely to arrive sooner in China than in India.

Thus far we have attempted to provide a bird’s eye view of the quantitative trends in order to place India in global media context. What about the roles and functions of the news media and their qualitative performance? In order to begin to answer this question, we need to delve into history.

The two media traditions

Historically, we can distinguish two major media traditions in India – the older tradition of a diverse, pluralistic, and relatively independent press, and the younger tradition of state-controlled radio and television. Most objective observers are likely to agree that for all its faults, contradictions, and conflicts of interest, the first is a worthwhile tradition while the second is a stultifying and largely misspent tradition, representing a great democratic and developmental opportunity squandered (Ram 2000: 241-242).

The press in historical and social context

The Indian press is more than two centuries old. Its strengths have largely been shaped by its historical experience and, in particular, by its association with the freedom struggle as well as movements for social emancipation, reform, and amelioration. The long struggle for national emancipation; controversies and battles over social reform; radical and revolutionary aspirations and movements; compromising as well as fighting tendencies; and the competition between
self-serving and public service visions of journalism – these have all found reflection in the character and performance of the Indian press over the long term (Ibid.: 242).

In the first place, the close association between modern India’s struggle for political and social emancipation from imperialist thraldom and oppression and the origins and development of the Indian press accounts for the seriousness, relevance, and public-spirited orientation of the older media tradition at its best (Ibid.: 242-243).

Secondly, part of the historical legacy is some diversity and pluralism and a certain space for the expression of divergent opinions. Diversity and pluralism in the Indian press can be said to reflect the vast regional, linguistic, socio-economic, and cultural heterogeneity of a subcontinent. Within the Indian newspaper tradition, there has long been an awareness of the need for greater diversity and pluralism (Ibid.: 243-244).

In the developed countries, press and media monopoly has developed in a big way, eroding diversity, pluralism, and the values of serious journalism. In India too, monopolistic tendencies and aggressive market practices aimed at aggrandizing market share and killing competition have manifested themselves in the press sector. In some newspaper markets in India, duopoly or monopoly has developed.

Thirdly, there have always been sharp ideological and political divides within the Indian press tradition. In a sense, the contemporary differentiation between newspapers that broadly take a secular-democratic stand and those that have come increasingly to support the ideology, politics, and policies of the Hindu Right – the Sangh Parivar and some of its allies – can be said to be analogous to the divide between the ‘nationalist’ and ‘loyalist’ press during the freedom struggle (Ibid.: 244). But such categorization, while valid, is hardly sufficient. Within the ‘secular’ press as much as within the ‘nationalist’ press of the pre-Independence period, there are significant divides on a number of ideological and political issues, and these manifest themselves in differentiated news coverage and editorial attitudes towards the ruling Congress and other parties at the national and regional level. Oftentimes, as Press Council of India chairman Markandey Katju has pointed out in his recent critique of media performance (Katju 2011a), the losers are the people of India – the working people and the hundreds of millions who suffer under multiple deprivations.
Involvement in great social and political campaigns, or other exciting events, during the freedom struggle fuelled newspaper growth and circulation and built up the credibility and image of particular publications. ‘Literacy, basic communications and adequate technology’, notes Robin Jeffrey, a political scientist who has done valuable scholarly work on the Indian language press, ‘are essential to the development of a daily newspaper culture. But momentous events provide the link between these developments and politics – the link that seems to send circulations shooting upwards. People need the stimulus of exciting times to hook large numbers of them on the daily newspaper habit’ (Jeffrey 1987: 608).

Kerala is the classic Indian case of politicization spreading to large sections of the population and creating a newspaper-reading culture. Many forces influenced this process. They include, most importantly, working peoples’ struggles, the social movement of the oppressed castes, and Left politics. The connection between the masses forming the habit of reading newspapers and the existence of an authentic public opinion is noted thus by V.K. Ramachandran: ‘Owing to the prevalent levels of literacy, the dissemination of information by means of the written word goes much deeper in Kerala than elsewhere in India; this has important implications for the quality and depth of public opinion and of participatory democracy in the State’ (Ramachandran 1996: 206). The implication is important for the rest of India: the formation of an authentic public opinion will not be possible in the absence of a newspaper-reading culture – the mass habit, in town and country, of reading daily and periodical newspapers and tracking major happenings through them.

The dramatic expansion of the Hindi daily press over the last quarter-century, partly in response to the political and social upheaval generated by Ayodhya-centred communal mobilization by the Sangh Parivar, is a strikingly different case, and one that underlines the link between political excitement and newspaper circulation. It can be seen that this politics-driven growth of newspapers can be for better or worse. But a public that tracks major events through the media must be counted as a positive development, even when it is encountered in the context of a socially and politically disastrous movement.

Even in the pre-Independence context, the press learned to act like a player in the major league political and socio-economic arena, despite its well-known limitations in terms of reach in society, financial viability, professional training, and entrepreneurial and management capabilities. The First Press Commission
estimated that the total circulation of the 300 or so daily newspapers being published in India in 1953 was 2.53 million. This worked out to 5.40 copies per 1000 in the population against the backdrop of an all-India literacy level of 16.40 per cent. (Press Commission 1954: 15-24). From such a low base, India’s daily newspaper circulation climbed slowly to 3.15 million in 1957 and 5.11 million in 1962. It would take the press three decades after the attainment of Independence to cross the 10 million mark and, in a manner of speaking, join the ranks of the ‘mass media’. It would take thirty-two years of Independence for the total circulation of Hindi daily newspapers finally to overtake the total circulation of English language newspapers in India (RNI for the relevant years; Ram 2000: 248).

According to the last National Readership Survey (NRS 2006), there were an estimated 204 million readers of daily newspapers and an estimated 222 million readers of all publications in India (even if more than two-thirds of them fell in the NRS category of ‘light’ rather than ‘medium’ or ‘heavy’ readers). A positive feature spotlighted by the survey was the rising profile of ‘rural’ readers who constituted nearly 50 per cent of all daily newspaper readers; this was in striking contrast to the composition of newspaper readership in India twenty years earlier. However, women were severely under-represented in the ranks of daily newspaper readers in the country. There were more than 650 million people aged 12 and above (the NRS’s potential reader universe) who did not read any daily newspaper. The 2006 survey found that nearly 360 million people who could ‘read and understand’ some language did not read any publication. They represented a huge potential readership of the near future.

The latest survey by the Indian Readership Survey (IRS 2011, Q2) shows further growth in the numbers but the structural features of the all-India readership are not very different. Total readership of all publications is put at 347.80 million, with Hindi publications accounting for 53 per cent of this and English publications 16.80 per cent. Now ‘rural’ readers are actually in a majority, accounting for 53 per cent of the total. However, women continue to be severely under-represented in the readership, accounting for merely 33.00 per cent. There are still more than 280 million literates or neo-literates who do not read any newspaper.

3 The IRS definition of ‘urban’, which follows the Census of India classification, comprises all statutory towns; the outgrowths of cities and towns; all other places with a minimum population of 5000, where at least 75 per cent of the male working population is engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and all places with a density of population of at least 400 per sq. km. Places that do not fit these criteria are classified as ‘rural’.
NRS 2006 found that the top ten most read dailies in India were all Indian language newspapers, with an estimated readership ranging from 8.41 million to 21.17 million. According to IRS 2011, Q2, the top ten are all Indian language dailies, but the estimated readership now ranges from 14.40 million to 55.10 million. For English language newspapers, still the most resource-endowed sector within the Indian press, the challenge is one of consolidating gains and holding their place against rising Indian language challengers, competition from television, and potential competition from digital news operations.

Robin Jeffrey’s scholarship on the growth of successful newspapers in a dozen Indian languages (1987; 1993; 1997) highlights a lively and buoyant situation where, essentially, five factors have been capitalized on over the past two decades. They are: improved technology (which enables the production and distribution of larger numbers of more attractive newspapers), steadily expanding literacy, better purchasing power, aggressive publishing, and political excitement. ‘The logic of capitalism’, Jeffrey explains, has driven newspaper expansion ‘as strongly as a thirsty potential readership’ (Jeffrey 1993: 2007).

Yet while the absolute numbers are big, the social reach of the Indian press is not impressive – about 85 copies of daily newspapers per 1000 in the population. This compares poorly with the social reach of the press in developed countries, where the relevant number ranges between 150 and 550, and unfavourably with several developing countries, where the number is well above 100. There is also the phenomenon of uneven development. This means, among other things, vastly uneven dispersion among regions and states, between urban and rural India, between men and women, and among social classes.

But there are more serious problems than built-in disparity and unevenness in the development path of the Indian press. Increasing concentration of ownership in some sectors; higher levels of manipulation of news, analysis, and comment to suit the owners’ financial and political interests; the downgrading and devaluing of editorial functions and content in some leading newspaper organizations; systematic dumbing down, led by the nose by certain types of market research; the growing willingness within newspapers to tailor the editorial product to subserve advertising and marketing goals set by owners and senior management personnel; hyper-commercialization; price wars and aggressive practices in the home bases of other newspapers to overwhelm and kill competition, raising fears about media monopoly; private treaties with corporates that undermine the independence and value of news; rogue practices
like paid news (Press Council of India 2010) and bribe-taking for favourable coverage – these are deeply worrying tendencies.

Some of these tendencies, which grew qualitatively worse over the past decade, have caused anxiety to two Press Commissions, to the Press Council of India (PCI) from time to time, and to a host of practitioners in the field. Recently, they have attracted sharp criticism from PCI chairman Katju. The retired Supreme Court judge began his term by highlighting ‘three major defects in the Indian media’, which he listed as frequently diverting attention from serious socio-economic issues to non-issues and trivializing news, dividing the people by putting out communal or other divisive messages, and promoting superstition and obscurantism instead of rational and scientific ideas. He also criticized what he considered to be the relatively low intellectual level of a majority of journalists, their poor general and domain knowledge, and their lack of ‘desire to serve the public interest’. He called on the Indian media, print as well as broadcast, to take the progressive path the print media charted in Europe’s Age of Enlightenment. He also revealed that he had written to the Prime Minister suggesting that the Press Council Act be amended to bring the broadcast media under the purview of the PCI and also that it be given ‘more teeth’, including penalizing powers (Katju 2011a; 2011b).

**Radio and television**

I do not propose to delve into the history of the broadcast media in India, except to make the following shorthand observations.

The younger tradition was initiated some eight decades ago with the appearance of radio as a prop of the British colonial state. Television arrived late on the scene in independent India, but when it did, it was annexed with hardly any protest by the manipulative tradition as part of its natural domain. It had been kept away, for as long as possible, by philosophical as well as policy and resource-related considerations. It is difficult today even to imagine that until the early 1970s there was an official belief that television, which is now estimated to have an audience of 531.76 million (IRS 2011, Q2), was an unjustifiable luxury in a poor and underdeveloped country.

In the early phase, the experiments with teleclubs, urban community-viewing centres, school television, and the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment...
(SITE) showed some commitment to public service goals. But the idea of television as an agent of social change and as an educational and development-oriented medium fitted uneasily into the manipulative framework established by the Indian broadcast media tradition. Enthusiasm for the early experiments quickly waned. That set the stage for virtually abandoning the idea of introducing television with an educational and serious intellectual content on a national scale and for opening the gates, in the late 1970s, to the process of tabloidization and dumbing down. The soap-operatization of Indian television was not long in coming. Gresham’s Law, it was clear, operated in the media field as well: shallow, soap-opera-led commercial programming drove the serious and worthwhile out of the market, giving a quietus to any idea of public service broadcasting in India (Ram 2000: 250). The recent appearance of two state-funded but relatively independent television channels, Lok Sabha TV and Rajya Sabha TV, has introduced Indian audiences to some intelligent and relevant public service programming but this is a very small part of the picture.

The entry of multi-channel private satellite television, without any regulatory framework in place, has certainly made a major difference to the media landscape. On the face of it, satellite television delivered to homes by cable or direct telecast, with its plethora of channels, close to 600 of them, including more than 100 news channels, has more in common with the press tradition than with the tradition of state-controlled radio and television. But such an analysis is arguable. For one thing, the satellite television channels lack the journalistic experience and reserves of the press and function in a semi-mature or immature environment. For another, the 24x7 cycle puts tremendous pressure on the values and methods of newsgathering, analysis, and comment.

One study of private satellite television in South Asia found that it has ‘made a huge difference to the choice of viewing available even in small towns, tremendously increased viewing options in relatively small towns…[opening] windows to worlds which were inaccessible before except to the well to do… and [provoking] a lively and often heated debate about the implications for nations…communities and cultures’ (Page & Crawley 2001: 20). However, the proliferation of satellite television has happened without necessarily offering a better and richer choice of content. It has promoted increased fragmentation of the television audience. More recently, it has become clear that the choice of viewing is being restricted by ‘entry barriers…at the marketruled distribution end’ (Sashi Kumar 2011). These have resulted in a ‘peculiarly skewed and distorted’ development of the television industry in India – with
the unregulated, exorbitant, and arbitrarily variable distribution fees charged by mega cable TV and DTH operators denying small- and medium-sized broadcast ventures ‘a fighting chance’ of achieving viability by reaching a national audience (Ibid.).

The content too has raised concerns about accuracy, taste, decency, rationality, and brazen class bias. While bringing some worthwhile and occasionally excellent news, features, sports, and educational programming to tens of millions of homes, Indian satellite TV contributes, in disproportionate measure, to the sensationalization and trivialization of news, the class bias, and the other ailments that have recently drawn a lot of public criticism.

A surprising development has been the steady decline in the reach of radio, once considered the mass medium with the greatest potential to reach every section of the population in rural as well as urban India at unmatchable cost advantage. All India Radio is, in terms of territorial spread, notional reach of the population, and educational programming, one of the world’s great broadcast networks. But during a period in which both television and the press have expanded their reach impressively, it has languished. IRS 2011, Q2 estimated the audience for radio to be 161.45 million, which is 30.36 per cent of the TV audience and 46.43 per cent of press readership (IRS 2011, Q2). In contrast to television, radio as a news medium remains a state monopoly in India. From time to time, assertions are made that FM radio is ‘poised for an exponential growth in India’ (Indian Media Scenario March 2011). There are around 250 FM radio stations broadcasting now and in the next phase, 1100 more are expected to be licensed, most of them private (Ibid.). However, the private FM radio stations have not been allowed by state policy to cover news and current affairs on their own and their programming is mostly entertainment.

Functions of the press

The idea that information, and specifically the news media, can play a substantive and even a crucial role in the formation of public opinion in society and in shaping public policy on major social, political, and economic issues is an appealing one in intellectual and socio-political terms. The discovery that on vital matters such as mass hunger, deprivation, and a sudden collapse of entitlements, timely and relevant information makes a qualitative difference to the way public opinion is shaped and official policy is made to respond is somewhat flattering.
to the self-image of professional journalism. In a sense, it begs a much larger question. It depends on the kind of independent, or relatively independent, role that newspapers and other news media are allowed to play in society; and this in turn depends on the political system and practice, the constitutional and legal safeguards, and the information cultures that prevail in the country in question (Ram 1990: 146; 2000: 267). These observations apply primarily to the printed press, which has played the most substantive role in the formation of public opinion in society and can claim pre-eminence in a historical sense.

Two central functions

The long-term Indian press experience, set in a broader framework, suggests two central functions or roles that newspapers have played in modern and contemporary times. These functions may be designated as (a) the credible-informational and (b) the critical-investigative-adversarial. An accompanying condition – which evolves over time, typically as an outcome of a democratic or working people’s struggle – is that the political system, for whatever reason, gives newspapers free or relatively free rein, and a public culture of valuing these functions develops.

Analytically, the two central functions are closely related, in fact, twinned. They need to be considered together, for the following reasons.

In the first place, the credible-informational function can be seen as a prerequisite for the second function. In India, the former has something to do with a rule of law tradition that managed to take root despite the oppression, racism, inequities, and barbarities of British colonial rule (in contrast to another country under a different colonialism where nothing comparable might have happened historically). The credible-informational function is also capable, it must be assumed, of being acquired or ‘learned’ in a non-colonial or post-colonial context (Ram 1990: 152; 2000: 270).

Secondly, it is the critical-investigative-adversarial function that gives the credible-informational function a new, substantive content in relation to society. The more progressive second role that the press may be able to play, at its best, with respect to, say, public policy relating to food, hunger, and multiple deprivations

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4 I use these terms, functions and roles, which in other contexts might carry different connotations, interchangeably, to avoid linguistic infelicity.
and in defence of mass entitlements and their expansion needs much stronger ideological and political nourishment than the credible-informational role. In fact, if the critical-investigative-adversarial function weakens or gets eroded for whatever reason, the credible-informational function might fade away through sheer disuse (Ram 1990: 152; 2000: 270).

Another point needs to be made about the second function. It can also, inter alia, be conceptualised as a ‘watchdog’ role, which is to say it can involve either constructive cooperation or adversariality in the public interest. Under ideal circumstances, the purpose and tendency of press reporting, criticism, investigation, and even watchdogism may be to improve the government or reform the system; this may be characterised as the latter-day Walter Lippmann vision of an informed and enlightened free press intervening continuously to improve governance in society (Steel 1980: 180-185; 513-515). But under other circumstances, the more substantive and progressive function may legitimately turn into a ‘destabilising’ role in the sense that the press tilts effectively against what begins, as a result of the communication impact or influence, to be popularly and politically perceived as unjust or otherwise unacceptable government policy (Ram 1990: 151-152; 2000: 270-271).

It is only in this sense that an independent press, by exposing facts on the ground relentlessly and by providing some kind of hunger-related discourse with policy implications, can prevent a government from pursuing disastrous policies and thus, in concert with other democratic institutions, can, in the Amartya Sen theoretical scenario, ‘guarantee...the avoidance of acute starvation and famine’ (Sen 1985a: 77). Thus, in a deeper sense the adversarial or destabilising role makes for the relative stabilisation of crisis-averting policies if the democratic rules of the game work reasonably. Theoretically, it can be seen that so far as a government or a system is concerned, the second role might help to reform its practice, or, perhaps, to destabilise it – this depends very much on the nature of the government or system, its attitude to democratic opposition and criticism, and the character of the policies it pursues vis-à-vis mass entitlements or other great social challenges and issues (Ram 1990:151-152; 2000: 270-271).

Performed over time, in a sustained way, the two central functions working together build trust in the press or, more accurately, in individual newspapers. ‘A newspaper that can really depend upon the loyalty of its readers is as independent as a newspaper can be, given the economics of modern journalism’,
which is an economics overwhelmingly dependent on advertising. This insight from Lippmann (1922: 206) is as valuable today as it was when he presented it in his acclaimed study of public opinion nearly nine decades ago. How to retain the loyalty of readers who are migrating away from the printed press and the broadcast media to digital platforms – where there is weak or inadequate advertising support for content that news organisations offer – is another matter. But trust remains the key.

A qualification needs to be entered here. Discussion of the strengths of the press in terms of the two central functions does not imply ruling out a certain autonomy for the development of professional journalism in the sense of availability of indigenous media and intellectual resources, a stabilised practice with its own critical professional values and yardsticks, technological capabilities, entrepreneurship, advertising support to secure a measure of independence from the government, sophistication in production values, and so on. These might be present in one country and not in another, and this factor could make a vital difference to the capability of the press and its performance on the ground. In the Indian case, a critical mass of conditions for the autonomous development of journalism as a ‘calling’ developed well before Independence was won (Ram 1990: 151-152; 2000: 271).

Pastime function

A third function may now be posited. It occupies a bashful, somewhat nebulous position when we speak of the high-minded, serious, ‘quality’ cohorts of the press but is out in the open in the ‘popular’ press and on television, often in a flagrant way. At its worst, it seeks to purvey escapist entertainment, celebrity worship, vapid talk shows, scandal, and even voyeurism at the expense of everything else. But it can be something quite different – engaging, entertaining, delving into life’s small pleasures, covering hobbies and recreation, pandering to crossword and sudoku addicts, mixing in humour and satire, lightening solemn, heavy, ponderous journalism, and in general serving the ’pleasure principle’ as the French use that term. This can be designated the pastime function\(^5\) of the news media. Suffice it to say that the pastime function has always been around, in India as well as elsewhere, but

\(^{5}\) I am indebted to V.K. Ramachandran for proposing this designation for the third function. There is a Tamil phrase that describes this function felicitously: pozhuthu pokku, which roughly translates as ‘whiling away the time pleasantly’.
is encountered today on a larger scale and in a greater variety of ways than, say, a couple of decades ago.

How do we assess the performance of this third function by the news media? The criteria for evaluation used here must necessarily be perspective and proportionality. How does the entertainment or pastime function of a newspaper or television news channel or radio station fare in relation to the two central functions? Does its performance, day in and day out, outweigh the performance of the credible-informational and critical-adversarial functions? If it does, it deservedly invites criticism. Thus this observation in the Katju critique: ‘No doubt the media should provide some entertainment also to the people, but if 90 per cent of its coverage is devoted to entertainment, and only 10 per cent to all the socio-economic issues put together, then the sense of priorities of the media has gone haywire’ (Katju 2011b).

**Derivatives**

But this is not all. There are *derivatives* of the two central, twinned functions and these are significant.

The first derivative is the agency of the press in *public education*. It is widely recognised that the press, television, radio, and the digital media have the potential to make a major difference in this area. At a certain level, India’s print and broadcasting media have been serving to educate the public for decades, in areas such as politics and public affairs, the economy, science and technology, music, the arts, and sport. But as elsewhere, including the developed world, the educational potential of the press and other news media remains largely untapped. What is certain is this: if and when the educational agency of the news media is taken up systematically and imaginatively in India, there will be a qualitative change in what the media mean to society and exciting results are likely to follow.

A *second derivative* of the two central functions is the press, or at least its serious sections, serving as a forum for analysis, disputation, criticism, and comment, in which different opinions and ideas are discussed, debated, and have it out. An idealized conception of this is attributed to the American playwright Arthur Miller: ‘A good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself’ (Miller 1961). ‘Free trade in ideas’ is at the heart of the fundamental
right to free speech and expression, as India’s higher judiciary has repeatedly affirmed (Shah 2011). The problem is that more often than not, the forum provided by the news media is not what it claims to be, namely, an open, critical, and democratic forum; the rules of the game allow the editorial gatekeepers to be highly selective and restrict entry to opinions and ideas that challenge the status quo or offend their ideological sensibilities or go against their judgment of what will not be palatable to the mainstream or to advertisers. Thus you will rarely read Noam Chomsky, one of the great intellectuals of our age and a prolific commentator on politics and international affairs, in the mainstream American press.

From here, we can move on to a third derivative of the two central functions. This can be called agenda building. Several examples can be found of investigative and analytic journalism bringing a significant issue to the fore and initiating or contributing to the building of a worthwhile public agenda. The leading role of the press in investigating the Bofors scandal, which captured the imagination of political India in the late-1980s, and more recently, the role of the press and news television in probing certain aspects of the 2G spectrum, Commonwealth Games, and Adarsh housing corruption scandals readily come to mind. The publication in early 2011 of a series of articles based on the U.S. Embassy cables on India, made available by WikiLeaks, has provided the reading public and historians of contemporary India a wealth of information on foreign and domestic policy issues, and on corruption, the cover-up of corruption, and ministerial and official misconduct; and at least in one case relating to the 2008 ‘cash-for-votes’ scandal, it triggered the launch of a criminal investigation under the watch of the Supreme Court of India. It is also worth remembering that the exposé of the scandal of paid news and its role in the 2009 general election has come largely from within

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6 On March 17, 2011 a front-page story in The Hindu revealed that a U.S. Embassy cable dated July 17, 2008 and marked ‘secret’, made available by WikiLeaks, reported to the State Department that just ahead of a no-confidence vote the United Progressive Alliance government faced in the Lok Sabha on the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal, Nachiketa Kapur, an aide to Congress leader Satish Sharma, showed off to a U.S. Embassy employee ‘two chests containing cash’ as part of a much larger stash of dirty money to buy MPs’ votes (India Cables, The Hindu 2011; and Tehelka 2011). Publication of the report and the text of the cable caused a political storm in Parliament and, after a PIL or Public Interest Litigation citing the cable was filed in the Supreme Court of India, a criminal case was launched and several politicians, including Amar Singh, were arrested. The three-year delay in starting a criminal investigation spoke volumes about the official cover-up of corruption in India, which in this case would have continued had the whistle-blowing cable not surfaced in the press.
the press. P. Sainath’s investigations of rural distress and farmers’ suicides are part of the finest journalistic tradition of agenda building on working people’s issues. Socially conscious media can trigger agenda-building processes to help produce democratic and progressive outcomes; and this they can do best when an authentic public opinion and a congenial context of attitude, feeling, and critical democratic values and practice exist, as in Kerala.

We have seen how the two central functions of a relatively independent press – the credible-informational and the critical-investigative-adversarial – and the derivatives, the agency of public education, acting as a critical-disputatious-reflective forum, and agenda building, relate to each other within a conceptual framework. In an ideal world, by working virtuously and symphonically, these functions and derivatives can become a powerful force for the good.

How does the pastime function fit into this framework? Aside from the intrinsic merits of serving the pleasure principle, performance of the third function broadly and tastefully can be said to make journalism more interesting, lively, and enjoyable, thus contributing to the engagement of readers or the audience in challenging times, when cohorts of traditional supporters of newspapers, broadcast television, and radio seem to be getting away.

The capability of the news media to perform these functions and their derivatives, and contribute more meaningfully to society will be strengthened if progress can be made in a long-neglected area: journalism education, training, and research. The distinction between training, which is essentially about skills, and education, which is about something else, must be constantly kept in mind. Journalism education must aim at challenging the intellectual capabilities of aspiring journalists, introducing them to concepts and ideas, educating them in the core values, best practices, and ethics of the profession, giving them new critical yardsticks and a vision of journalism, and, of course, strengthening professional capabilities (Ram 2000: 270).

The need for innovation in specialised areas of journalism also stands out. Investigative journalism has a long and creditable track record in India but its capabilities can be significantly enhanced by acquiring a better grasp of theory and ethics applicable to this field, by appreciating its essential character as ‘the journalism of outrage’ (whereby journalists attempt to alter societal agendas by unearthing wrong-doing or bringing problems to public attention), by gaining systematic knowledge of specialised methods and techniques, and by
developing new areas such as computer-assisted reporting, data base analysis, and ‘crowdsourcing’.

A major development has been the arrival on the global media scene of Julian Assange’s *WikiLeaks*, a completely new kind of digital-technology-enabled, not-for-profit player. In less than five eventful years and especially since July 2010 when it geared up to a new level of journalistic operations and engagement, *WikiLeaks* has changed the rules of the game for newspapers and the news media everywhere, including India. It has enabled and empowered whistleblowing and ‘principled leaking’ through the power of digital technology and its ideals, functioned as a reliable and generous source and publisher, and raised the bar for investigative journalism. It has inspired other experiments or ventures to develop technologies, secure electronic drop boxes, and platforms to encourage and enable whistleblowing or leaking on issues that matter.

**Manufacture of consent**

There is yet another issue that needs serious discussion, especially in the current Indian context. It is the *propaganda* or *manufacture of consent* contribution of the press and the other news media. This can be seen to be the subversion of the two central functions, the credible-informational and the critical-investigative-adversarial.

Liberal democratic theory asserts for the most part that in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, the media are free, independent, respectful of a diversity and pluralism of views, strive to report the news fairly, fully and without undue bias, play adversarial roles, and act as watchdogs of the democratic and public interest. The propaganda model conceptualised by Herman and Chomsky (1988) in their influential book, *Manufacturing Consent*, is a frontal challenge to this liberal theorising on the media and democracy.

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7 Wikipedia defines this as ‘the act of sourcing tasks traditionally performed by specific individuals to a group of people or community (crowd) through an open call’ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowdsourcing).

8 Starting March 15, 2011, *The Hindu* offered readers a broad spectrum of articles and reports based on a selection from 5,100 India Cables, aggregating six million words, made available to it by WikiLeaks. In May 2011, the newspaper partnered with Dawn of Pakistan and NDTV 24x7 in doing a large number of articles and reports based on the Pakistan Cables, also made available by *WikiLeaks*. 
In another classic, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, Chomsky (1989) explains that the propaganda model shows how ‘the media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limiting debate and discussion accordingly’. In a highly developed context, the major media can be seen to be ‘corporations “selling” privileged audiences to other businesses’ and the picture of the world they present tends to ‘reflect the perspectives and interests of the sellers, the buyers, and the products’. Ownership concentration in, and the management structure of, the media as well as their dependence on advertising powerfully promote such a role.

The interesting question is whether the propaganda model applies to the Indian news media and the answer must be in the affirmative. The propaganda of state-controlled television and radio is widely recognised and ridiculed in the Indian public arena, but the press too can be seen to manufacture consent from time to time in relation to sensitive, contentious issues. Two major cases in point are the complicit role of influential sections of the Hindi as well as English language press during the aggressive Ayodhya communal mobilisation by the Hindu Right between 1990 and 1992, and the propaganda role played by much of the press on issues and controversies raised by the post-1991 experience of economic liberalisation.

The *kar sevak* role played by a large section of the Hindi press during the *kar seva* crisis of October-November 1990 has been documented and indicted in a study commissioned by the Press Council of India (1991). The general culpability of the Indian media in adopting a celebratory attitude towards the Hindu Right’s Ram Janmabhumi movement and in creating the impression that the mobilisation that led up to the demolition of the Babri Masjid was ‘a grand mobilisation without any dissenting voice’ has been criticised by the Citizens’ Tribunal on Ayodhya (1993). In an interesting study, Rajagopal (2001) offers a comparative perspective of the performance of the English language and Hindi press during the Ram Janmabhumi campaign and argues that ‘the social distance between the Hindi and the English language press itself became a strategic resource for Hindu nationalists’, with the gap between the coverage by the two press sectors providing ‘crucial camouflage’ for the mobilisation.

In the case of Gujarat in 2002-2003, a similar point can be made about the differential coverage by the English language and Gujarati press. While ‘national media’ coverage has justly been applauded for truth-telling and blowing the whistle on a state-sanctioned genocidal pogrom, it was a sobering fact that the
dominant Gujarati print media in the State performed the manufacture of consent function with a vengeance, attracting censure from various fact-finding exercises, including a report done for the Editor’s Guild of India (2002). ‘The mischievous role of certain Gujarati newspapers’, the fact finding mission concluded, ‘cannot be glossed over. Some of them have been named for irresponsible and unethical journalism in the past but have regrettably learnt nothing and forgotten nothing. Wilful incitement to offence, propagation of hate, and fuelling disorder are criminal offences’. In the event, these newspapers went scot-free.

As for post-1991 economic liberalisation, press and broadcasting media coverage to date has tended to adopt a laudatory tone, keep out or underplay the criticisms and objections, censor the negative political and socio-economic effects, especially among the poor, and provide little space to the voices of robust criticism and opposition, including those raised from the ranks of professional economists. This, if anything, is a more conscious and more systematic case of manufacture of consent. ‘The media themselves’, observes an experienced insider, ‘have become more and more class self-conscious, with little going for those below a set purchasing power threshold. The lower you are in the social and economic scale, seems the moral and the model, the less relevant you are to the media, either as subject or consumer... Profit maximization, rather than any commitment to the citizen’s right to be informed, drives the news media’ (Sashi Kumar 2011).

‘Patnaik’s Law’

In an original and unusually perceptive meditation on ‘Markets, Morals and the Media’, the economist Prabhat Patnaik (2002) addressed an interesting conundrum. Despite the growing reach of the media in society, evidenced in circulation, readership and viewership growth, and despite the talent they have been able to attract, ‘the power of the media as an institution’ had ‘gone down greatly in India’ in recent times. Patnaik looked at two cases – the coverage by leading English-language newspapers and television channels of the 2002 carnage of Muslims in Gujarat, in which the State government played a complicit role; and Tehelka’s 2001 sting operation on fictitious but presumed defence deals that exposed a culture of bribery. Neither exposé made any discernible difference to political outcomes.

The key question was: why had this decline in the power of the media occurred? Patnaik’s answer was that ‘internal’ or media-centric explanations were
inadequate and that a better explanation was that ‘the moral universe of the people’ had undergone a change, engendering ‘a degree of confusion, uncertainty, and fuzziness’ about what was right and wrong and enabling the communal or corrupt forces to ‘get away with their unconcern for media and intellectual opinion’. Looking deeper for an explanation, the economist found it in such factors as the collapse of dreams of building a society that was not based on private aggrandizement, the ascendancy of a new kind of international finance capital based on the globalization of finance, the spinelessness of nation states and political formations in the face of this ascendancy, the intellectual hegemony attained by ideas and policies imposed by globalized finance, and the plethora of institutions and instruments that serve this juggernaut (Ibid.).

There can be little question that the news media ‘have fallen prey to this hegemony’. From this, we come to what may be called Patnaik’s Law on media power in relation to economic issues: ‘where the media are on the same side as international finance capital, they appear powerful; but in fields where they strike out on their own, upholding humane values and expressing concern for the poor and the suffering, they appear powerless’. Such powerlessness, he proposes, is the outcome of a process, ‘the process of ascendancy of international financial capital over the economy, which the media, paradoxically, with a few honourable exceptions, have avidly supported’ (Ibid.).

We have here a persuasive, sympathetic, and deep-going critique of media performance that focuses on the theme of media power, its limitations, and its perceived decline in recent times in India.

The status of media freedom in India

There are differing views of the status of press and media freedom in India. Some external observers consider the Indian news media to be in an enviable position in the developing world, their freedom, space, stability, and security derived from history, constitutional protection, the workings of a democratic political system, and their own rapid growth and expansion over the past quarter-century. Others, mostly media insiders, believe these advantages are offset to a considerable extent by an illiberal framework of laws, dating back to the British Raj, which cover criminal and civil defamation, contempt of court, legislative privilege, official secrecy, national security, and incitement to offences – and have a chilling effect on freedom of expression.
Further, media freedom in India is considered ‘incomplete’ because the print media
and the broadcast media have not been placed on an equal constitutional and legal
footing (Ravi 2007). Freedom of the press is a fundamental right not explicitly
mentioned by the Constitution of India. Fortunately, judicial interpretation has
derived it from Article 19 and placed it on firm ground. Specifically, the Supreme
Court of India has held that freedom of the press is a combination of two
freedoms, Article 19(1)(a), ‘the freedom of speech and expression’, and Article
19(1)(g), ‘the freedom to practice any profession, or to carry on any occupation,
trade or business’. The first is clearly the principal component. It is subject to
‘reasonable restrictions’ that can be imposed by law for the purposes specified
under eight heads in Article 19(2) – and for no other purpose. Article 19(1)(g) is,
however, subject to ‘reasonable restrictions’ that can be imposed by law ‘in the
interests of the general public’. It has also been held that the restrictions must
meet judicial standards of reasonableness. No such protection has been conferred
on television and radio, whose status within the Article 19 framework can only
be described as nebulous, insecure, and yet to be settled.

Secondly, newspapers in independent India function within a benign system of
registration; since there is no licensing, they cannot be de-licensed. By contrast,
while terrestrial television is a state monopoly and All India Radio alone is
allowed to do news and current affairs radio broadcasts from within India, private
television channels and FM radio stations function under a licensing system and
can be taken off the air for alleged serious transgressions of the rules.

Paradoxically, in practice, while the press has a statutorily established watchdog,
the Press Council of India, in place, there is no legal regulatory framework
for private satellite television channels, which have attracted growing public
complaint that they are a law unto themselves.

This paradoxical situation demands well-considered, progressive reform. The aim
of such reform must be to expand the scope of media freedom – but also to ensure
professional and social accountability.

**The social responsibility of the media**

Conventional wisdom in the west posits a *laissez faire* conception of a
libertarian press with unbridled rights that no government and no external
agency could be allowed to touch. The social responsibility conception arose
in reaction to this posture. In the United States, the first systematic theory of a socially responsible press was presented in 1947 in the report of the Commission on Freedom of the Press, headed by Robert M. Hutchins. The Hutchins Commission lay down five ‘standards of performance’ for a free and responsible press. These were (1) to provide a ‘truthful, comprehensive account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning’; (2) to serve as a ‘forum for the exchange of comment and criticism’; (3) to offer a ‘representative picture of the constituent groups of society’; (4) to present and clarify the ‘goals and values of society’; and (5) to provide ‘full access to the day’s intelligence’ (Lambeth 1986: 7).

The specification of ‘standards of performance’ needs revision and updating. But there can be little doubt that over the long term the conception of socially responsible news media has been influential and has come to stay. Over the years, a substantial international literature has appeared on templates for socially and ethically accountable journalism and also on the constitutive ‘elements of journalism’ (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001). This has yielded codes of practice or professional ethics that have privileged such principles as truth telling, freedom and independence, fairness and justice, humaneness, and working for the social or public good, and emphasized such disciplines as fact-checking, verification, investigation, rigorous data sourcing and analysis, providing context and meaning, and maintaining perspective.

But what are facts to the journalist? The New York Times may continue to print on its front page the claim, ‘All the News That’s Fit to Print’, patented in 1896, but everyone recognizes this is mythologizing about not just one newspaper but the field of journalism itself. I would propose that an intelligent approach to the journalist and her facts needs to fall back not so much on C.P. Scott’s much-quoted dictum, ‘Comment is free but facts are sacred’ (Scott 1921), as on E.H. Carr’s classic dissection of ‘The Historian and His Facts’ (Carr 1961: 7-30). It needs to steer between the Scylla of a ‘fetishism’ of undistinguishable facts and documents, the most trivial mixed up with the really significant, and the Charybdis of the wildest and most extreme subjective form of ‘disputable interpretation’. As for the discerning public, the most sensible advice must be, following Carr (1961: 23), ‘When you read, or tune in to, a work of journalism, always listen out for the buzzing’.

This is a period during which, taking the cue from the critique and demands placed on the national agenda by PCI chairman Katju, many voices within the
Indian establishment and the large media-consuming public are demanding accountability, transparency, better standards, an end to paid news and other rogue practices, and effective governance and regulation. The more discerning critical voices make the point that ‘self-regulation’ either does not exist within the Indian media industry or, where it exists, is not effective. So what can be the answer?

Interestingly, a parallel discussion of media-related issues, provoked by the phone hacking scandal featuring the News of the World, the Murdoch empire, an array of top British politicians, and the Metropolitan Police, is being conducted in the United Kingdom. An unprecedented inquiry set up under the Inquiries Act 2005 and conducted by Lord Justice Leveson shows every promise of going deep and wide into ‘the culture, practices and ethics of the press’ and coming up with sound recommendations for ‘a more effective policy and regulation that supports integrity and freedom of the press while encouraging the highest ethical standards’ (Leveson Inquiry 2011). Forward-looking liberal voices, notably Alan Rusbridger, the highly regarded Editor of The Guardian, have welcomed this as ‘an opportunity for the industry to have a conversation with itself while also benefitting from the perspective and advice of others’ (Rusbridger 2011), and several other British journalists seem to agree with this.

The Indian situation cries out for such an independent, comprehensive, hard look into the culture, practices, and ethics of the news media and into questions of what kind of regulatory and governance mechanisms need to be put in place. The object must be the same: to support integrity and freedom of the media while encouraging the highest ethical standards and best practices. For too long have India’s news media got by on the strength of empiricism and animal spirits, an inchoate realization of their own history, accumulated strengths, capabilities, weaknesses, vices, and unrealized potential, and an approach that is ad hoc and, on most issues, hit-or-miss. They have travelled quite a distance since Independence, with the pace accelerating over the past quarter-century. What they need to acquire in order to develop further is an active consciousness, a coherent theory of their own role in society, higher professional norms and standards and benchmarking, a better-informed socio-political and ethical side to their practice, a systematic critical monitoring of their own performance, a break with the illusion of self-sufficiency, an internal accountability to higher intellectual standards, a whole-hearted acceptance of social responsibility, a more precise and less breathless style, and a sober advocacy of their own role as an indispensable part of the striving for a democratic and just system.
Nobody knows what the long term holds for India’s news media. But if they do not shy away from these challenges and go about these tasks earnestly and intelligently, their immediate and medium-term future can be considered secure and bright.

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