

Sharing the Best and the Worst: The Indian news media in a global context

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If I were to seek pride in India now it would in a tiny way be part of my pride; if there were to be disappointment and regret I must now share that regret, and in some oblique way accept its responsibility... Only now, after twenty-five years of knowing India, can I make the presumption of claiming a small share of its rare joys and its frequent sorrows.

-- James Cameron, Foreword to *An Indian Summer: A Personal Experience of India*, Macmillan, London, 1974, page 5.

James Cameron, I think, would have got it right – I mean about the Indian news media as well. I doubt they were part of his pride when he came upon their front ranks, with their wildly speculative ways, during his first visit to India in 1946, a time when the transfer of power and, in the grim background, the Partition of India were being negotiated. A quarter century later, he was still not impressed with India's newspapers, not to mention All India Radio; he found the tightly controlled broadcast network preoccupied with 'the machinery of government as distinct from the realities of democracy' and, like the newspapers, not showing 'the slightest knowledge of nor interest in the affairs of other places' (Cameron 1974: 58). He knew some 'thoughtful and intelligent men, journalists in their own right (as is evident from the work they do outside)' – there were few women in Indian journalism at the time – but these thinking journalists were 'enmeshed in a dismal machine, which grows worse every year' (*ibid.*: 58). He was shocked by the reporting of the story of the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation, when 'all newspaper professionalism fell to bits' and readers were served not verifiable reports from the actual scene of the happenings, but 'half-baked Hemingway in an orgy of wish-fulfilment because, one sadly supposed, this was the Indian line' (*ibid.*: 174-175). But Cameron, fair-minded as ever, entered this caveat: his longstanding friends, 'the core of serious and concerned Indian journalists', were even more depressed than he was by this 'jejune amateurism' (*ibid.*: 175).

Cameron never condescended; he judged from high standards. This self-taught journalist – reporter, broadcaster, occasional illustrator and cartoonist, foreign correspondent – took pride in communicating clearly, precisely, and meaningfully. He wrote like an angel when in flow, with descriptive richness, shinningly honest value judgments, and what he called *attitude* embellishing his 'art of omission' (to borrow a phrase from Robert Louis Stevenson).

Cameron, the generous-spirited foreign correspondent, who saw history being shaped before his eyes in Vietnam, Korea, India, Cyprus, Kenya, the Congo, and elsewhere, had many interesting things to say about journalism as it was and as it should be. For one thing, he understood it to be 'a trade, or a calling that can be practised in many ways'; he was clear it was 'not and never has been a profession...since its practice has neither standards nor sanctions' (Cameron 1967: 69). I think the Leveson Inquiry should be interested in that insight from half a century ago, not much seems to have changed about the essential nature of the trade or calling since then.

By the time Cameron was in his middle thirties, a famous writer and broadcaster, he had formed strikingly original opinions about the craft and art of being a foreign correspondent. When he started out as a reporter, he had decided that 'facts must never get in the way of the truth', as he provocatively put it in *An Indian Summer* (Cameron 1974: 147). His reputation as a foreign correspondent was made by persisting with this approach.

He was clear that 'objectivity was of less importance than the truth' and 'the reporter whose technique was informed by no opinion lacked a very serious dimension'. Journalists therefore were professionally obliged to present their 'attitude as vigorously and persuasively' as they could, to be set out for consideration, criticism, and debate. Being scrupulous and consistent about this he held to be a vital ingredient of 'moral independence'; among other things, this involved an 'attitude of mind that will challenge and criticize automatically, thus to destroy or weaken the built-in advantages of all propaganda and special pleading – including the journalist's own' (Cameron 1967: 72-73).

Cameron's was an unconventional position. But it was well reasoned, intellectually honest, philosophically grounded, and nuanced – and professionally not difficult to grasp for any 'thinking journalist' (*ibid.*: 72), as he pointed out. You will not find this way of thinking about reporting in *The Elements of Journalism* and I doubt *attitude* and *voice* are, or can be, taught in journalism schools, although they can certainly be recognized, encouraged, and rewarded. Self-deprecation, which can be mistaken for cynicism, came naturally to the very Scottish Cameron who, as though this were not enough, had been through a variant of French school education in Brittany. But to the extent his position involves theorizing, it is free not just from cant but also from its polar opposite, the studied cynicism that is an element of journalism in many countries, including Britain.

It was this highly original attitude and voice that he brought to India as a foreign correspondent in the 1940s and later as a son-in-law of India (as we say), after he married Moni, my friend, who is here with us today with her husband, Sir Denis Forman. Cameron loved the country with its enormous diversity and its 'warm and generous' people – and was its most consistent and empathetic critic among all the foreign correspondents who have covered 'its rare joys and frequent sorrows' over the years. He was a friend of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, whom he rated as 'incomparably the greatest man I ever met...and a big influence in my life' in a 1975 *Guardian* piece (Cameron 1981: 309). But there was no question of cronyism for this journalist, who did not hesitate to criticize Nehru severely for letting himself, his nation, and his people down.

James Cameron was incapable of compromising what he believed to be the truth unfolding before his eyes. He never surrendered his thinking journalist's attitude and voice, his capacity for admiration as well as outrage, his moral independence; and not even Lord Beaverbrook could get one past his apparently nonchalant guard. You can read Cameron, to learn about his life in journalism, in *Point of Departure*, or about his tough love for India, in *An Indian Summer*, written after a terrible, life-changing road accident that probably shortened his life eventually. For sheer literary pleasure, you can go to *The Best of Cameron*, a selection brought out by New English Library in 1981 that should find a place in the library of every good journalism school in the world but is unfortunately out of print.

I believe this great friend of India would have been spot on about the joys and sorrows of the contemporary Indian news media. I imagine he would have found his 'pride' on the one hand and his 'disappointment and regret' on the other to be in some kind of rough equivalence.

A mixed report

Cut to 2012. I recently asked Mark Magnier, South Asia Bureau Chief of the *Los Angeles Times*, how he viewed India's print media. Here is his response (Magnier 2012), which I think speaks to that kind of balance:

'There's a real vibrancy (and profitability) in India's print media that stands in marked contrast to the often depressive atmosphere we're seeing in the West. This can be very uplifting, a reflection of India's general outlook and stage of development, its strong economic growth, upward mobility, social possibility and heady embrace of wealth and bling, i.e. the early days of a growth story (before aging, economic maturity and other problems set in).

'That said, in my view this enthusiasm and energizing sense of possibility is not yet necessarily matched by the quality of the journalism. Many organizations seem to rely on inexpensive, young talent that, revolving door fashion,

leaves after a few years, in organizations relatively uninterested in building institutional experience or the professional standards that come out of the careful nurturing of promising journalists over many years.

[In an aside, I learned this soon after I moved to India and followed a story on the front-page of one of the English-language dailies about an angry village god outside Delhi supposedly killing off residents every 17 days over a several-month period. When I got to the village, in fact the time gap between deaths was fairly random, as you would find with any population, and the main point of the story in error. There was no appreciable fact checking and no attempt to correct it, however, a valuable lesson.]

‘Of course these are generalizations, and there are reporters and organizations that work very hard and do great work, but I believe the industry could benefit from a bit more focus on fundamentals.’

This then is the topic I have chosen, in consultation with my hosts, for the James Cameron Memorial Lecture I am honoured to give at City University London today. My theme is how India’s newspapers, news television, state-controlled radio, and nascent digital media share the best and the worst of traits and practices that we witness round the world – as journalism struggles to come to terms with profoundly changed and changing circumstances that have destabilized the game, whatever spin one chooses to put on it.

Key issues and challenges

Let me flag some of the key issues and challenges, after disclosing that I have addressed them in papers and essays I have published over the years and especially in a talk to the contemporary history section of the last [Indian History Congress \(Ram 2011\)](#), and draw from that bit of research and reflection here.

The first issue is the need critically to reflect on, and rethink, the implications of the buoyant growth story. It is a well-worn narrative that draws heavily on the differences in the situation of the news media in developed countries (‘mature media markets’) and some major developing countries (‘emerging media markets’). I won’t bother you too much with the statistics; they are readily available elsewhere. What they reveal is that ‘India is one of the few places on earth where newspapers still thrive’, as Ken Auletta puts it in an article in *The New Yorker* (Auletta 2012), and plenty of professional opportunities are available for journalists, especially young journalists.

The Indian press, especially Indian-language newspapers, and satellite news television continue to be in growth mode. Some of that story has been splendidly researched, analyzed, and told by my friend, the political scientist Robin Jeffrey in his book, *India’s Newspaper Revolution*, published more than a decade ago (Jeffrey 2000) and a series of articles in the *Economic & Political Weekly* (1987, 1993, 1997). The key factors behind India’s newspaper revolution, Jeffrey points out, are *improved technology, steadily expanding literacy, better purchasing power, aggressive publishing*, and, last but not least, *political excitement* (Jeffrey 1993: 2007). There is a huge appetite out there for news and what masquerades as news, for analysis, for comment, and of course for entertainment and also for that hybrid creature, ‘infotainment’. All this has spawned tens of influential Indian language daily newspapers, many of them with large circulations and huge readership. **Today half this total readership of about 352 million is in small towns and rural areas and women account for a third of the readership (IRS 2011, Q2; IRS 2012, Q2).**

But the buoyancy and implications of this print media development, while ‘uplifting’ when viewed against ‘the often depressive atmosphere’ seen in the West, must not be romanticized. The social reach of the Indian press is not impressive – about 85 copies of daily newspapers per 1000 in the population, a statistic that fares dismally in any kind of international comparison. 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. Such poor social reach and the extreme disparities obviously influence and distort news and editorial coverage of happenings in society.

The audience for television in India is huge, in the region of 563 million (IRS 2012, Q2), and still growing. However, that is largely for the entertainment channels. The dozens of 24 x 7 satellite television news channels that compete with the print media in English and the various Indian languages account for only about 10 per cent of the total TV market, which means they are decidedly not the dominant 'organism' in the Indian news media 'ecosystem' that they sometimes claim to be. There are also signs that the long-expected shakeout is beginning to happen in the news television sector.

There are other reasons why the buoyancy of the Indian news media should not be exaggerated. For newspapers, the huge circulation numbers ride on the back of extreme under-pricing of cover prices and the printing and dumping of hundreds of thousands of copies that go straight to the *raddhi* or used paper market for recycling. The latter, a sharp practice to inflate circulation for advertising gain, has become systemic. As though this were not enough, the Television Audience Measurement (TAM) system has come under widespread criticism and even frontal attack. NDTV, a pioneer in news television in India, recently filed a suit in New York to recover about \$ 1 billion from Nielsen and WPP, the world's largest communication services group, who jointly own TAM in India. The suit alleges, among other things, gross negligence, false representations, *prima facie* tort, and corruption in the ratings system.

What is now clear is that the economics of both the print and broadcast sector has been hardening, gradually. The advertising market has tightened in the last few years. The catalyst seems to be the global economic slowdown: it has taken its toll of the Indian media growth story, leading some industry experts to rule out any return to the pre-crisis situation, especially in the crucial matter of advertising revenues.

And how does India fare in the digital age paradox? Let me first try and define this paradox, which is central to this transformational age. On the one hand, more and more people are reading newspapers digitally; you have for the first time in history a live global audience for the best publications; there are excellent newspaper and news websites offering rich, many-sided, multi-media content, including long-form features, investigative articles and thoughtful analysis; there are even success stories, here and there, of journalism garnering impressive digital revenues; the sky seems to be the limit to what you can offer in this exciting space. On the other hand, the existential crisis of the old news media has not been resolved and it continues to take a heavy toll; the discussions of the 'future of journalism' have not ceased; and poor morale and low spirits continue to haunt the journalistic profession as well as the news media industry – for the simple reason that all this wonderful development has not yet yielded a viable revenue and business model for internet or digital journalism.

The newspaper industry continues to face '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 (Ram 2011: 3). Broadcast television faces the same problem, in somewhat different ways and measure. I rely on the judgment of John Naughton and other experts that this 'dominant organism' in the 'media ecosystem' is in 'inexorable decline' (Naughton 2006), with commercial television, in parallel with printed newspapers, 'losing its audience, its advertising revenue, and its reporting resources' (Downie & Schudson 2009).

There can be little doubt that within this digital age paradox, both the print and broadcast media in India continue to benefit from the country's relative backwardness in Internet use and broadband access – and from the digital divides that stand out. China's development in this respect has been quite spectacular: at the end of June 2012, it had an estimated 538 million Internet users (CNNIC July 2012), most of them served by broadband, minimally defined by western standards. India, by contrast, has only something like 121 million Internet users (Internet World Stats 2012), 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 swathes of backwardness amidst relatively high economic growth rates. The most revealing indicator in the comparison is the Internet's penetration of the comparable populations: China's 40 per cent, which is still only about half the developed country norm, contrasts sharply with India's 10 per cent.

What this means is that the impact of the digital revolution on the print press and on news television is considerably stronger in China than in India – and that the tipping point is likely to arrive sooner in the former. It also means that while virtually every Indian newspaper has a website and some major ones offer informative and attractive digital content to readers in India and abroad, this is secondary to print content by a long chalk. My friend Alan Rusbridger, Editor of *The Guardian*, was recently quoted as saying that ‘journalism is changing at the speed of light’ (that is, nearly 300,000 km per second) and that ‘virtually every week we are learning new techniques and fresh truths about the way digital technologies are transforming the media’ (Rusbridger 2012). Within the Indian newspaper industry, there seems to be a sense that the field is changing at the speed of sound (which is 342.29 metres per second).

This situation has bred complacency, so there is no real push to learn these new techniques and fresh truths that are so vital to the digital age. According to Jacob Mathew, the first Indian 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 such predictions and the assumptions behind them reflect a widespread attitude of denial of the proximity, if not the immediacy, of the digital impact. The just-released top line findings of the Indian Readership Survey (IRS 2012, Q2) show that newspaper readership has remained virtually stagnant over the past six months compared with a 35 per cent growth of Internet users, of course from a very low base. It seems highly improbable that India has until 2040 for the tipping point to arrive.

The critical challenge here is the need to come to terms with the convergences observed worldwide, make nuanced assessments of the pace of change, and prepare for the future, including possibly hard times.

A conceptual framework

In critically assessing performance a clear distinction needs to be drawn and maintained between the *state or fortunes of the news media* and the *state of journalism*. The point seems obvious enough but the two states tend to get conflated in public as well media marketing discourse. High growth rates, with animal spirits rampant across the sector, may offer opportunities but they do not guarantee quality. I would now like to turn our focus on the state of journalism in India and some *relevance and quality* issues. To do this, one needs a conceptual framework to look at and evaluate news media functions in society. I have written on this subject and will only offer some shorthand observations here.

The long-term Indian press experience, set in a broader framework, suggests two extremely valuable central functions or roles that the country’s best newspapers have played in modern and contemporary times. These functions may be termed (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. Performed over time, the two central functions working together build *trust* in the press, or more accurately, in individual newspapers.

There are also valuable derivatives of the two central, twinned functions. The first derivative is the agency of the press in *public education*. A second is serving as a *critical forum* for analysis, disputation, 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). A third derivative is *agenda building*. 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.

A third function of the news media is the *pastime* or *entertainment* function. 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.

Evaluating performance: the good and the bad

What can we say broadly about the performance of India's news media within this evaluative framework?

The Indian press is more than two centuries old. It has always been a highly political press. 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 independence; the sharp ideological and political divides; 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 truly long term (Ram 2000: 242). 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. This rich history accounts for the seriousness, relevance, and public-spirited orientation of the press at its best (*Ibid.*: 242-243).

The tradition of a strong and assertive political press has continued into six decades of independence. Today satellite television competes with newspapers aggressively and often breathlessly in trying to influence the political agenda of states and the nation. With their expanded reach, these news media together serve as an effective antidote to any trends of de-politicization in society. Further, there is significant space for the expression of dissent and contrary political opinions.

Pluralism in the Indian media can be said to reflect the vast regional, linguistic, socio-economic, and cultural heterogeneity of the subcontinent. A positive factor for both the print media and news television is that over the past quarter-century, their social representativeness has broadened. For one thing, there has been a rapid feminization of the newsroom. Alongside this, the composition of the journalistic workforce has become more inclusive in socio-economic and regional terms. However, the number of Dalit journalists in the mainstream news media continues to be insignificant.

Tens of millions of Indians are voracious consumers of news about politics. Daily newspapers in nearly two dozen Indian languages as well as in English are their primary source, with news television spicing up the fare. And clearly political awareness and excitement are good for the media business. Jeffrey speaks of the 'Crimean War effect' and makes the connection strongly: while literacy, basic communications, and adequate technology are a necessary condition for the development of a daily newspaper culture, it is 'momentous events' that provide 'the link between these developments and politics – the link that seems to send circulations shooting upwards' (Jeffrey 1987: 608).

The progressive south Indian State of Kerala is the classic Indian case of politicization spreading to large sections of the population, rural as well as urban, and creating a newspaper-reading culture; and the mass habit, in town and country, of reading daily and periodical newspapers and tracking major happenings through them contributing to the creation of an authentic public opinion (Ramachandran 1996: 206).

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 Hindu Right, is a strikingly different case. The Hindi press has still not been able to live down the ignominy of the *kar sevak*, or militant Hindu chauvinist, role a large section of it played during the Ayodhya crisis of October-November 1990; this has been well

documented and indicted in a study commissioned by the Press Council of India (1991). The culpability of influential sections of the Indian media in adopting a respectful, if not celebratory, attitude towards the Hindu Right's Ram Janmabhoomi 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 the case of Gujarat's anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002, there was strikingly different coverage by the English language and the 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), for 'wilful incitement to offence, propagation of hate, and fuelling disorder'.

Some of the finest work done by the Indian press, historically and in contemporary times, is its investigation and expose of political corruption, ministerial misconduct, and government misdeeds. In fact, corruption, in its myriad forms and tremendous scale, presents limitless investigative opportunities to India's independent news media; it also enables them continuously to win strong public support for the work they do. Here is James Cameron (Cameron 1974: 139) on the phenomenon, as of 1974 when its scale was perhaps a thousandth of what it is reckoned to be today:

Corruption in India is almost as leaden a cliché as hunger. It is sanctified by the oldest of traditions: it is denied by nobody, indeed the totality and pervasiveness of Indian corruption is almost a matter of national pride: just as India's droughts are the driest, her famines the most cruel, her over-population the most uncontrollable, so are all the aspects of Indian corruption and bribery the most wholly spread and spectacular.

Given such exciting opportunities to investigate independently, build on investigations done by official watchdog bodies, and do agenda building on the theme of corruption, the press has done itself proud. The Bofors howitzer deal scandal captured the imagination of political India in the late-1980s, so much so that Bofors became a synonym for sleaze and skulduggery in various Indian languages. The opening shot in this case was fired by a well-informed broadcast over Swedish Public Radio, which then, curiously, went silent over the affair. The prolonged investigation and document-backed expose of the scandal by *The Hindu*, in which I played a part, is generally reckoned to have contributed to the downfall of a corrupt government. Bofors featured arbitrary and opaque decision-making on a major military acquisition, and contractual arrangements to pay bribes aggregating more than \$200 million as the *quid pro quo* for the Indian government's purchase of the 155 mm Swedish howitzers in preference to French howitzers that the Indian Army brass had repeatedly rated as a better buy. About \$50 million of this amount was paid into secret Swiss bank accounts before the whistle was blown on the corrupt deal.

In the years since, there might have been no repeat of Bofors and the way it unravelled. But in the last few years, the press and news television have aggressively probed, and agitated on, a series of corruption scandals that have shaken political India and eroded the credibility of the Manmohan Singh government.

This is the Man Booker Prize-giving season and we have quite an exciting shortlist of contenders. By the way, I haven't read all the books on the shortlist but I can't imagine how Hillary Mantel won't do it again. Anyway, here is my shortlist of India's choicest corruption scandals.

The 2G-spectrum scam is about the government twisting the rules under a 'first come, first served' (rather than an auction-based) allocation regime to favour mobile telephony companies through undercharging 2-G spectrum allocation licences in return for huge kickbacks. The presumptive loss to the government has been estimated by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), a constitutionally created financial watchdog, to be in the region of US\$32 billion but most of the bribes are yet to be traced by the criminal investigations.

The scandal around the 2010 Commonwealth Games held in New Delhi featured massive irregularities such as the award of work contracts at very high prices, often to ineligible parties, and pervasive corruption in procurement and the award of contracts for the construction of the game venues.

The Adarsh Housing Society scam in Mumbai, India's financial capital, involved top politicians, officials, and military officers subverting rules to have a massive high-rise constructed at a prime location and corner flats for themselves at hugely deflated prices.

The mining scandal, spread across several States, has featured the illegal and corrupt mining of ore, especially iron ore meant for export, defrauding the state of mining revenues through ministerial and official collusion, encroachment on forest land, and trampling on the rights of tribal folk.

The coal block allocation scandal, or Coalgate, promises to be the biggest of them all – and perhaps one day someone who fictionalizes it will be in contention for a Booker. The CAG has exposed the fact that by going for a process of arbitrary allocations, or patronage deals, instead of competitive bidding, the central government has enabled a 'windfall gain' for the allottees worth US\$ 35 billion.

In all these cases, the irregularities and suspicious transactions were exposed by constitutionally or statutorily created authorities. But the role of the news media has been crucial in keeping up the heat, contributing new information or angles, and following up –thus helping to build a democratic public agenda on the theme of political corruption.

I must add a caveat here. Critics have noted, correctly, that the energy and motivation Indian newspapers have shown in going after government and political corruption have been missing in investigating and exposing corporate corruption. The reasons for this I will go into a little later.

The publication in early 2011 of a series of articles based on the U.S. Embassy cables on India, made available by *WikiLeaks*, 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. One cable supplied explosive information on the 2008 'cash-for-votes' scandal, where parliamentary votes were sought to be bought to help the Manmohan Singh government squeak through a no-confidence motion in the Lok Sabha, India's House of Commons. Hearteningly, publication of the story in the press triggered the launch of a criminal investigation under the watch of the Supreme Court of India.

I have given you an idea of the democratic role played by influential sections of the Indian news media in the sphere of politics. Unfortunately, when it comes to economic issues and policies, the mainstream media's contribution turns out to be anything but democratic. This was not always the case. Amartya Sen has commended the historical role of Indian newspapers in exposing hunger-related facts on the ground in extreme cases and, in concert with other democratic institutions, preventing the government from pursuing disastrous policies and thus guaranteeing 'the avoidance of acute starvation and famine' (Sen 1985a: 77).

Today a number of factors operating in the Indian media industry have virtually shut out news, analysis, and comment that challenge the neo-liberal economic policies that have held sway over the last two decades. Mainstream press and broadcast media coverage 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.

Critics point out that Indian journalism is facing increasing pressure from advertisers, marketing personnel, corporate managers, and even senior journalists to present and prioritize 'feel good' factors – rather than highlight

the reality of mass deprivations and what to do about them. In several frank conversations with the executives of India's largest newspaper publishing company, Auletta learnt why poverty, especially rural poverty, was not a fit subject for news and editorial coverage, why this coverage had to cater to the 'aspirational' among young readers (because poverty was 'not a condition to which one aspires'), and why a newspaper's editorial philosophy, which was derived from its business philosophy, had to be one of optimism (Auletta 2012).

But the problem, which is by no means confined to one or a few news organizations, goes way beyond this. 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, and despite the talent they have been able to attract, 'the power of the media as an institution' has 'gone down greatly in India' in recent times.

The key question is: why has this decline in the power of the media occurred? Patnaik's answer is that 'internal' or media-centric explanations are inadequate and that a better explanation is that 'the moral universe of the people' has undergone a change, engendering 'a degree of confusion, uncertainty, and fuzziness' about what is right and wrong and enabling communal or corrupt forces to 'get away with their unconcern for media and intellectual opinion'. Looking deeper for an explanation, the economist finds it in such factors as the collapse of dreams of building a society that is 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 formation 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.*). George Monbiot in a recent *Guardian* column on the collusion between big business, neo-liberal thinktanks, and the media is on to much the same trend in the UK – how 'to free the rich from the constraints of democracy' (Monbiot 2012).

Poverty and mass deprivation, basic livelihood issues, the impact of policies on these issues, the state of agriculture and the countryside remain massively undercovered in Indian newspapers and the broadcast media. The good thing is that the honourable exceptions Patnaik refers to have been significant. P. Sainath's investigations of rural distress, farmers' suicides, and mass migrations, which won him several honours, including a Magsaysay award, are in the finest traditions of people-oriented, investigative, agenda-building journalism. Such influential and iconic work, along with the lively contributions of young idealistic reporters on these subjects in various Indian languages, suggest a way out of this bind – provided a public culture of valuing such journalism can be built up.

The business of journalism

In several developed countries, media monopoly has developed in a big way, eroding diversity, pluralism, and the values of serious journalism. The situation in India is rather different, as is appropriate to a stage of media development when ageing, economic maturity, and the problems of maturity have not yet set in (Magnier 2012). But here too monopolistic tendencies and aggressive market practices aimed at aggrandizing market share and killing competition have manifested themselves in the press and, to an extent, in the news television sector. There is clear evidence of hyper-commercialization, which takes a heavy toll of journalism.

Auletta's *New Yorker* piece, *Citizens Jain* (Auletta 2012), offers an entertaining glimpse of an exotic world of aggressive and unorthodox publishing and business strategizing for growing newspapers that throws out of the

window most of the things we have learnt from journalism school or *The Elements of Journalism*.

The issue of 'paid news' exploded in the public sphere in the aftermath of the 2009 general election. A section of the press revealed that a large number of newspapers, small, medium-sized, and big, and also several television channels had sold promotional news packages of specified size, using an under-the-table rate card, to candidates in State Assembly and parliamentary elections. Candidates who could not pay, or refused to pay, were blotted out of news coverage. There were special rates for negative coverage of the candidates' opponents. This involved violations of the law, was tantamount to extortion in several cases, and mocked every rule of ethical journalism. It was every bit of a rogue practice as the UK's phone hacking affair was. The scandal of paid news led to a damning report by a sub-committee of the Press Council and calls for external regulation of the press and the private television channels.

It also led to some critical debate on a wider phenomenon – paid news not as a rogue practice but as a deeper and industry-wide phenomenon that was not confined to election coverage. Sainath offers this handy definition: 'Paid news is run to pass off an advertisement, a piece of propaganda and advertisement...pass that as news, pretend that it is news, that is "paid news". Paid news does not disclose to the reader that this information has been paid for' (Sainath 2010).

To return to the theme of hyper-commercialization and what it means for journalism. Auletta's top media interlocutors had no inhibitions in telling him that 'we aren't in the newspaper business, we are in the advertising business...a derived business...of aggregating a quality audience' for advertisers to 'facilitate consumption' (Auletta 2012: 53, 55). And they had a point, considering that in this top thriving newspaper league, 80 to 90 per cent of the revenues come from advertising and only small change from circulation. He learnt about focus-group-led research that put 'elitist' editors, 'pompous fellows thundering from the pulpit, speaking in eighty-word sentences' (*ibid* :55), in their place. This was research directed by the marketing people into what readers, and especially 'aspirational' young readers, wanted to read and the consequent restructuring and re-invention of editorial content.

Auletta was educated in easy rationalizations of the practice of 'advertorials' – an ad-sales initiative that opened a section of the newspaper to promotional or puff pieces paid for by celebrities, brands, and well-heeled ego-tripsters, and written not by ad agencies but by the newspaper's reporters. There was some kind of indication that this section was paid for but a reader needed 'a magnifying glass to be alerted' to the disclosure in small print (*ibid* : 53).

The *New Yorker* writer, who has written its Annals of Communications column since 1993, also learnt about another business innovation originating from India's largest newspaper-publishing company but now fairly common in the media industry – 'private treaties', a programme under which newspapers offer ads to smaller and medium-size companies in exchange for equity (*ibid* : 54). The conflict-of-interest implications of this initiative for editorial coverage of these companies by the newspapers have been much discussed among journalists and critics of the Indian media industry. They even attracted the attention of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI); in a 2009 letter to the Press Council chairman, it warned that 'private treaties may lead to commercialization of news reports since the same would be based on the subscription and advertising agreement entered into between the Media group and the company. Biased and imbalanced reporting may lead to inaccurate perceptions of the companies which are the beneficiaries of such private treaties' (Sainath 2010).

This brings me back to the point that the *two states* – the fortunes of the news industry and the state of journalism – ought not to be conflated. Manipulation of news, analysis, and comment to suit the owners' financial or political interests; the downgrading and devaluing of editorial functions and content in some leading newspaper and news television organizations; systematic dumbing down, led by the nose by certain types of market research; the growing willingness within newspapers and news channels 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; advertorials where the paid-for aspect of the news-like content is not properly disclosed or disclosed at all; private treaties; rogue

practices like paid election campaign news and bribe-taking for favourable coverage. If this is what it takes to have thriving newspapers and other news media, then there is something seriously wrong with this growth path.

Actually, some of these tendencies, which have grown qualitatively worse over the past decade, go back in time. They have caused anxiety to two Press Commissions, to the Press Council of India from time to time, and to a host of practitioners in the field. The issue has been sharpened and highlighted recently by trenchant and tireless public criticism of the ways of the press from the chairman of the Press Council, Markandey Katju. The retired Supreme Court judge, who came with strong credentials as a champion of free speech on the bench, began his term in late-2011 by highlighting 'three major defects in the Indian media'. He listed them 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 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 Council and also that it be given 'more teeth', including penalizing powers (Katju 2011a). Not everybody agrees with these bold generalizations and sweeping assertions but, in my opinion, the Katju critique has been valuable for keeping the focus on relevance and quality issues.

How free?

An overarching issue for the news media in India is the state of free speech.

Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression as a fundamental right. This right, hard won in the freedom struggle against a highly repressive and censorious British Raj, is unamendable. Freedom of the press is not explicitly mentioned by the Constitution but the Supreme Court of India has, through judicial interpretation, read it into Article 19. It 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.

Unfortunately, freedom of speech and expression is hemmed in, and to a significant extent undone, by Article 19(2). This provides for restrictions on the fundamental right by law – some reasonable, most not. Notable among the unreasonable restrictions that remain on the statute book or in practice are the law of criminal defamation, the undefined power of contempt of court, uncodified legislative privilege, the outrageous law of sedition (124A of the Indian Penal Code), other illiberal provisions of the IPC (especially 153A), the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, and other draconian laws enacted in the name of fighting extremism and terrorism.

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). The higher courts have not judged it necessary to confer Article 19(1)(a) protection on radio and television.

Newspapers in independent India have functioned under a legal regime of registration; since there is no licensing, they cannot be de-licensed. By contrast, private satellite 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 laid down by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Paradoxically, while newspapers have the Press Council, a statutorily established watchdog, some would say a watchdog without teeth, there is no legal regulatory framework for private satellite television channels, which have attracted growing public complaint that they are a law unto themselves. Add to this the fact that the huge terrestrial television network remains a state monopoly and the private FM radio stations are not allowed to do news and current affairs, which remain the monopoly of All India Radio, and you have an idea of how complicated it gets.

Free speech has come under serious pressure in India. Consider these examples from the past quarter-century.

Being the first country in the world to ban Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and carrying through this policy of appeasement of murderous intolerance to the last Jaipur Literary Festival.

Criminalizing paintings by India's greatest painter, M.F. Husain, from 1996 onwards, the state standing by an orchestrated Hindu Right campaign intimidated him with dozens of criminal complaints filed across the country, vandalized his art works and exhibitions, and eventually forced him into exile in Dubai, to die, at the age of 95, in London as a Qatari national.

Carrying out several acts of localized violence and intimidation against journalists, writers, historians, cartoonists, artists, activists, and others.

Assaulting journalists and sending toughs to stone, smash, and burn the offices of media organizations, here and there.

Piling on criminal defamation cases against journalists, with the lower courts hardly applying their mind to *prima facie* admissibility even under this illiberal law, thus ensuring that the process is the punishment.

Blocking text or sms services in the name of law and order or public order. Notifying under the Information Technology Act, 2000 (as amended in 2008) illiberal rules, especially the notorious Intermediary Guidelines Rules, which permit blocking of content on the Internet .

Threatening to tame the social media, which, among other things, shows a complete inability to understand the nature and ways of the sharing beast.

Using the sedition law against the writer Arundhati Roy.

Imprisoning a cartoonist for sedition, with the result that the Indian criminal justice system has itself become a cartoon gone viral on the worldwide web.

As the journalist Salil Tripathi put it earlier this year in a tweet at the FreeSpeechDebate site: 'Biggest threat: combination of state passivity, antiquated laws, and existence of 'the right to feel offended'' (Tripathi 2012). The right to be easily offended – genuinely offended or offended for the sake of an ideological or political cause – he might have added, had Twitter allowed him more than 140 characters.

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. But it is well to remember that media freedom cannot survive, let alone thrive, unless free speech can be safeguarded in society at large.

Regulate? If so, how and by whom?

This is a period during which, taking the cue from the critique and demands placed on the national agenda by Press Council 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. Self-regulation, the Press Council chairman has proclaimed, is an oxymoron and no profession can be called a profession unless it has an enforceable code of conduct and sanctions against those who violate it. So what can be the answer?

It is likely that freedom of the Indian news media will come under increasing pressure and threat unless they move briskly to set their house in order. They need to ensure that transparency, accountability, and social responsibility are more than slogans. With no codes of values or practice binding journalists and the media industry, and no mechanisms for self-regulation such as internal news ombudsmen in place within major news organizations other than one or two, the vulnerability to government and legislative forays in disciplining the news media through external regulation going beyond the present Press Council is becoming increasingly evident. 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 privileging the principles and values of journalism. It has emphasized such disciplines as fact-checking, verification, investigation, rigorous data sourcing and analysis, providing context and meaning, and maintaining perspective.

Here a fundamental question arises: 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 about the field of journalism itself. Some months ago, I proposed to the Contemporary History section of the Indian History Congress that an intelligent approach to the journalist and her facts needed 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). The approach needed 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 more or less what James Cameron prescribed to young journalists.

India and its news media can learn valuably from the parallel discussion of media-related issues taking place in the United Kingdom, which has been provoked by the rogue practices of an influential section of its media. The Leveson Inquiry has been a stimulating learning experience for us, allowing for the considerable differences in the situations. Many of the testimonies have been first-rate and the Inquiry has gone quite deep into 'the culture, practices and ethics of the press' (Leveson Inquiry 2011). As a former Editor, I am pleased that the forward-looking Editor of the *Guardian* has welcomed Leveson 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 that several other British journalists seem to agree with this. We look forward to the final report or recommendations of Lord Justice Leveson and to seeing what legislative or other practical arrangements might follow.

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 can be worked out and put in place. The object must be the same: to support 'integrity and freedom of the press while encouraging the highest ethical standards' (Leveson Inquiry 2011).

Nobody knows what the long term holds for India's news media. It should be possible, through some kind of regulation, to reform the system to put an end to the major ethical transgressions, not to mention rogue practices like paid news. But I have no illusions about what it will take to reverse the tendencies that put enormous pressure on independent, professional journalism. My personal hope is that feel-good journalism, focus-group-led journalism, ad-dictated journalism, journalism that sees no need to take account of basic realities – the mass poverty and the multiple deprivations in a country where two-thirds of the population subsist on less than two dollars a day – can be discredited by good, sensitive, progressive journalism that attracts public support. My hope is that effective incentives, moral and material, can be put in place in significant sections of the news media for taking up the basic concerns of hundreds of millions of ordinary Indians – and projecting them, with social responsibility, into the public sphere.

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