

Media must take positions to strengthen democracy, secularism

Digital disruption in news media is bringing about a major change. That even traditional print media has started to publish online editions is a sign of this shift.

If we keep aside the technical and economic aspects of moving from print to online newspapers, a noticeable aspect is that news can be published faster on online media.

The times when people used to get news only from newspapers delivered to their homes in the morning are changing. Television channels compete to take news to the public as soon as it happens. Without having to undergo the inconvenience of watching television, news will be delivered to us wherever we are on our mobile phone. Even the difference of a few seconds adds to the competition. The competition is so intense that the claim made is "we are the ones to report this news first", not "here we have this news" as it was in the past. The urge is to report even before confirming the facts. This is the first step. The second stage is to exaggerate and spin stories. Media practice is shifting from taking news to the public to ensuring that viewers stay glued to the channel.

It is true that the growth of technology has led to faster reporting. It should also have helped to enhance the quality of news. However, it can't be said technology has enhanced the media's credibility. The progress of technology should have helped that happen. Media owners need to change their approach to enable such a change. The criterion should not be whether "it (news) was given first", but whether truth was presented. Today's measure is a race to telecast, even if what is given is false. This must change.

At the same time, it can't be forgotten that certain media houses do recognise the seriousness and maturity journalism calls for. This is the time of online platforms and social media where news travels by the second and readers react instantly. The Indian Express Group's portal is entering this world of abundant debate. This is definitely a good thing.

There are many online news portals. But whether these are serious and responsible in their work is something they should judge for themselves. The media that claims to be the fourth pillar of democracy should remember that the role entrusts it with some responsibilities. Good journalism is about telling the truth. Business interests will have to take a backseat to make it possible. It is perhaps impossible for many to totally disregard the market. But effort should be made to balance the two. There should never be an unfortunate situation where the needs of the market completely overshadow truth. Today we see many media organisations ignore issues that affect the society and instead serve the forces of market and capital.

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Many media organisations have become the platform for the government and corporates to engage with the public. It is a fact that there are people in the media who undertake the role of middlemen in the corridors of power. The news organisation becomes a fraternal unit of the entertainment establishment. For the news industry, it is not easy to be profitable on its own. That job is done by the entertainment channel.

Occasionally, the line that divides the two starts to blur and the interests of the entertainment industry begin to influence news. The channel then looks to entertain its viewers rather than tell them the truth. When that happens, the entertainment value of news takes precedence over objectivity. When how-to-tell-the-truth makes way for how-best-to-entertain, media ethics is pushed back. The profit motive starts to lead from the front. Fake news shaped by preconceived

notions, emotions and interests is now rampant on many media platforms. Many media houses are in competition to build a world of fake news to serve political and corporate interests.

We have discussed a lot about paid news. A situation has developed where money has become the criterion for news to be published, withheld and manufactured. Institutions are threatened with destruction - by publishing negative news - if advertisements are not given. P. Sainath once pointed out an incident when there were no reporters to cover farmer suicides while journalists flocked in large number to report a fashion show in Mumbai. Sainath is one of the few media professionals who records the realities of rural India. In his opinion, 75 per cent of India's villages do not find a mention in the news. According to a CMS survey, national media provides only half a per cent of the total news space to agricultural issues. This situation has to change. The media has a responsibility to reflect the concerns of the country's entire population.

In the past, the big business groups at the national level did not use their newspapers to protect their interests. Today something called private treaties journalism has emerged. This is a new approach born out of the unholy nexus between business and media establishments. The newspaper publishes a report in which a company in financial distress is touted as a financially sound one. The company's valuation receives a boost in the stock market. In return, the newspaper gets shares of the company. These are times when media practice is degenerating in many new ways.

Many online news portals are being set up because these do not require large capital investment. Like any sector, online journalism too can be used for positive and negative purposes. Many online media follow click-bait journalism and forge headlines with rumours and half-truths. At the same time, some good initiatives are also coming up. The platform also offers the unparalleled freedom to do journalism without being bothered by business interests. Media professionals and activists ought to make better use of these opportunities. These spaces are becoming useful to protect values like democracy and secularism that define our social life. A unique aspect of social media is that anybody can post their opinion without having to get permission from an editor. Anyone who has a smartphone is today a journalist. It is because of the intervention of such journalists that thousands of people mobilised in a single night to protest the Nirbhaya incident in Delhi. In this manner, it has now become possible for every person to have their say on social issues. Many things are being brought out in such a way that mainstream media can no longer hide them. These avenues ought to be explored for the benefit of our democracy and secularism.

The Indian Express has a history of fighting the suppression of democracy. It is a newspaper that dared to leave the editorial space blank during the Emergency. Believers in democracy and secularism will naturally rejoice when a newspaper with such a legacy brings out an online newspaper in Malayalam. A lot will be expected from it. This online news outlet should rise to the expectations. It goes without saying that democracy and secularism are facing their biggest challenge today. People from Govind Pansare to [Gauri Lankesh](#) had to die. Others like K.S. Bhagavan are facing a death warrant. It is a time when someone can dictate to you what to write, what to read, what to enjoy and what to eat. It is a time when the bestiality of a monolithic communalism is threatening to annihilate the plurality of our culture. In such a time, The Indian Express online news outlet must take positions that strengthen democracy and secularism. Remember, if these are threatened, press freedom will not survive. The Indian Express must distinguish itself with courageous positions. It must strive to expose the toxic elements of our times. There is no need to be neutral on those who threaten the country's unity and the people's oneness. Your positions on these issues must be unambiguous.

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