

Media needs a new outlook and approach

by N. Bhaskara Rao

DESPITE rapid growth and expansion of the mass media and the emergence of the new media, its overall reach is not even two-thirds of the country's adult population. Regional differences between states in this regard continue to be glaring. In the last couple of years, there is some stagnation in the "overall expansion" of the media, going by various national surveys, including the latest National Readership Survey (NRS) for 2005. This is because of the preoccupation of mass media in terms of their concerns, contents and concentration in the operations.

That is they, all are trying to reach the same people, those with deep pockets. The latest NRS brings out that even the reach of the press has fallen in urban India since 2002 and that there are 3-4 million people who can read but do not read any publication. Also, despite the proliferation of the media and competitiveness, the choice in the content package is not so distinct.

This is because the laws of economics are operating in the field of mass media. Where the ones informed are being informed more and the ones not are being ignored altogether more or less. Some years ago, the media was relatively more concerned with society, community and citizen. Today mass media is preoccupied with markets, consumer, voter and politics. Because of market-driven media today, it is no longer the journalist who dominates the media scene. It is the advertisers, market researchers and public relations people who dominate and determine the concerns and content package of the mass media. No wonder, the media is sometimes described as "marketing media" instead of "mass media".

How do we restore a balance in serving both ends and ensure moderation in this trend? The National Readership Survey (NRS), the Indian Readership Survey (IRS) and the Television Rating Points (TRPs) continue without even being questioned for their relevance and validation. All these surveys are primarily advertising driven. There are no independent experts involved in designing or in conducting these studies or in analysing the survey findings. As a result, television with all its immense potential remains a source more for advertising and amusement than enlightenment and empowerment.

Despite so many institutions engaged in teaching mass communication and for so long, neither of them had ever

questioned the basis nor could they come up with a realistic alternative to TRPs or even readership surveys. Together, TRPs and NRS/IRS dictate media culture, priorities and preoccupations today. There are no longitudinal studies on the role of mass media as only such studies could reliably track media habits and impact of media on society, culture and lifestyles. India is not short of creative talents to limit to narrow stereo-typed formula. Every part of India has its rich oral and cultural traditions. How much of that get reflected in our media? Because of reliance on TRP-based formula in the case of TV, we have a very restricted view and use of TV.

Some 120 higher institutes of learning

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giving degrees in mass communication and many more offering all kind of media education have made little difference to the country's media culture. Is this because these schools are busy producing good "copy cats" and "band-wagoners" than in broadening the very scope of media? What difference academics have made to better the credibility of the media? What lessons do we learn as even in US, the confidence level in the news media has declined over the years? There has been an increased trend among universities to emphasise corporate public relations and advertising in the curricula and glorify the opportunities there in.

The Centre for Media Studies' Media Lab has recently brought out that hardly 2 per cent of items of national news bulletins of television channels are from or about rural. But two-thirds of news of national bulletins is from Delhi and Mumbai. Also, not even 4 per cent of

items of news bulletins are to do with health, education and environment put together. But two-thirds of the items are about politics. Yet, repeat of such news in TV national news bulletins gives the impression that little is happening.

TV's limitations as a news medium are setting the criteria for what is news of the day and their priority in the presentation of news bulletins is misleading. Now newspapers are trying to emulate and compete with TV news channels. Cannot we hope to have a more reflective news agenda for the country which is more democratic, representative, equity concerned and catering to the country's unique socio-economic features? Moreover, we have the Right to Information Act with wider implications.

There is need for more Indian correspondents abroad, but their number is shrinking. Their number today is lowest in three decades. What is that we lack today to be a global media player? Where are we on the global media scene? Some 60 countries have their media representatives in India today as against our people in hardly 10 countries. Why? Is it because of dearth of talent or increased reliance on Internet? Is it result of a profit maximisation strategy? No wonder, the revenue being spent on news origination has declined despite the revenue having gone up.

Original Indian contents for children and by children in Indian media is much less today when it should have been several times more than a few decades ago. On the contrary, imported fare for children is all around in TV today, that too, deceptively. For, foreign children's programmes are being dubbed into various Indian languages and telecast. There are four or more foreign children channels, available all over the country, mostly with foreign cartoons and animations. All of them with commercial advertisements luring children. The way children's fare is being broadcast gives the impression that no one is bothered what it all means, least of all the government.

The 21st century is not for "more of the same" in the media. We need an extraordinary outlook and approach. For, content is not an end itself. Creativity has to be for a cause. That is why it is said these are the days of "power of ideas" — to work for larger concerns and causes. ■

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