

## **The Paradox of Media: Plentiful yet Unviable, Plentiful yet Unfree**

Today India is media rich. It currently has more privately-owned media than most countries in the world. The 400 plus news channels and more than 1.8 lakh publications are a consequence of rising literacy, markets in multiple languages, opportunities created by technology, budding entrepreneurship at many levels, and above all by commerce, seeking consumers.

We are on track to becoming the world's fifth biggest newspaper market in terms of revenue by 2026 and will have the largest newspaper readership, overtaking China by 2025. The size of our population, low internet penetration compared to other newspaper markets, growing literacy, and low pricing will ensure this. But it will not be either our journalism or reporting that takes us to any international heights.

The New York Times for instance, currently has some 1,700 journalists reporting from 160 countries. But the past two decades have seen India's television news channels withdrawing feet on the ground and replacing news with debates. Our biggest newspapers have shrunk their foreign correspondent deployment to three or four major countries, at best, and for most national newspapers, state bureaus within India have also shrunk to a single correspondent. The eight states in the Northeast are likely to be covered by a couple of people at best for the national newspapers.

### **Expansion**

Media expanded in India because the growth of literacy presented a market. Between 1951 and 1991 there was sevenfold increase in the number of literates in the country. The onset of liberalization in 1991 meant advertising became available, and by then readers were also available. When literacy expanded in India's Hindi heartland newspapers followed, picking up readers in places where there had been none. Rising farm incomes and a growing service sector led to the emergence of a rural middle class by the mid 1980s, which made newspapers affordable.

The other set of players in developing regional media markets, particularly those for the language press which reached villages, were the multinationals who came in post liberalisation and began to conduct readership surveys to understand the distribution and purchasing power of the emerging middle class in the 1990s.

Robin Jeffrey has [spelt out](#) the relationship between print and capitalism. Burgeoning newspapers were capitalist enterprises. You needed capitalists for the investment in newsgathering, printing technology and distribution. Capitalism in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century liked large markets he said.

Newspapers expanded by localizing and they localize because advertisers see a commodity that is worth buying: rural and small town spending power. You need the new printing technology that makes local printing possible, and you need to give people news about themselves.

The proliferation of media in India took off because of these factors but also because a new generation in the media-owning families strategized to capitalize on this convergence of factors. One of them said, when you launch a newspaper you have to purchase the readership. To give one example, the *Dainik Bhaskar* spent Rs 10 million distributing plastic chairs with new subscriptions which garnered for it a 30 per cent increase in circulation. There were also gift schemes, followed by price wars. (*Headlines from the Heartland*, Ninan, 2007) The young family scions who became managers also realized that what would sell in villages was local news, and for that you did not need journalists. Employing stringers who could be shopkeepers or local gentry, became the norm.

Mrinal Pande who edited the *Hindi Hindustan* for several years describes in her recent book how the quantum of advertising in the Hindi press grew post liberalisation, leading to the expansion of regional language media, a segment which today has the highest circulated newspapers in the country.

Localisation came earlier to the South, the *Malayalam Manorama* began localizing as did *Eenadu* and the *Anandabazar Patrika* in West Bengal. You distributed the main paper with a district insert. When newspapers began invading each others territories, a single district could end up having 3 local editions and advertising became more difficult to come by for these publications.

Newspaper proliferation increased at the same time as the satellite TV revolution took off in India, in 1991, with more media outlets chasing the advertising that had become available. And in the English press the new generation that had taken charge in the Times Group followed an aggressive marketing strategy by dropping the price of the daily paper to Re 1. Their tag line was, 'The Leader Guards the Reader'. It was the way to boost circulation and thereby garner advertising.

In later years as they entered other markets, such as the territory of the Hindu in the South, they undercut existing market leaders by entering with a much lower cover price. And forced the competition to drop prices too.

The first consequence of too much media is an unviable industry. If you drop your cover price to increase circulation you lose subscription revenue. If you depend on Google or Meta to find readers and viewers, they take much of your advertising. If you have too much non-serious competition because cable operators, politicians and sundry others have got into the game, you don't get the advertising revenue you need to be viable.

Being unviable and unfree came from rapid expansion and politicization. It also came from developments in technology which engendered new forms of media, new sources of media revenue, new possibilities for multiplying advertising and thereby new publications, TV channels, and online media ventures. The latter three things add up to a single outcome: too much media.

The subscription price which dropped to rock bottom also had to support the cost of ground distribution of newspapers. A newspaper like '*Sahara*' introduced incentives for hawkers—a bicycle for selling 20 subscriptions, a motorbike for bringing in 200

subscribers. More enterprising hawkers developed into circulation agents. (Mrinal Pande, *The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India*, 2022)

Low pricing was followed by other innovations to boost revenue: paid news supplements which carried interviews and features for a price, then a scheme called private treaties which the Jain brothers of the Times Group thought up which offered equity for advertising. All of this impacted journalism. Private treaties with companies meant that in practice that the paper would go soft on that company if it became involved in a controversy.

Paid news was essentially public relations masquerading as journalism. Paid news during elections was particularly controversial: articles formatted as news stories were carried about candidates, which would say at the bottom in a miniscule font size— advt. Media firms now began to hire people who had worked in marketing consumer goods such as fizzy drinks and soap. They evolved revenue-garnering strategies such as paid advertorial supplements in daily newspapers and reached out to companies and state governments to avail of the space being offered. A corollary of this was the fact that you could not then upset either category of advertiser. If being unviable comes from having too much media, being unfree is partly a consequence of the same lack of viability.

### **The Fourth Estate**

To understand the vulnerability of the news media in India today, you have to take a long view. Not just going back to the early 1990s when liberalisation triggered major changes, but also to the early 1950s.

Our expectations of the role the media must play derive from the imported concept of a fourth estate, which goes back to 18th-19<sup>th</sup> England. Both Macaulay and Burke referred to the fourth estate of the realm. The notion of a fourth estate in the Indian context has been unpacked by the academic Vibodh Parthasarathi. He says two ideas at the core of the liberal models of the press that have become globalised are that of 'watchdog'--- alluding to its role--- and of 'Fourth Estate', referring to its institutional site. The idea of the Fourth Estate is premised around a watchdog press discovering the abuse of power by the other three estates. The media play a watchdog role to make governments accountable to citizens. (Unpublished paper shared by the author.)

But then he goes on to argue that the Fourth Estate out of which the press emerges is usually embedded in society, You have to locate the abstraction called the 'Fourth Estate' in Indian society and polity. It emerged under the evolving colonial political economy of 19th century India. The expansion of newspapers during the early 20th century, in some cases even in the mid 19th century, saw news outlet directly owned/controlled by politicians and businessmen. He documents how by the last quarter of the 19th century, "newspapers in English and in Indian languages were owned by regional politicians of varied importance, social reformers of different hues, and sundry religious denominations".

Subsequently there has grown to be widespread ownership of news outlets by formal political interests (legislators and their immediate families) and by diversified business

interests (industrialists, traders, sundry financiers). The media actors who are expected to conform to ideals of journalism imported from other societies are embedded in this society.

At which point then does a commercial or political construct become a watchdog, a guarantor of democracy, an estate holding the state and the polity to account?

## **Media Ownership**

The concerns over media ownership in India manifested themselves shortly after independence, with the Press Commission report in 1954 giving examples of owners influencing reportage and editorials. Chapter 15 of the report has these fascinating subheads: forms of ownership, boosting of the proprietor, writing up business activities, biased reporting and editing of news, interests of the owner, sensationalism to raise circulation, and so on. So if we think sensationalism in news is a concern only in satellite TV post 1991, it actually dates back much earlier. And it came from print.

Other chapters in that 1954 report also looked at bias and external pressure, and competition and monopolies.

Ownership regulation never came in India, though the first attempt to legislate on ownership of media was made in 1971. We are still trying, fifty years later. In January 2023 the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India was again holding an open house discussion on its consultation paper on media ownership in India. The govt is still looking at concentration of ownership and cross media ownership, among other issues.

The fact that ownership is still not regulated in broadcasting, means that the entry of players who will distort the news market is permitted. When there are too many players, some of whom are not there to do news but to buy influence or protect their businesses, it affects viability of the industry at large. There simply isn't enough advertising to sustain hundreds of channels. Then you get a viewership ratings industry which helps advertisers know who has better viewership. Ratings can also be bought, in 2021 there was a criminal case registered with a channel head accused of bribing the head of a ratings agency to give his channel the highest ratings.

When there is no regulation, many agendas are served in the guise of news publishing or broadcasting on television. Why does a trucking company owner in Assam want to own newspaper? Because he thinks it will protect him from insurgency outfits in the state, as the editor of one such newspaper in Guwahati explained.

Why does a politician want to own media? Because it gives him both a platform and a tool. Media viability is affected when a cash rich political family enters the industry. In 2008 when a media recession was setting in, in Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y S Rajasekhara Reddy's son began a 23- edition Telugu daily called **Sakshi** from Hyderabad and other cities. It could expand and flourish because it had resources to draw upon. Since then Andhra Pradesh has seen more political families including that of the current chief minister launch media properties.

By the year 2013 the media business writer Vanita Kohli Khandekar was estimating that more than a third of the news channels in the country were now owned by politicians or politically-affiliated builders. Many were just political vehicles; others peddled influence for builders. The result was that companies that want to make money by running a good old-fashioned news outlet end up competing with ones that have no shareholders or investors to answer to. Similarly, an estimated 60 per cent of cable distribution systems were owned by local politicians who had influenced and funded several local elections. There are dozens of small and big newspapers owned by politicians or their family members that influence the course of several local elections. Many newspaper chains with political affiliations also owned broadcast networks and had Internet portals.

### **The Media Business**

There is another paradox. While the news media is unviable, the media industry as a whole is thriving in India. The latest estimate is that it is worth Rs 161400 crore. Of this 16 per cent is the size of the news industry, combining TV and print, at Rs 26000 crore. And of that a mere Rs 3000 crore was the revenue earned by news TV. Entertainment TV she says has a revenue of Rs 72,000 crore.

At the end of 2022 Vanita Khandekar looked at the changing picture of the [top ten](#) list of media companies over 10 years. In 2012 the Times group headed the list with Rs 5,500 crore. In 2022 Google India heads the list with 25000 crore. Followed by Meta and Sony-Zee. The Times group had slipped to fifth place. There are only two publishers in the top ten now: the Times Group and DB Corp which publishes *Dainik Bhaskar*.

The five-year period of 2014-2019 has seen an explosion of internet connectivity. the explosion of cheap smartphones in small town and rural India, led to growing numbers online and on social media. The launch of Reliance Jio in September 2016, the 4G telecom service of Reliance Industries, enabled this. The Telecom regulator allowed Jio to offer it free for six months. This racked up 100 million subscribers in 170 days. Subsequently other telecom operators dropped tariffs in order to compete, helping to deepen Internet penetration.

With 500 million Indians on the Internet by the end of 2018 (a growth of 65% over 2016), the acquisition of WhatsApp by Facebook in February 2014 and its accelerated growth in India, the mobile phone was [shaping up](#) as the BJP's most important weapon for the 2019 election. Search and social media, clearly, is worth more now in many ways than the conventional media. And counts for more with the political class.

### **Delegitimising Mainstream Media**

The widespread emergence of multiple media platforms including social media is redefining the role of the media in politics and government, and the relationship between the two. Given Narendra Modi's earlier history with the news media as chief minister, particularly with some elements of the English media following the 2002 Gujarat riots, his prime ministership created a new template for media-government relations.

The Modi government chose to delegitimise mainstream media. In the first term of the BJP government. Co-option and self-censorship by this media have followed. Alongside, the use of social media has grown hugely, making the likes of WhatsApp powerful weapons in elections.

In the five years of the Modi-I regime, party and government operated on a simple formula: delegitimise existing media and create your own channels of communication with the voter and citizen. Narendra Modi was elected in May 2014. In June it was reported that the Prime Minister had asked both senior bureaucrats and cabinet colleagues to refrain from speaking with journalists. When [surveyed](#) on whether the government had really clammed up, journalists covering government said cabinet notes and cabinet meeting agendas were no longer available, nor were inter-ministerial exchanges coming out. The decision to shut down the Planning Commission and replace it with the NITI Aayog became known only when the Prime Minister announced it on Independence Day, though the decision was cleared by the cabinet two days before. There was neither a briefing nor a leak before that.

By August 2014 it became clear that only official media would accompany the Prime Minister on his trips abroad, breaking from past practice.

The Indian Prime Minister became the forerunner of a US president who demonstrated the same preference in communication: Twitter over press interactions. Long before Donald Trump came along in 2017, Narendra Modi took to using his Twitter handle, with more than 11 million followers, to convey day-to-day developments. His tweets then became a source of news for the Delhi press. When ministers wanted to communicate, they too tweeted. Some every day.

Prime minister Modi also started a monthly radio programme, "Mann Ki Baat" on All India Radio, and the programme quickly began to drive stories in the press and on television. The notion that the government needs mainstream media was made to stand on its head. Aided by a strong leader who, quite simply, changed the rules of media engagement.

No press conferences, no interviews except to handpicked journalists, and those usually with pre-screened questions and (often) only written answers. He sidestepped critics and his government co-opted entire media houses. The fallout has been increasing self-censorship on the one hand and pro-active defence of the government on the other.

Meanwhile media companies had developed events as a source of revenue to supplement advertising revenue. With major media houses given to holding sponsored events every year, they needed the prime minister and ministers to speak at their events.

The Times Group learnt that the hard way in March 2017. The Prime Minister, his ministers and bureaucrats, and Chandrababu Naidu (whose state was an official partner of the summit) all pulled out of the ET global summit at the last minute. There was much speculation as to the reasons, including government displeasure with the Economic Times' coverage of the Samajwadi Party leadership in the run-up to the UP elections.



A few months later that year the Times Group played ball when the BJP President filed his papers for the Rajya Sabha nomination. Stories in the Ahmedabad edition of the Times of India on his assets, as well as on Smriti Irani's educational qualifications, were taken down from the website hours after publication. The DNA newspaper published by Zee Media also took down their story.

A more drastic instance of the government leaning on a major newspaper came when the editor of the *Hindustan Times* resigned, in September 2017, just 14 months after joining the paper. The paper had been running a "Hate Tracker" since July, which it described as "a national database on crimes in the name of religion, caste, race". After the editor's exit it was taken down.

Here too there was an annual event at stake. Speaking at the *Hindustan Times* Leadership Summit in November that year, the prime minister spoke about the many changes his government was bringing in the lives of ordinary people. And he wanted to know why the media was so negative. The postscript to the whole episode came in May 2019 when the former editor in question, Bobby Ghosh, suggested in a tweet that his resignation had not been so voluntary after all, and that government pressure was involved.

During the tenure of the Modi government media houses in India (TV, print and online) have discovered the virtues of self-censorship. Published news items disappear from websites. TV channels dropped interviews or stories done by their correspondents. NDTV was exposed as a channel that had practised internal censorship during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime as well. The entertainment channel Star Plus decide not to air a comedy act that mimicked Prime Minister Modi. And so on.

Giving a new spin to self-censorship, several prominent news outlets took down their published articles on the post-demonetisation bank deposits in an Ahmedabad-based bank in which BJP President Amit Shah was a director. The IANS news agency, which broke the story, however said that it was based on information obtained through the Right to Information (RTI) Act and they would not be retracting the story.

Denial of advertising is being used to bring the press to heel. The Union government is the country's largest advertiser. When Covid hit newspaper circulation, it only increased the print media's dependence on government advertising. The Indian Newspaper Society wrote to the prime minister asking for a stimulus package, no less. In return you would naturally be expected to play ball.

Today media activism means fighting the government's battles for it. Just watch Times Now's coverage yesterday of the BBC documentary which has riled the government. The current dispensation also distributes talking points to the media when major controversies erupt. When the Chinese intrusion took place, the Prime Minister's Office distributed talking points to journalists whose text one of them tweeted. It included such points as India stands solidly behind the prime minister, the Congress's efforts to create wedges trashed by other parties, China hasn't pulled back, China has been pushed back by a united nation led by a leader who led from the front, and so on. Aakar Patel in his book *Price of the Modi Years* documents some of these talking points and then lists the television debates that followed such helpful hints.

Revisiting what began in 2018 helps one understand how governments work when they set out to change the rules of the game. Smriti Irani, as minister for information and broadcasting, floated the idea of regulation for online media in the first quarter of that year. Until then, there were no rules or codes of conduct that governed media on the Internet. By early 2021 the government came up with IT rules to the Information Technology Act 2000 which were then challenged in court by several news organisations. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology then came up with amendments to these rules in 2022, and so far twice in 2023. The latest amendment sought to empower the Press Information Bureau to fact check misinformation on intermediary platforms.

You can be a democracy with one of the biggest media markets in the world and still have a dismal freedom of press ranking. Today you have penalties for news reports which are critical of government performance but not for news shows which allow hate speech to be spewed.

Not only is the media not the political influence it used to be at some periods of our history but it is also a frequent victim. Last year there were attacks almost every week in some part of the country. Journalists who were on assignment to cover the Hindu Mahapanchayat in New Delhi's Burari ground were assaulted by *Hindutva* groups; three were arrested in UP for reporting the leak of a Class XII English paper; a reporter was allegedly tortured in custody in Agra; and a local journalist was among those stripped and humiliated in Madhya Pradesh. for their reporting on a BJP MP and his son.

Whether alleged offenders are booked in Uttar Pradesh, Kashmir or Tripura, these incidents are marked by common features: the registration of FIRs under non-bailable laws, such as sedition and sections of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, the propensity of the police to convert investigators (such as reporters) into offenders, and considerable inventiveness in creating a backstory in the chargesheet to back up the original charge.

A notice under UAPA was served to a journalist for tweeting that Tripura was burning. An anti-terrorism deterrent, no less, for journalistic hyperbole. The overenthusiastic use of this law was underscored by the [statistics](#) the government gave in the Rajya Sabha in December 2021: 4,690 people were arrested in different parts of the country under UAPA in the past three years, 149 of whom were convicted. And the [state](#) which reported the most arrests was Uttar Pradesh, followed by Jammu and Kashmir and Manipur.

News gathering is being criminalised. In 2020, 55 Indian journalists were arrested, booked, and threatened for reporting on issues related to COVID-19. As many as 22 FIRs were filed against various journalists while the lockdown was in progress. Its onset led to the government putting hitherto under-used laws to work, such as the Disaster Management Act and the Epidemic Diseases Act, these have been used in tandem with Sections of the IPC to criminalize reporting of the government's response to the pandemic as well of the outcomes of its handling, such as the migrant exodus. Panicky administrations across the country used no less than 14 Sections of the IPC and Sections of the IT Act (including the one that was struck down), the DMA, the Unlawful Activities



(Prevention) Act, the Motor Vehicles Act and the provisions of Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act to issue show cause notices, lodge first information reports against reporters and arrest them.

There is also crowd-sourced censorship in the current era, with offence takers growing, and police acting with alacrity on their complaints.

Intolerance of digital media which has not been co-opted by the government has increased apace. September 2021 saw income tax surveys on digital websites Newsclick and Newslandry, both not given to practising self censorship. September 2022 saw an income tax survey on a Bangalore-based foundation which funds online media startups.

The more the government's attack on digital news media widens and deepens, the more it stirs up public-spirited responses. They are seen as Davids ranged against the Bharatiya Janata Party's Goliath. Abhinandan Sekhri's cock-a-snook tweet a few days after the Income Tax visit to Newslandry sums it up pithily: "Since the IT 'survey' in 2 days we have got over Rs 14 lakh [in] subscriber contribution. No sarkari ads & no grovelling to large corporations & they wonder how we get funded. THATS HOW."

But for a climate hostile to media to see a concerted and sustained pushback, a far broader front is needed. Citizens came together to push back on the Citizenship Amendment Act, Farmers came together to fight the Farm Bill, but journalists don't come together enough to push back on regressive legislation, nor do citizens come together in a big way. In 1988 the Rajiv Gandhi government saw enough protesting journalists out on the streets to drop the Defamation Bill it sought to pass. Today the pressure is more diffused, the controlling legislation is focused on online media, and journalists are a lot more divided for ideological, and pragmatic reasons, so there is no visible pushback. Individual media proprietors do not unite to push back effectively, they make their quiet compromises to stay in business.

And consolidation of media is growing as oligarchs take over smaller media businesses. Ramoji Rao's Eenadu TV empire, which had its origins in the pickle baron's newspaper back in 1984, is now part of Reliance Media. Raghav Bahl's TV 18 was taken over by Mukesh Ambani who had bought substantial shares in it. NDTV and NDTV India are now part of the Adani Group. In both the latter cases the entry point for outside control came because of equity sold in situations of financial vulnerability. Mukesh Ambani bought the equity in both cases, last year he sold the company which owned the NDTV shares to Gautam Adani. We can only speculate about the circumstances in which the sale took place, some twelve years after they were bought to bail out NDTV when it was in financial straits.

While other democracies — Australia and some in Europe — bat for mainstream media, which is losing its viability on account of Google and Facebook using media content without paying media companies, the NDA government in India is not about to shed any tears for the viability of mainstream media. Like Donald Trump, our leaders have little use for mainstream media but plenty of use for social media, which can be bent to their purposes.

## Way Forward

At the beginning of a new year the Indian news media and journalists in particular find themselves at an inflexion point in their profession. The Editors Guild said as much at a day long online introspection towards the end of last year. The problems are easily summed up: The govt of the day has little use for independent journalism, it communicates with voters primarily via social media. The prime minister uses All India Radio, Doordarshan, and handpicked media channels. Both central and State governments weaponise existing laws to stifle efforts at reporting, and criticism. And with media entities changing hands it is an oligarch moment for media ownership.

India has had press freedom issues now for at least two decades, apart from one-offs such as the Emergency and the attempt to pass the defamation bill in the 70s and the 80s. But the annual consolidated press freedom monitoring data we get are still from Reporters Sans Frontieres and from the Committee to Protect Journalists in the US. Not from any organization here.

Media financing is an issue, viability is an issue, and Big Tech is eating into the online advertising that could have helped sustain online news ventures. Journalists have lost jobs after Covid affected newspaper distribution and advertising shrank. The new labour codes which have subsumed multiple existing laws have also done away with the Working Journalists Act and the protections it afforded media workers.

Digital publishers have now set up a legal defence mechanism for themselves, but for the many many stringers, reporters, and journalists in the districts, there is no legal defence at hand when the government slaps cases upon them. The Editors Guild has only just begun to discuss this issue.

What support structures can be put in place? The country has a Press Council, a Human Rights Commission and numerous courts. But it needs a growing network of human rights defenders, a galvanizing force created by an alliance of journalist organizations, concerned lawyers and civil society stalwarts to map a strategy for this canvas, if the news media's freedom to function has to be reclaimed.

End