

State of Indian media

A discussion on State of Indian media was conducted by the Dravidian Professional Forum. The Panelists were honourable Palanivel Thiagarajan, the Minister for Finance, Human Resources Government of Tamil Nadu, who before entering politics was the senior managing director of the Standard Chartered Bank; Prof. Sukumar, a print media journalist; A S Panneerselvan, a fellow at the Centre for Study in Public Sphere; Pamela Philipose, a senior fellow at the Indian Council of Social Science Research, Delhi; N. Ram an Indian journalist who controls the Hindu publication; P Kamalanathan, Malaysian politician.

The session was moderated by Mr Puhazh and Mr Dharanidharan.

Mr Puhazh Gandhi initiated the discussion and described media as the fourth pillar of democracy which has the main function of providing information to the common people but in the contemporary scenario the quality of the same is questioned due to a variety of reasons like mushrooming of media houses, government increasing control over media through sedition laws against journalists, recent IT laws which provide limited freedom for the press and the government signals to control the media within six months through these types of continuous and gradual interference.

Palanivel Thiagarajan expressed his concern and said that there is no stable media environment. Every media house and social media seems to show an alternate reality through TV and newspapers. This industry transition in media has led democracy in flux. The same transition is exciting with various opportunities as well as worrying at the same time due to misinterpretation of information and misleading the public. He also said that nowadays, it has become difficult to distinguish between official and unofficial data due to numerous sources of information. People get confused in the dissemination of information from the ruling political parties and the government and here the role of the career of information becomes significant to provide factual and authentic data. He asserts worry for the future of the country by looking at the current scenario of the same which is miscommunication and misleading the general public.

Prof. Sukumar addressed the topic by questioning the constitutionality of the sedition laws and explains the journey of media in India and its position which has always been a matter of debate. He said media helps to identify each other by providing a platform to discuss and debate over a variety of topics which helps to know the views of each other. During the 1990s, the period of massive globalisation media had two roles of being a forum for public dialogue and earning profit as a commercial industry. In 1999, the country had diverse media groups with diverse ideologies and was unfettered. He also called the Internet the disruptor and an opportunity in this industry which was a turning point in the history of media. Google and Facebook are the enticing bounties of this indispensable invention which are the main career of ideas, news, information and knowledge in the present world often leading to

hearsays and conjectures thorough flowing unfactual and uncredible information. The algorithmic curation of knowledge on this web creates a sense of filter bubble and creates room for political disruption. Hence, at present, the media has deviated far from the footprints of the traditional media.

A S Panneerselvam claimed that the democratic space is shrinking in south Asia by supporting his arguments through Reuters Report and San Frontiers Report and 142nd position of India in the World Press Freedom Index which is worrying. He said almost 73% of the population receives information and news through smartphones and the quality of news which they get is deteriorating day by day not only with e media but also with the print media through TV and newspapers and hence it becomes the responsibility of the editors, media reporters and correspondents to provide credible information, effectively interpret the same and stop providing the targets of communicating in just 50 to 100 words because that can never explain the issue or matter. He also showed concern towards the fact of a large number of media groups streaming the same idea and skewing the paradigm of media and news systems. Also, the inability of the system to confront the fate of misinterpretation from social media which has no source for follow up is also of concern. The 3Is of journalism Inform, interpret and illuminate are endangered and needs to be addressed with proper attention and regulations. Even the extraordinary reach of any media group doesn't have any relation to the revenue and this mismatch is also a problem. The lack of a government regulatory framework for the content and the career of content has created room for disrupting the very purpose of media. Even Google, Facebook and Twitter which were with the purpose of decentralisation at the level of individuals have led to centralisation or mega consolidation in silicon valley. He also highlighted the fact of media groups are being handled and owned by politicians and corporates. Therefore, with opaqueness in the regulatory framework, media and journalism need to be made more transparent.

Pamela Philipose called journalists the eye witness of the situations and media in India is relatively stable but fragile in the period of flux. Media is constantly observing a changing topography with the Internet as the major source of disruption and serving social function at the same time. Since 2001 there has been an increase in internet users by 7 million which is 25 times increase in the last 12 years. Between 2020 and 2021 the number of users has increased by 47 million in India with an unstoppable speed. The transition period in this industry has enabled media convergence, increased consumer power and greater integration in the Indian market with unbiased content and freedom of speech. This power needs to be legitimised and the censorship of media during emergencies directly implies that media has always been an appetite for control in politics. In the present situation, Prime Minister has understood the importance of media and has received electoral dividends from the same through smart use of media in politics. Now the elections are fought on phone and internet. She also emphasised the fact that to control people we need to control media and the new IT rules have targetted the small and

independent media groups and packaged something good for the voters. The need of the hour is to guarantee free speech and eliminate the cascading cost of exclusion through a digital device.

N. Ram said that the media environment has been influenced by Hindutva authoritarian regime a lot. He also explained the difference between the state of journalism and media which most people misinterpret the same. He told that the main motive of journalism is not to make a profit and so there is somewhat hope for authenticity in information even today. He also said one of the main reasons behind this problem is lack of competence, untrained people who can float ideas or news without verification and lack of professionalism. Hence, good journalism schools and institutions can create a difference but it is not enough.

He said Hindutva has a clear strategy and has been able to influence the media groups but the judiciary has not done enough to safeguard media freedom. He clearly stated the roles and functions of media in a forward-looking framework which are providing credible information, critical functioning, educational role, agenda-setting role and propaganda role. In certain instances, the media hasn't covered the opposition and hence paving the way to the ruling party for authoritarianism. In some ways, media has had a mixed performance of showing the truth at their convenience and failed to play an independent role. Mainstream media is dismal in relation to the issues that matter. Indeed it has enabled a space for dissent, condemnation and raising voice, etc. for example a newspaper Dainik Jagaran was able to unveil the underestimation of death during covid which is appreciable and media houses are taking this responsibility to show the truth but not all. He also said that the present constitutional legal structure is not good enough to protect the freedom of speech, sedition laws are unsatisfactory. Almost 11,000 individuals are languishing under 816 sedition cases since 2010 and most of them are in Bihar, Tamil Nadu, UP, Jharkhand and Karnataka. There are cases unresolved of journalists murdered. He also commented upon the new IT rules which are ambiguous in nature, no clarity on who is being targetted and a mockery of the concept of self-regulation according to him. With the acceleration in digital development, Indian media is under great stress and the future is opaque. It is acting as propaganda for the government but the diversity and federal structure of the nation seems to safeguard media. He inspires the young journalists to rise to the opposition and lawyers need to speak up as it is a tricky situation.

P Kamalanathan praised the platform and said if a politician has the courage to address the topics related to media then that is a straight reflection of strong administration. He questioned the people that the main role of media is really fulfilled. He specified the roles of media very clearly which are informing, telling the truth, analysing the complex social, economic and political issues, providing a platform for debate and acting as a watchdog for the public. But if the current situation is analysed it can be assured that the media houses have become

economic giants but the kind of information which they render needs to be strengthened and verified. He lamented the fact that these profit-making entities have taken the role of dividing the country instead of uniting the same. This is a big concern and it needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

Q and A

Q1) Dharanidharan asked what are the solutions to make media more sustainable and profitable?

Sukumar answered by suggesting a new social contract between the news industry and the public and adopting a different revenue model as many of the western and European countries have adopted. The industry needs a new ecosystem and addressing the issue of media diversity is another question at the same time.

N. Ram added that there is a need to find out the foundations for funding who value worthwhile and professional journalism. Adding to this Panneerselvan opined that the government could open CSR funding for media activists which could be a changemaker.

Q2) Tara Krishnasami questioned why serious media groups do not use social media for spreading their ideas and because of their inactivity social activists have to look for platforms to engage these bulk categories of people who use Whatsapp and Instagram?

N. Ram answered that the giant media groups are active on these platforms but the question is that do these users have an appetite for this type of serious content. He accepts the fact that yes these media houses had an attitude of denial earlier but now they have an interest in magnifying themselves in social media and they are proactive for the same.

To one of the comments among the audience on the covid deaths, he said that in India media plays an eminent role in unveiling the truth and number of deaths. Indian journalists who brought experts for discussion over these issues to create awareness is commendable and applaudable. Hence the contribution of professional journalism can never be underestimated. Sukumar added People believe what they want to believe and he also shows concern over the lack of factual account of information due to the competitiveness in this market.

Q3) One of the people among the audience asked about the intent of showcasing cases in newspapers wherein news like scandals occupy the cover page of theirs while that of investigation languish in an inside corner of the page. So what are the factors for the same?

N. Ram addressed the question and said it is the accountability and ideology of the editor and the other staff working who have changing views on subjects over time and lack stability financial and economic environment of media. He also talked about the issue of empowering the journalists and especially investigative journalists but at present journalists do not have that much freedom to speak the truth as it is.

Q4) There is a tricky play by the tech giants who are monetising the content of the publishers in every way through algorithms and AI and recently there was a tussle between tech companies and publishers in Australia and the government came out with a novel solution. So, is there any attempt in India to sort out the same?

All the panellists said as of now there is no step in India to address this issue but this is of critical importance in the present situation and needs to be addressed with concrete steps.