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Credibility at stake

Saturday, 23 March 2019 | Ajoy Kumar

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In recent times, the media is engaged in a game called 'survival of the fittest', which has been facing flak for misleading, hyped and insensitive coverage. The status quo must change

Last week, while flicking past some news channels, I chanced upon a broadcaster. There were animations of fire and bluster splashed across the screen and close to 15 panelists were debating some issue – all speaking at the same time. The news ticker kept moving along with all the noise and colour. It was commendable that the news broadcaster also managed to fit in a weather, time and pollution check. In this week's column, I would talk about the growing crisis of the Indian media and how it is imperative for to arrest its sharp decline.

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Media plays a unique and critical role in the development of any modern society. Therefore, it is unsurprising to find figures that inspire awe, both in fact and fiction. An example of Edward Murrow will stand out here. One of the most legendary figures of broadcast journalism, Murrow, earned his corn as a war correspondent during the Second World War but what actually brought him fame, and more significantly respect, was the manner in which he took on McCarthyism.

In the 1950s, McCarthyism was the practice followed in the US, of categorising acts or persons as treasonous without any due regard for evidence. While McCarthyism was a creature of the 1950s, many would say that its fundamental tenets exist even today in many countries. I will not disagree. In fiction, too, there are heroes of journalism that have been inspired by figures like Murrow. These creatures of fiction, too, attempt to imbibe values that we would want to see in our journalists: Courage, integrity and approachability. It is a tragedy then that many in today's media are often found wanting in these respects. Journalists, who display courage and integrity, are crucial in aiding the process of nation-building. The corollary, however, is just as true: Journalists, who are pliable and publish information without any independent thought, accelerate a country's decline.

What's the nature of the problem? The fundamental issue with the Indian media today is that it has come in the category of 'infotainment', a combination of some information with an unhealthy dose of 'entertainment'. This is precisely the reason why people say that they get their news from comedians and comedy from the news. A good reason for this change is the upsurge in digital media. Media outlets nowadays compete primarily to gain screen time and boost their advertisement revenue rather than through subscriptions. Since news channels compete for advertisements, facts are often compromised in favour of being the first to a piece of news. This was evident during the episode of doctored tapes of students from the Jawaharlal Nehru University that were broadcast on a few news channels without they having conducted any basic verification. It once again became evident during the recent India-Pakistan standoff where certain media outlets contributed to the panic and hysteria. In an environment that required calm heads, some news anchors were, unfortunately, screaming their heads off.

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Another problem with the Indian media is that social media and the internet has made anybody and everybody a broadcaster. They even allow everyone to claim their own facts. This makes it all the more difficult for everyday people to distinguish between 'verifiable news' and 'fake news'. This is the 'WhatsApp' school of journalism where people appear to get information from photoshopped pictures or videos rather than a reliable source.

To put things into context, a news channel immediately manages to reach out to millions of Indians when they publish a piece of information; whereas WhatsApp now has limited the forwarding of any information to 25 people from 250. Therefore, while WhatsApp, which essentially has nothing to do with the news, has taken the initiative to stem the flow of false information, there are many in the media who have not.

Is there a solution? In my article, I have been critical of some sections of the news media. I do understand that it is survival of the fittest in the media and, therefore, there isn't much room for leeway that journalists have while reporting news. I appreciate these concerns. However, I believe that some steps could prove useful in regaining some of the credibility that the media has lost:

(i) Adherence to a code of conduct: While the Press Council of India does prescribe the "norms of journalistic conduct", as per the code itself, "the sanction behind the code of ethics is moral." This isn't enough. I don't mean to propose creating legal sanctions for violation of these norms but one suggestion is that media houses are audited for violation of norms that have been detailed in the code of conduct. In the case of companies, it is important for stakeholders, who do not participate in the day-to-day affairs of the company, to have some method to gauge whether the firm is being run in an ethical way. News channels, too, must be subject to audits by an independent agency that examines the manner in which they are being run. The audit reports should be published and freely available so that the veracity of information by such outlets can be examined.

(ii) Demanding better from ourselves: A large part of the blame does lie with the media firms that refuse to speak truth to power but instead act as 'his master's voice'. Whether it is the question of jobs or about the actual speed of Indian trains, there are sections in the media who have been found severely wanting. In times like these, then, it becomes imperative for consumers of such information to be more discerning and at the very least compare different pieces of information. We can ask tough questions from the ones who provide information to us by asking them hard questions even if they don't ask the powers that be the same types of questions.

So, the only way forward is if all parties concerned put their best foot forward. In this context, the words of Murrow are appropriate. While speaking about fear-mongering and false propaganda around him, Murrow, in one of his most famous broadcasts, reminded his fellow countrymen of their better nature. He said, "We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason." It is important for those in the media to remember these lines. If they don't and we don't, the realm of inspiring journalists in the future will only be in the realm of fiction rather than fact.

(The writer is Jharkhand PCC president, former MP and IPS officer. Views are personal)

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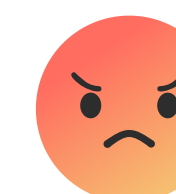
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