

Role of Media in Promoting Peace in Democracy



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Abstract

In a country like ours media is considered as the fourth pillar of democracy. If media is honest and unbiased, democracy will be strengthened and if media runs propaganda for mere sake of money or TRP, it will create confusion and atmosphere of unrest and chaos among people that may result into conflicts and anarchy. It simply means role of media is very significant for a healthy democracy and peace building process. So, like the spirit of democracy, media should essentially focus on the wellbeing of citizens regardless of any kind of discrimination based on caste, creed or beliefs and avoid favouring or disfavouring illogically any particular opinion or philosophy against the other. Controversial issues that may lead to riots or conflicts should strictly be restricted to a limit so that no violence should emerge due to them. My Research paper presents the multiplicity and diversity of media, early historical developments and tendencies, its importance in its various roles ensuring peace against violence in democratic situations with some special global references.

Key words: Media, democracy, propaganda, discrimination, violence, peace

Introduction

The outburst of violence and consequent peace building measures are two opposite concepts in the present time. These two concepts are closely interconnected terms. Both have their own meaning and interpretation. If violence takes place, peace building measures will follow. No intellectual can envisage a sustainable peaceful solution to any conflict or violence without knowing and going into the root causes of the problem. In a wider context, striking of political or personal individual interests, misunderstanding of the opinions, having dubious information or rumours, ignorance of actual issues, radicalization of thoughts, are some of the common reasons that cause violence and conflicts among people and communities. In this respect, keeping in mind the instant reach to people, media can play a vital role in promoting sustainable peace through its educating campaigns particularly in violence affected areas.

Historical development of Media

The Indian Media industry is one of the largest and oldest in the world as it dates back to the rule of Ashoka's dynasty. Indian Media has been active since the 18th Century and has been free and independent throughout most of the time in history. However, there have been times in history when it was censored, especially, during the period of emergency between 1975 -1977, at the time of erstwhile Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It was a short period of time when Indian Media faced with potential government retribution (Kumar 2017). Later, media was controlled by large, profit-oriented corporations that reaped their revenue

from advertising, subscription and sale of the copyrighted material in India and abroad. (1)

The first Indian newspaper was published in the late 18th century called Hicky's Bengal Gazette. It was started in 1789 and by July 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière moving pictures were screened. By 1927, radio broadcasting began in India (Biswas 2012). The media has been free for most of the time in history except for a brief period of time when the period of emergency was declared the erstwhile Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi. History has also witnessed when media provoked people to create violence. Hitler had depicted the entire worldview of hatred not only for Jews and homosexuals but also for other marginalized communities. Rwanda's radio RTLM openly asked people to come out to streets with machetes for ruthless killing like 'the cockroaches.' Media broadcasters in the Balkans incited local public to be united to create violence to address their grievances. This is a fact that people recognize the media's impact on escalation of violence more than that of its impact on conflict prevention and peace building measures. (2)

Presently, there are more 1, 18,239 publications that are registered with the Registrar of Newspapers for India as of March 31, 2018 (Ministry of Information & Broadcasting Government of India 2018). Even now with the advent of new media and social media, India has the second-largest newspaper market in the world. There is a combined circulation of 240 million copies of newspapers each day (Ministry of Information & Broadcasting Government of India 2018). It is the biggest newspaper market in the

world with 100 million copies sold each day. Apart from that, India has over 1,600 satellite channels and among them, 400 are news channels. (3) In this context of having large number of media houses and publications, it is next to impossible to get unbiased reports on each issue.

Variable Tendency of Media

Variable tendency of the media can be realized in two ways:

- An honest and unbiased approach in media reports that lays the true picture of the important issues before the common people to avoid any rumour or confusion.
- A biased approach by media houses for the propaganda purposes for the sake of money or for mere Tele-Rating-Points (TRP) without caring for its negative repercussions on the mindset of the people.

In this regard, emphasizing the need for free access to unbiased news reports, Harry S. Truman once said, "You can never get all the facts from just one newspaper, and unless you have all the facts, you cannot make proper judgements about what is going on" (4) Media, in this respect, seems to have deviated from creating amicable atmosphere where people can express their fears and frustrations.

Ideological Patronage & Commercial Preference

Media houses have their own commercial interests and economic constraints. That's why they are patronized by different thoughts and philosophies. This ideological and philosophy compromise of media community is the biggest impediment in imparting unbiased news reports to public. They very shrewdly manipulate the facts and run openly, their propagandas in favour of their masters without caring for its adverse consequences on the people belonging to different ideologies. In addition, they often ignore the public interest in their blind pursuit of their commercial gains or for increasing TRP for their channels, without caring too much even if it is leading to the situation of unrest, chaos or anarchy. Ironically, apart from advertising and subscriptions, selling biased news stories through their newspapers or news channels has become an indispensable source of earning for many media houses. Such unscrupulous commercialization of media is really a very serious issue that needs to be resolved soon for a healthy democracy.

Focus on Violence & Controversial issues

Commercialization has shaped a stiff competition among different media houses, yet there is ample

scope for media campaigns against violence and controversies in the interest of common public. But, unfortunately, it has become a general tendency of media to focus more on violence and controversial issues and it does not seem to take responsibility to promote positivity in the society by positive reporting without indulging into the blame game of controversial ideologies. "If it bleeds, it will lead" philosophy supports the business. That's why violent incidents of bloodshed and conflict become headlines of in the leading newspapers and news channels, today. This practice leaves behind other important and useful issues of employment, business and well being of common man. Such approach may help flourish the business, but it distorts the true spirit of journalism. Unfortunately, conflicts and provocative issues are the attractive sources of business than peace building attempts. (5)

Excessive exposure of sensitive issues is another face of media tendency that leads to violence among different communities' people. Uneducated section is more prone to provocations than the educated ones. Sometimes, unimportant news story is made unduly sensational by frequent repetition that creates apathy and insensitivity among people. The judicial execution of Dhananjay (14 August 1965 – 14 August 2004) stimulated open debates and drew huge attention of media. In independent India, he was the first person who was convicted and hanged for raping and murdering a 14 year old girl –Hetal Parekh. (6) Professors from ISI Kolkata – Probal Chaudhuri and Paramesh Goswami criticized the excessive exposure of the media-trial of the case. Keeping in mind the sensitivity of media trials as excessive exposure, media is supposed to devise its role seriously and sincerely.

Media in Democracy

Media being the backbone of a healthy democracy plays a crucial role in establishing peace apart from presenting bare truth and harsh realities of democratic strata. In a country like ours, where people are deprived of their basic rights and freedom from fear, it is no less than a structural violent crime against them in a liberal democracy. In a heterogeneous democracy with diversity of opinions and beliefs lives, any misunderstanding at any level may cause an adverse situation of disappointment, desperation and restlessness. In such a situation, media has the responsibility to provide open platform for healthy debates and discussions to clear all doubts and confusions and to ensure that diversity of opinion should not turn into any violence or bitterness. However, some

research studies conclude that there is not yet sufficient empirical evidence to confirm or reject claims that media promotes or prevents conflict and there is a reliance on anecdotal evidence to illustrate the media's positive impact on democracy, governance and accountability. (7)

As a Mediator

In a healthy democracy media is also supposed to assume the role of a mediator between the two opposite parties or communities especially when there is no other means of reconciliation during conflict and post-conflict situations. Situation of conflicts arise when interests of two people, communities or parties strike together to get a social or political gain. On one side unbiased and honest media houses provide a platform for open debate to understand the issue for peaceful solution. On the other side, paid media turns instrumental for propaganda purposes by provoking people to incite and spreading rumours cunningly to cause tensions. (8)

For example - The South African "Peace Café" programmers brought parties together who had been unwilling to meet by interviewing them separately and then editing the video and showing it to the other side. This process eventually led to direct negotiations between the parties. (9)

Role of Press Council of India

The Press Council of India is the regulatory body for the press in India and ensures that it is free and responsible as much as possible. The motive being the Press in India is to work as a watchdog of public interest in the country. So a journalist needs to follow the accepted norms and ethics of journalism and maintain a high standard of professional conduct. If there is unprofessional conduct by any journalist, there should be a way to check and control it without the involvement of government or official authority. Therefore, the Press Council of India was created to let the peers of the profession regulate the media which is a representative of impartial machinery.

Conclusion

Today's media is very intelligent media that possess a wonderful knowledge of various social, political, and financial issues at grass root level. Even this intelligent media too, seems to have been helpless and appears to have surrender before their selfish biased owners. With limited and restricted power, how media can be influential against biased news stories is a burning question today that needs to be considered seriously. An active and effective media can be a tool of great assistance to educate people to develop their own level of understanding in the matters of common

public interests. It's the duty of media to make people aware with the truth and strengthen their democratic rights and powers against any injustice. Media become stronger if remains unbiased. So, it should support not only democratic structure but also fosters economic growth and incorporates positivity. That's why, the United Nations Millennium Declaration emphasized the need "to ensure the freedom of the media to perform their essential role and the right of the public to have access to information" (10)

Besides, to ensure sustainability of peace, media has to be impartial. Media have to understand that the presence of violence always threatens the survival of peace. Since, occurrence of violence in one part of the country impedes the existence of peace in other places; the role of media becomes manifold and cannot be ignored. Keeping in mind the present era of easy connectivity, media can identify and influence the drivers of violence to establish peace.

Since the politicians and the industrialists have been using media as a means for their own interests, it is the responsibility of the media to enable citizens to be more sensible and empower them with knowledge and awareness to understand things, particularly to encounter rumours. Media will have to become the mouthpiece of people from all sections of societies and communities at all various levels in demoting violence and promoting peace. Honest and impartial reporting will definitely be supportive in fixing the responsibility of offices and officials to make them more transparent. Media experts must consider this fact and revise their role to dominate the spirit of peace building on people's mind than catering impact of violence. Thus, Media cannot be taken for granted and should be seriously analysed regularly for violence prevention strategies and peace building assistance.

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