

Journalism in the 21st Century World – Tackling Challenges

Abhijit Bora

Associate Professor & Head, Department of Mass Communication & Journalism,
Tezpur University, Tezpur - 784028, Assam, India
Cell phone: ++91 +98640 72390, E- Mail: abhijitbora71@rediffmail.com, abhijitb@tezu.ernet.in

Doi: 10.5901/mjss.2012.03.01.393

Abstract With the advent of internet and digitized formats of communication, journalism has been going through a lot of challenges over the last about one-and-a-half decade in an unprecedented situation in which the very concepts of the discipline are undergoing lot of changes. The challenges are manifold - from citizen journalism to free flow of information and news through the internet, emergence of social networking sites (SNSs) to a large extent are posing newer aspects in front of the field of journalism. This paper would endeavour to examine how these developments are facilitating a better flow of information dissemination to the masses and at the same time creating problems of ascertaining authenticity, journalistic practice without the benefits of trained human resources. This analysis has been necessitated as the availability of so many virtual digital outlets have facilitated a better flow of information making it highly difficult to hoodwink the masses by deliberately passing on wrong information. Yet, this uncontrolled flow of information at the same time is also posing serious questions of finding out whether the sources are 'reliable' or not. Also, how much filtering we need to carry out to find out what portion of the information available from the blogs and SNSs are authentic and free from propaganda or personal opinion about an event. Further, this paper would also like to analyze how much of the censorship restrictions in place in many 'developing nations' including India actually holds good in today's media situation where practically everything is freely available through the virtual communication mode.,

Keywords: Information Revolution, Self-Regulation, Censorship, Mass Communication, SNSs, Citizen Journalism, Cyber Media.

1. Introduction, *The Information Revolution*

In today's age it is needless to reiterate the significance of the saying that - 'information is power'. It is the thing that empowers the people from kings to commoners alike and thereby converting them into 'thinking human beings'. So that it can effect a difference in their lives by acquiring and processing all information available to him or her all around the environment.

And whenever this world has experienced revolutions in the field of 'information and its dissemination' the human civilization has also witnessed major developments as a result. In other words we can term this as a series of 'information revolution' since the mediaeval age which have brought in 'far-reaching' changes to the masses in each and every walk of life.

The first information revolution was initiated by the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1487 in Germany. This has ushered in the unprecedented advantage of making books available – the eternal source of knowledge to many hundreds and thousands of people. This convenient availability of this source has created a situation in which masses also got ample opportunities to acquire knowledge which made them knowledgeable and be able to lead a better life.

This was one of the most important causes behind the happening of the great Reformation movement led by Martin Luther King which was an epoch-making revolution.

Then came the series of developments like the Radio, TV and in the latter part of the last century the 'internet' has assumed a similar role in empowering the masses by throwing open the floodgates of knowledge for common consumption.

This is also nothing but a highly successful information revolution that has created a never-before scenario of information dissemination that we could never even think of.

We also know how the internet has been instrumental in making the liberation struggle of the people in Middle-East and Africa a big success in the recent times. At this point it would be pertinent to look at a few questions concerning several important aspects related to this entire issue.

First of all – in this tremendous free flow of information of all kinds among the masses how and where do we keep a tab on the authenticity of the information being passed on or disseminated around through the net. Also, how do we ascertain whether these information that we are consuming day in and day out are worth it or not. This needs to be expressly tackled because circulation of specific information by people or groups having vested interests in mind could cause major havoc in the society.

Media is a magic multiplier. We speak or write one thing and it is transmitted innumerable times to the masses which do affect a lot of peoples' intellectual capacity.

Secondly, it is highly interesting to note that more the number of outlets of information dissemination more it is becoming quite difficult to disseminate information falsely to the masses anywhere across the world.

Let me refer to the incident when a photograph of the Israeli bombings of Palestine a few years ago published by a major daily in the United Kingdom supplied by Reuters had to be withdrawn when it was pointed out by a blogger that the photograph was actually a doctored one. Even the freelance photojournalist who clicked the photograph admitted that it was a common practice to touch up photographs to create a better effect in the minds of the audiences.

Further, how can we be sure that these disseminators are conforming to the basic tenets of journalism before disseminating information to the masses at all.

Many of you may remember that in November, 2008, several important landmarks in the city of Mumbai – India's financial capital was taken to ransom by a few fanatic suicide attackers which was later countered by military commando action. This entire development was captured by the electronic media in a minute-by-minute detail outside the Taj hotel – a prominent icon of the city.

In a way the commodity - information has become the liberating panacea of life, the equalizer of status for everyone in any society across the globe and nations are going to great lengths to maintain networks of free flow of information.

Many of you might definitely recall the immensely important role played by the network of community radios in Nepal during the turmoil times after power was usurped by a kin of the then King who tried his best to block all forms of communication with the outside the world even including the internet which of course could not succeed only because of mass media's efforts.

2. Role of Gate-Keeping: Self-Regulation or External Imposition

At this we need to seriously look into what kind of 'gate-keeping' role this system is actually performing at all.

At this point there also arises another very important question – whether we need the services of gate-keeping for dissemination of all of our information at all or not. This is because a gatekeeper is akin to that a 'censor' authority which is usually regarded as a nuisance to the globally-accepted norms of freedom of expression.

In my country – India there is a strange situation. That is – we have a gatekeeper for films called the Central Board of Film Censorship (CBFC) which is the body responsible for issuing certificates to feature films for public viewing.

In case of news media there is no such restriction as such yet except that private FM radio services still not allowed to air news and current affairs programmes produced independently.

Yet, there is no doubt that there is indeed an express need for 'self-regulation' which only can inculcate a good taste among the masses.

Let me recall another important incident that is an example of sheer negligence of one's responsibilities while discharging one's duties in the field of media, more so in the world of journalism.

During the infamous India Pakistan conflict in the Kargil region of Jammu and Kashmir in 1999, a team of journalists were taken to the field spot on the Indian side by the Defence Ministry officials for a better coverage of the happenings. The scribes' community was repeatedly requested specifically not to use 'satellite or cell phones' for calling back their offices for passing on the news. But a journalist from a prominent TV news channel ignored this and used her satellite phone to call her office back in New Delhi and report about the activities. The enemy forces managed to pick up the signals and almost in no time directed their howitzer firing at that specific spot resulting in serious wounds to several of Indian Army personnel.

Another pertinent question is whether we would be content with an 'external regulator' – either a college or a single person - keeping a tab on what we are doing and restricting our professional duties. Or we would practice self-regulation in such a manner that there won't be any need for such an arrangement at all.

Media is like an elephant which is not much aware of its own enormous powers to influence public opinion and the governments – more so in developing nations and thereby suffer silently in the hands of various stakeholders always working with a motive trying to manipulate the media in their own frame of things.

3. Censorship: How Far and How Much

Talking of censorship of media it is quite strange how the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) has been managing to go scot free in the international platform by curbing freedom of expression of both the media and the common public. The system was in full swing just before and after the Beijing Olympics (2008) when the country even blacked out internet sites as well as restricting the activity of the foreign journalists staying there for coverage of the Games.

Interestingly, such an effort was further experienced even as late as in the third week of July, 2011, when two bullet trains of the country collided with fatal casualty of more than 30 passengers and injuries to many others. Soon after the mishap, PRC's Central Propaganda Department issued strict directives to the journalistic community not to try to investigate into the causes of the mishap on their own but rather sticking to whatever information the government was doling out. (*The Telegraph*, India, 2011).

"The major theme for the Wenzhou bullet train case from now on will be known as 'in the face of great tragedy, there is great love. Do not question, do not elaborate,'" the news report quoted this statement from the department.

This is important to note that even in this advanced age of the 21st century there are societies and countries around the world which still believe in such coercive regimes trying to keep the freedom of expression of the people at bay under any circumstances. But, why would somebody, specially a government try to gag freedom of expression in any country unless there must be something fishy and there is no transparency. This also leads to an ironical situation in which gate-keeping does not have any meaning at all in this age of the internet as a means of information dissemination. Even if any country had any such mechanism in place how much of it would actually be effective in reality.

In the Indian context the year 2010 was a watershed on a few major counts. First of all – there was a major allegation against the print journalism of the country that huge amounts of money changed hands to the newspapers from the politicians and political parties for getting news items published favourable to a particular election contesting candidate or maybe a political party itself during nation-wide polls to the state-level assembly Houses or the parliament. The controversy gained such momentum that finally the Press Council of India (PCI - a quasi-judicial body) had to institute a committee to investigate this and the committee in its report acknowledged existence of such a nexus.

So, in addition to the commercial and technical challenges being faced, this is another aspect where there is a huge challenge of rising above such a state while discharging their duties by the media in India. Only when this would happen peoples' faith in the media (specially news media) would be reverted back in the near future.

For example, many of you may recall the incident in which there was major hue and cry from several countries when a Danish newspaper published a cartoon showing Hazarat Mohammad in a lighter mood. A huge public outcry spread across several nations of the world with a strong demand for intervention by the government concerned against that specific daily.

However, the stand taken up by the Danish government was highly encouraging and motivating for those in the media. The country's premier had apologized to those concerned expressing regrets over the issue. But, it was also said in no ambiguous terms that the country revered the media in high esteem and believed that the media was matured enough to take its own decision and there could be absolutely no interference with the latter's freedom at all.

Another sensitive aspect that needs discussion here is sourcing of news or information from social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Twitter etc. Mr Rusbridger further opines that in this regard the judgment of the journalists of a certain news media organization would make all the difference. He says that these are also news sources like any other sources whereas these should not be taken as representatives of the public at large. "This is an interesting, extra dimension to information. We will use it as a source. It is an imperfect source like all others, but a very useful source and journalistic tool." (2010).

In India also from time to time incidents happen which undermine the freedom of expression of the media. About a decade ago, a new TV news channel Tehelka.com was launched with a big bang – a nicely-executed sting operation that exposed bribery charges for awarding of big ticket Defence contract deals by the president of the party which was holding power at the Union Government. When it was done, after the usual denials and other routine methods the government mounted pressure on the channel for changing its version – by registering almost a hundred different cases of violation of all possible legal provisions of country. But the government failed to prove anything of substance in the courts of law and all those cases had to be withdrawn with a lot of humiliation.

4. The Mobile Challenge

"Outside of newspapers, there has been a real explosion in consumption of information, whether, it is mobile phones or iPads. So, it is wrong for newspapers to imagine that what applies to everyone else does not apply to us. There is an urgent message there, that we ought to be developing journalistic ideas that fit into the mobile", said Mr Alan Rusbridger, Editor of *The Guardian* of London in an interview in the prominent daily from India - *The Hindu* (2010). The prominent mediaperson believes that his organization has just started thinking on the lines of how to look at what these incredible basic things of the mobile like location devices can do for us. This is of special significance for India as the mobile phone subscribers' base is about 700 million by now which is big enough a number to do business with by any news media outlet.

If we can combine meaningful information including news and disseminate the same through the mobile or other communication modes this is going to usher in an unprecedented positive development in the days to come.

Another very important aspect in this regard is how journalism is playing the role of being a leader of the society. That is – as we all know journalism is expected to play the role of an able leader of the society by providing the right kind of information and news to the masses.

5. Relationship Between Journalism and Masses

In fact, the relationship between journalism and masses or its readership should be very complementary – it should be empowering for both the sides. Journalism is expected to create or inculcate a good taste among the people about everything in life and thereby lead the audiences towards a better world. On the other hand it is also the duty of the audiences to keep a check on the functioning of journalism and actively go for 'course correction' whenever needed.

Eminent New media researcher Dan Gilmore says that grassroots journalists are dismantling big media's monopoly on the news, transforming it from a lecture to a conversation (Subramani, MW, p 43). He further opines that the blog has been becoming the standard news medium of the world and the old media through the new media, to we media, using the power and knowledge and the energy of people at the edges.

Today, the circumstances have transformed the situation to such an extent that blogging as well as SNSs are also providing news and information to the masses – at least to the participants and members of these virtual communities whoever might be interested in it at all. The days of conventional newspapers seems to be headed for a serious confrontation with the virtual ones.

With easy access to the technological tools at hand, an increasing number of people are starting to demand themselves to be heard and be considered as a part of the news and information dissemination system through the web.

And we all know that in mass media 'the switch is in our hands' and the moment someone does not like to listen to us or read us, he or she would switch it off. As this virtual media revolution is an inevitable part of our life nowadays it would be better for the conventional news organizations to go by the saying 'if you can't beat them, join them'. It would be in their own interests that the newspapers should integrate to this new and emerging phenomenon to keep their readership in good humour. Sooner the better.

Further, it is a greatly liberalizing aspect for all of us concerned – newspapers and the readership. This is because earlier everyone had to depend upon the journalistic skills of one or a few mediapersons for getting to know the facts. While it was a highly 'centralized' activity earlier, it has become a far more 'decentralized' one with so many possible participants in the process and thereby reducing the possibilities of follies in the news services.

6. Social Responsibility Versus Corporate Social Responsibility

It hardly needs mention that today media has become a highly 'commercialized industry' with everything aimed at garnering profits rather than anything else.

"The commercial endeavours have taken upper hand and thus media has acquired the status of an industry. It has changed the very characteristics of media and media's function to mould public opinion."(Ravi, p – 28)

This aspect brings in an important side of the media in the developing nations like India where 'literacy' has been a major problem plaguing the country even today, after almost seven decades of Independence. The 'official' Indian literacy rate is 75 % according to the latest India census carried out this year out of the total population of almost 110 crore. However, the official Indian definition of a literate person is 'someone who can just sign his or her name' nothing else. This means that in the practical sense, just about half of this percentage is actually literate in the real sense of the term.

Further, even today more than 70 % of the Indian population live in some six lakh villages. Under these two circumstances the media still has a sky high responsibility towards disseminating meaningful information to these masses who are devoid of the benefits of formal or informal educational system.

This is one of the most important challenges of the media in the current century as a successful execution of this activity would translate into an 'empowered' nation in the near as well as distant future.

This is important because of the fact that mass media today wields enormous power over the masses anywhere across the globe. They are increasingly playing the role once played by family, community, religion and formal education. The media is also a key agenda setter. Television in particular has been acknowledged as a powerful audio-visual medium which leaves long-lasting impressions on the minds of the public and is therefore a powerful tool to shape public opinion. (Majumdar, 2011, AMITY page 59).

The challenge here is how to utilize this enormous power to reach out to the masses for passing on meaningful information to the people at grassroots level.

Media is a highly prolific interdisciplinary social science. This means that each and every walk of our life – whether it is something trivial to something highly scholarly – media is needed by everyone for making their presence felt. In this regard it needs to be mentioned that our academic institutions, research institutions etc. which are carrying out research and development works anywhere across the world are being able to acquire a lot of knowledge and information which have vital significance for helping in the development of mankind.

Now, the challenge is how to carry these life-enhancing information-cum-knowledge to the masses who should be the ultimate beneficiaries of such endeavours in any society. This is because unless such knowledge are applied for the enhancement of human life's development what is the use of keeping them in laboratories. This challenge of becoming a suitable bridge between such storehouses of information and knowledge and the masses is a highly skillful job.

So because the challenge also lies in looking for and acquiring such information, translating them to a language understandable to the common people and presenting the same in an effective manner.

The modern day development of digitization of the information dissemination system has two sides to it. *First* – it is making the media somewhat sophisticated and thus seemingly out of reach for the masses at grassroots level. However, as more and more governments and societies around the globe are trying to expand the benefits of the 'broadband digital' system network to reach out to the maximum number of people, this acts as a 'liberating' factor by becoming a catalyst of delivering such knowledge which in turn can be utilized by the masses for improvement of their life under any circumstances.

Justice Markandey Katju, a senior and experienced Judge of the Supreme Court of India in a newspaper article (*The Hindu*) in June this year expressed lot of expectations from the media in the country as mentioned here. "To my mind, the media in our country today must be able to help the people in their struggle against poverty, unemployment and other social evils and to make India a modern, powerful, industrial state," said the *The Hindu* editorial page article.

However, our question here is can't we think of such responsibilities of the media as something akin to the 'Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)' aspect of the established commercial entities across the world. In other words even if we consider media – specially journalism – as basically a commercial endeavour rather than a social service yet, it is expected to escape from the CSR obligation which ties it up to the issue of social developmental issues. This is because even out and out commercial ventures do have at least some basic obligations for contributing to the society in kinds in addition to the responsibility of creating jobs and opportunities. This aspect needs a thorough debate involving all the parties concerned.

7. Citizen Journalism

Mr Rusbridger (2010) is of the opinion that a far greater involvement of the readers is becoming extremely important for the newspapers to see them through the troubled times of the present era. This is because nowadays the readers have the facility to publish and link up. "The realm of newspapers is shrinking and all kinds of energy being created elsewhere and it is a life or death position for newspapers as to whether they essentially ignore all that or redefine their role."

This is a foregone conclusion that the new media has already made its presence felt in a rather very strong manner and is going to stay on track for the at least in the foreseeable future under any circumstances.

Noted communication scholar and researcher Professor Clay Shirky (2011) is of the opinion that ever since the rise of the internet in the early 1990s, the world's networked population has grown from the low millions to low billions and over the same time 'social media' have become a fact of life for civil society worldwide involving many stakeholders in the process – from individuals to governments.

Professor Shirky (2011) claims that social media have become the coordinating tools for nearly all of the world's political movements at a time when the world's authoritarian governments have been trying to limit access to it. Even though the powers of the social media have been brought to limelight in the recent times

by the peoples' uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia among others, the roots can be traced back even to the days of impeachment trial of the Phillipines President Joseph Estrada in January, 2001.

So it is evident that the news media would definitely gain a lot of benefits from such a handy and available source of information of any kind anywhere across the world.

"Journalists believe that blogs are not significantly creating any impact on the mainstream journalism, but they believe that blogs are complimenting the profession. This is clear indication of the gradual penetration of the blogs in the mainstream media. Blogs are yet to reach the status of mass communication, but it is considered as forms of communication. Blogs are changing the agenda-setting function of the media and it has created notable changes in the process of communication and further we need to examine it," (Subramani, 2010)

The entire system has also been contributing towards the convergence of all media into one highly powerful integrated one capable of delivering the goods to the masses at their doorsteps. It would be a great mistake if we ignored this phenomenon and try to carry out the old and conventional system without concern.

Mr N Ram, Editor of the prominent Indian daily *The Hindu* once opined that the conventional newspaper in the Indian context was still safe to a big extent from the onslaught of the electronic media as majority of the population were not media savvy because of various factors. However, this would not hold ground to a far distance. This is because the Government of India has taken up several ambitious projects for providing broadband net connectivity to most of the country's villages across every nook and corner. Once this became a reality an unlimited potential would be opened up for the media to deliver the news and other meaningful information to the masses at the click of a mouse.

A combination of these two great forces with enormous powers would be able to achieve unlimited success in reaching out to more and more masses anywhere across the world at nominal costs.

Another very important challenge for the news media – whether in print or broadcast is how to maintain its social responsibility status and public welfare goals despite the commercial onslaught day in and day out.

We can also see that all kinds of media – specially the news media serving more and more commercial interests rather than focusing basically on providing news to the masses. We also understand that it is the commercial advertising revenue which keeps the media (news media included) going under any circumstances. Yet, where to draw the demarcating line between pure entertainment and news. As this line has been getting more and more blurred in the course of the functioning of the media in the name of survival it is high time we took a decision about where the stop and recapitulate. This is because even the commercial 'for profit' enterprises have at least some basic amount of social and professional commitments to the society to be fulfilled and carried out to the best of their knowledge and efforts.

8. Challenge from Cyber Media: Need to Converge

Now the question is how do we strike a balance between this kind of individualistic journalism practices in comparison with the established proper format of journalistic practices with the conventional system.

Of course, there is a way out of this problem to a big extent. That is – as most of the established news media groups are finding it quite difficult to ignore the challenge of social networks and virtual communities via the net, their kind of information dissemination is expected to conform to at least some basic amount of journalistic principles rather than others.

"As a whole there is a silent revolution in the world of 21st century. For instance, the highly interactive convergence media is a major vehicle to transmit news and views. It has added new dimensions to the users by placing within easy reach, a mind-boggling range of information. Today, the receiver is even the sender and mass communicator. And as the numbers of people on it multiply, the opportunities are getting larger. (Ravi, 2011)

It needs mention here that print journalism has been well adopting to this new situation of emerging challenges over the years and we strongly believe that it would be successful in doing it without much of a problem at all.

Then there is the important challenge of victimization of the mediapersons across many nations of the world. Even in India – a prominent crime beat reporter of a daily published from Mumbai was shot dead in June, 2011 in broad daylight in the city allegedly by hitmen hired by mafia gangs with a remote control in a foreign country. This incident comes a few months after a prominent journalist was gunned down in Pakistan by unidentified killers.

9. Conclusion

Support From Academia And Society

This is a battle in which the journalists' fraternity can't carry on their own and the society and the state must shoulder at least some responsibility in this regard. Else, it would lead to a chaotic situation in which no good-minded people would come forward to pursue this noble profession.

At this point the academic institutions offering courses in mass communication and media must also contribute their portion to the society by providing quality training to more and more interested people so that a trained manpower can be created over a period of time.

So because it is them to whom the society turns back always when faced with a crisis for solutions. Thus they must live up to the expectations and play a pro-active role in advancing the cause of the society to the greatest possible extent. They must also provide the right kind of leadership to the masses through the media.

These are a few of the major challenges that the media in the current century has to confront with on the road towards an all-round progress of all the stakeholders concerned – the news media, the audiences or readership, regulatory bodies among others. We strongly believe that despite all the roadblocks and hiccups journalism would be able to raise itself much above the normal circumstances and thereby prove it worth in the near as well as distant future.

Further, the relationship between the traditional or conventional news service system and the new media must be developed to such a standard that both of them may become highly complimentary to each other. As this phenomenon is becoming an integral part of our life we can ignore it only to our own detriment. And thus we must devise the best possible way to integrate both these two so that the masses can acquire the best possible advantage out of it.

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