

The Juggernaut

Has the media lost the plot in the more wired world of today?



Chaitanya Kalbag

It was a year bracketed by the Delhi gangrape and the *Tehelka* train wreck, and you would be hard put to find another period since our colonial masters departed when journalism was in worse odour in India. It is not just the mediocrity of information assaulting us that is of concern; it is also the titillation, ignorance and bias to which our attention-deficit audiences are subjected. Every sensation is momentary and can obliterate objectivity, balance, common sense before we

move to the next bit of Broken News. Sober inquiry is rare, and rarer still is level-headed follow-up.

Even when our media “adopts” a seemingly just cause, as in the Nirbhaya case, the embrace is overpowering and even menacing. As much in that story as in the hysteria over the Tarun Tejpal episode, or the Aarushi murder verdict, or at year’s end the Khobragade ‘humiliation’ in New York, we have been assailed by the certitude of media judgement. Woe betide the person who comes under attack via Twitter and Facebook—the explosion of vitriol is so frightening that it obscures temperate discussion, demolishes privacy and destroys reputations.

Social media is now anti-social blunderbuss, and the hash-tag is a marker for slander and defamation. Well-written and edited reportage backed by facts and solid research is the exception. Instead, we have opinion and commentary masquerading as journalism on the front pages of our most powerful newspapers and on our most-watched TV news programmes. India’s millions teem in silence; we are told what is worth knowing by the shouting, bullying “anchor” or the front-page editor who delights in tabloid puns and crass wit. There is good news, but it has to be teased out. At one media group, editors had to be ordered to play up at least one good news story a day.

India’s media economics is topsy-turvy. The tyranny of TRPs and carriage fees and the hanging sword of a cap on advertising of 12 minutes an hour have made our television stations uneconomical. On the print side, the Indian Readership Survey is reinventing itself under fire from angry publishers. At the same time, recession-hit businesses have slashed ad budgets and caused thinner newspapers and

magazines. Across the spectrum, newsgathering budgets have shrunk, with little or no travel in search of better stories. We boast that India is a major player on the world stage, but our journalism is extremely parochial and our worldview uninformed and half-baked. *The Hindu* is the only newspaper with a respectable network of overseas correspondents. But its owners recently carried out a putsch against its editor. Indeed, several professional editors bit the dust in 2013. They had few mourners.

Three major trends stand out from this bleak landscape—media ownership, government regulation and the abysmal state of journalism training.

Some of the nation’s most powerful media conglomerates are now controlled by powerful business conglomerates. It’s no longer blasphemous to talk about the business of journalism. The profit imperative means that these conglomerates, with formidable print, television and digital footprints, censor or distort what you read, view or click on. “Private treaties”, the practice of bartering ad space for equity in a company, are now common in major media companies. Meanwhile, the besieged government is flailing at its media tormentors with a vigour that may not stop with the general election. It has squeezed its advertising, putting a chokehold in particular on the vernacular and small-town media. The information minister even suggested that journalists be licensed through a qualifying examination like lawyers or accountants. And the government is proposing amendments to the Press and Registration of Books Act which among other things lays down that media titles pronounced guilty of disseminating paid news three times by the Press Council be closed.

Journalists nationwide are a sorry lot. Although print mar-



kets seem to endure, the digital noose is tightening. Online ad budgets are rising, but the digital model is not self-sustaining. As costs bite, owners have ruthlessly hacked at flab. It does not take any specialism to be a journalist. That means if the generalists stop being journalists, there is precious little else they can do. Most journalism schools are like bucket factories and turn out ill-trained hacks. Concepts like ethics, balance and sourcing do not mean much to young reporters thrown in at the deep end. Research is given short shrift in a culture dominated by press releases, doctored quotes, planted stories and questionable web sources like Wikipedia.

The truth is, the journalist no longer has a monopoly on being informed and, in turn, informing eager audiences. As internet penetration rises, the power to be first with the news and to influence public opinion has been disaggregated like never before. It is no surprise that the government is stepping up its surveillance and intimidation of social media providers and web platforms. India slipped nine places to 140 out of 179 countries on the Reporters Without Frontiers World Press Freedom Index for 2013. Google's Transparency Report says India made 2,691 user data requests relating to 4,161 users or accounts between January and June 2013. It also said content removal requests from India rose 90 per cent in July-December 2012 from the previous six months.

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Hysteria rules Media pronounces judgements before courts

Media turbulence, government responses and the arithmetic of content creation and dissemination are only going to become more fraught as the 2014 general election nears. A delegation of Mumbai journalists visiting Pakistan recently came back with the feeling that Indian media is more jingoistic, less balanced and prone to squawk like parrots when authorities press the right buttons. There are honourable exceptions such as the investigative and long-form journalism in *The Caravan*, which stands as a credible counterpoint to the slippery and ethically troubling entrapment journalism pioneered by *Tehelka* and now institutionalised by the likes of *Cobrapost*. It is possible—and it was ever thus—for good, solid shoe-leather investigation to be carried out away from the cash-and-camera sting.

A very young India expects its news to be served in small, digestible bits. The 2014 elections will play to the most wired electorate so far; the voter really does not need Old Media to tell her which way to turn—witness the exit polls that nearly all got the Delhi results wrong. Take a good look at the Congress, BJP and AAP websites. The first two, festooned with pictures of their leaders, reek of old politics. AAP looks like it better understands the voter-as-digital-native. In this new world, Indian media needs to think hard about surviving and staying relevant. As H.L. Mencken wrote, "Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance." Indian democracy deserves better. ■

(Chaitanya Kalbag will shortly complete 40 years in journalism. He was Asia editor at Reuters, editor-in-chief of the Hindustan Times and editor of Business Today.)