

CROSS MEDIA OWNERSHIP

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Abstract

Media is a powerful tool in a democratic country. The principle function is to support democratization, to ensure that different opinions are heard and interests can access media, and to act as a watch dog. Access to information is important so that people may be able to use media in order to register criticism, mobilize opposition and propose alternative course of action. For a thriving Democracy the pluralism of media offering diverse content is necessary. The last decade saw increase in commercialization of Indian media with the entry of multinational media corporations.

Purposeful business practices in the field of media have affected the stuff of Indian democracy. Big industrial conglomerates in the business of media have threatened the transparency and credibility of the media. In the name of the globalization, global media organizations have spread their wings in the Indian market with their own global and monetary interests.

Key words: democracy, media, commercialization, globalization, cross media ownership, pluralism, transparency.

Introduction

In democracy the public opinion plays a major role. Democracy is defined as government of the people, for the people and by the people. Media came into existence in 1780 with The Bengal Gazette and later extended many folds. The role of media is very important in shaping the healthy environment of a country and healthy minds of the public. It is always necessary for a democratic country to have a powerful media for the success of the country as it is the backbone of the democracy. It aware public with their rights, provide information about social, political and economic activities around the world. The system in democracy becomes more accountable because of the constant eye of media on the working of the government. In a democratic set up government is accountable to public and can be changed if people know about the functioning of government. Here media plays an important role of informing public. Media is like a mirror, which shows us or strives to show us the bare truth and harsh realities of life. Thus providing public an option to choose and decide. It may be right in case of educated democracies but in country like India where most of the population is illiterate non participation in asking questions, question arises whether role of media can be limited to supplying information alone or to act as tool for generating public opinion. As cross media ownership basically is focusing on the commercial aspect of news alone. The increase in number of channels the competition is on rise. Media is now looked upon as a business of making money rather than performing its basic functions.

In this era where information technology is at its peak we are bombarded with information. We get the pulse of the world events with just a click of a mouse. The flow of information has increased manifolds. The increase in corruption led to the rise of downfall of the country economy as well as standard of living of some of the sectors. Cross media ownership in India has been a subject of an intense debate, with the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) holding consultations on the issues.

Typically, media businesses can broadly be categorized as carrier (medium), content (production), and distribution (platform). Carriers are Televisions, Radio, Films, Mobile, Internet, Newspapers and Magazines. Content is typically the message or the software that is, different genre of programs for various mediums. Distribution is the carriage service that delivers content, including cable network, direct to home (DTH) and internet service provider.

Now let us look at some evolving cross media ownership patterns in India.

ABP Ltd. is one of the leading media companies in India. The group started out as a newspaper by the name of Ananda Bazar Patrika in 1922. ABP was founded by Prafulla Chandra Sarkar who was also the editor. Today along with its flagship newspaper, the group publishes 9 other publications. The group jointly owns a 24 hour news channel in collaboration with Star India by the name of 'Star Ananda' Bengali – 2005. The present editor-in-chief of the group is Mr. Aavek Sarkar

The Times of India group is one of the largest Indian enterprises in print media, headquarters in Mumbai and offers a classic case study of a business group. Times Now is a 24 hour news channel, Zoom a film and entertainment channel while the Entertainment Network (India), a company owned by the times of India group has twenty five FM radio broadcast circles, to add to the seven that run under its brand name Radio Mirchi.

The Indian Express group is another leading media company owned by the **RPG group**. The Indian Express group started out as a newspaper by the same name in 1932. The foundation of the group was laid down by **Late Shri Ramnath Goenka**. The present Chairman and Managing Director of the group is Mr. Vivek Goenka. Presently the group owns 35 national editions, 14 publication centres and 7 national language dailies.

One of the largest Indian media company, HT Media Ltd. was founded in 1924 when its first newspaper, Hindustan Times was launched. A flagship company of the KK Birla group, HT Media Ltd. today operates with 15 printing facilities across India

The major media conglomerate Network18 operates India's leading business news channels CNBC-TV18 and CNBC-Awaaz, as well as general news channel CNN-IBN and IBN7. They have also launched IBN Lokmat, a Marathi news channel in partnership with Lokmat group. Network18 also runs one of India's largest Internet players – Web18 and have also expanded into print with Infomedia18. Network18, through its strategic alliance has also forayed into entertainment section as well. With Sun group it has formed a strategic alliance to create one of India's biggest distribution entities Sun18. The same pattern is visible in the regional media as well. Sun Network has 14 channels in 4-states, cable assets, 4-magazines, Radio stations and two newspapers. Eenadu group and Ramoji Rao's

There are at least six states where a single media house through its cross media ownership has a clear end growing dominance. These are media groups that are emerging as national corporations. They are all in the news business, as well as entertainment, media distribution in network business. They own newspapers, magazines, radio, cable TV, and Television channels. The emerging predominance of cross media ownership is contrary to very idea pluralism which requires both diversity of media owners and diversity of content. If any one branch of media holds takes in other media i.e. print, radio, television it will be in a position to control the opinion of larger section of people and the free flow of information meant for the public in democratic society is bound to be obstructed, if not totally killed.

All the democratic countries like USA, UK, Canada, Australia, France etc. have certain amount of restrictions on common and cross media ownership. A prevalent practice is to restrict the control of two out of the three media. Also there are restrictions in the broadcasters controlling the delivery services. In India, there is no general policy on ownership and cross media restrictions. This may have severe implication to India's democracy and development.

Commercialization and Globalization of Indian media leads to MNCs and TNCs to explore their monitory interests. Commercialization has led to the expansion of media world. Since the early 1990s, about 30 to 45 channels have come on air in India. However, it is the private Indian commercial television network that represents the phenomenal boom this industry has experienced. It is noteworthy that most of the global media giants are present in India.

While media corporations are finding Indian Television Networks attractive partners and gaining access to largest consumer market and middle class in the world, the interest of working class urban and rural Indian are likely to go unsaved. This is one of the means of attracting readers who are stick to T.V. news channels, which have cropped up swiftly in a recent past

and they believe this is a cheap form of journalism. Tabloids Journalism in Britain is replete with lot of these examples and very recently we have seen the unceremonious exit of the News of the World after glories 168 years of existence. The concept of breaking news in the age of 24/7 broadcasting has led to tectonic shift in the paradigm. The spot light has now shifted from what matters to what sells. So the media is constantly on the prowl for fresh fodder anything that exhibits potential to arrest eyeballs will do. Minor matters of news such as relevance of the story, sensitivity towards the subject or the viewer, news prioritization etc. get relegated to corridors of darkness.

Advertisement and sponsoring is one of the main tools of income for most of the newspapers, radio and TV stations. Free competition is benefiting society because it provides the most diversified supply of commodity at the optimal price.

News today means what sells to the market directly and advertisers indirectly. Market liberalization has made media more of a corporate entity than a community voice. New definitions and new values dictate the news media of today which has been operating in an atmosphere of consumerism (Raman: 2008, Survey by the author). 30 years ago, 55-77% of the total revenue of the newspapers came from readers; today it is the advertisers who sustain the media. From a supplementary component (25-30%) few decades ago to that of supportive component (60-75%) at present, the share of advertising has gone through an upswing all these years. In case of television channels it has been upto 70-80%. This is to the extent of determining priorities and preoccupations in a media outlet. In case of some big media houses, advertising comprises 60% of the total revenues of the group

Media House

Stakes in

Sun TV	Newspaper, DTH, Cable, Radio, Magazines, films, telecom
Essel Group (Zee TV)	TV, Cable, Film, Newspaper, radio, DTH, internet
STAR	India TV, film, internet. Newspaper, Cable, DTH
Enadu	Films, TV, Newspaper, Magazines
Living Media (India Today Group)	Radio, TV News, Magazines, Newspaper, internet, events
BCCL(The Times Group)	Radio, TV, internet. Magazines, Newspapers, films, events
Bhaskar	Cable TV, TV, Newspaper
Dainik Jagran	TV News, TV, Radio, Newspapers
Dina Thanti	TV, Radio, Cable TV, Newspapers, Magazines
Mid-Day	Radio, TV, Newspapers

(Source: Country Report, Mapping Digital Media: India, Open Society Foundations, New Delhi)

However, the free competition does not always consider all interests. Market failure may occur when consumers are unable to evaluate the quality of a commodity.

In case of media financed by advertisements exclusively, the interest serve are those of advertisers. The interests of media consumers are satisfied only as far as they coincide with the interest of the advertisers. There is no guarantee that public interest are served well. This is the reason why many countries have public radio and TV stations.

The recent topic and the style of coverage always attract consumers with particular media readership or viewership. The psychological appeal lies not only in the choice of topics but also in the way they are framed. A message is more appealing

when it is focused on a real person that people can identify with. Therefore, media prefers to give a story a personal angle rather than discussing abstract principles. Political debates are often presented as personal conflicts between politicians rather than a discussion about ideologies, a phenomenon we experience regularly across Indian media. The result of excessive competition and economic pressure is similar sensationalist at entertaining program with low quality and low information value.

The Cable Television Network Rules 1994 clearly says that not more than 12 minutes (20%) of advertisements for every hour of programming is acceptable. However, an analysis of prime time of six news channel shows that the volume of advertisements was more than even the new story or bulletins. The advertisements play a major role these days in the media. As they are the major source of earning. The TRP of the channel as well as the programme always decide the sponsorship and advertisements of the show.

On some channels, 67% of the prime time slot went to ads, and rest to news. In this increasingly disturbing scenario the role of public broadcasting system becomes all the more important. Although, it has not entirely fulfilled the vision of its founders but it can be a powerful instrument of social, cultural and political development rather than just an alternative consumer services. There are numerous studies to showcase system-wide and positive behavioral changes triggered by good programming. Some examples of such memorable programs on Doordarshan include Intakshari, Bharat Ek khoj, Hum Log, Udaan, Buniyad, etc. The need of the hour is that public broadcasting system should be guaranteed constitutionally and should deal from the government to make it an essential part of our Democracy.

No independent media watchdog group

In the present scenario there are no active media watch dog groups in India which could be on constant vigil and actively engaged in analysis and research on media issues based on objective analysis and reliable methodology.

The cross media ownership has concentrated the power of press in few hands. Media for example, when one talks about an independent media, it is necessary to include financial independence as a prerequisite, in addition to political independence. The American revenue earning model of heavy reliance on advertising is highly suspect in many former communist countries, but one has to weigh the alternatives. Are government and party subsidies less imprisoning? If journalists are so fearful of contamination by advertiser pressure, they can build internal walls between news and business functions, similar to those American newspapers erected earlier in this century.

The political contamination of media created fear of the information-gathering process. The other wall can be build separating the newsroom from the editorial department -- another important concept in modern journalism. The problem in many new democracies is that journalists who once had to toe the single-party line equate independence with opposition. Because they speak out against the government, they say they are independent. The press is now bounded by the editorial policies of the media house owners who are not aware of actual role of media but for them media is associated with glamour only. It has now become a money minting business in present age.

Agenda Setting Theory of mass media is supported by cross media ownership where the media provides fodder of what to think about rather than what to think? They mould the news according to the need and favoritism of the media house with a political party. For Example Anna hazare movement, coverage where media have not evoked some facts which require the depth of attention. Certainly, Anna was not little-known outside his home state when his protest began at Jantar Mantar; nor is he a particularly charismatic leader or a great orator. He started his fight against corruption on the name of lokpal bill and media propagated his ideology and methodology with a single view point. At this point of time when media

is expected to shed light on every facet of the Anna's movement and the associated facts, it is only supporting the movement with a few handful agendas to think about.

Media being the pluralistic weapon as the safeguard of democracy, its graph is going downwards with the increasing consolidation of the media in few hands and this is more evident in the Anna Hazare's case. On the one hand, Anna's team demands the execution of the Lokpal Bill and on the other hand the passive media consumers are unknown to the structure and meaning of the Bill. It is not only the lokpal bill but many other important issues which shows the one sided participation of media and how the ethics and media is losing its credibility, status and motive rather than giving a pluralistic view on the issue cross media ownership pattern is promoting one view through different media vehicles.

Conclusion

To increase the credibility of existing media houses the cross media ownership ban was lifted. But there has been a negative impact of the whole concept. What becomes of free media and their diversity in what is touted as world's largest democracy and what becomes of the public interest to know the truth in a conflict situation and what becomes of their right as a cable television subscriber to watch their preferred choices or ignore the channels they dislike? Can TRAI's belated initiative take off in a political context where political parties as media owners has become an accepted norm and cross media ownership raises no heckles in the corridors of I&B ministry or in the discussions on media in parliament or state assemblies?

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