

# THE ROLE OF UNBIASED MEDIA IN BUILDING A NATION



**DISHAN JOSEPH**

**M**edia has today become the voice of our society. Globally there are a variety of media platforms that have stimulated the thoughts of the younger generation and other sections of our society. Media is the plural of the word medium. Media are the channels which are used to convey information, entertainment, news, education, or promotional messages. Media includes television, radio, newspapers, billboards, emails and Internet which constitute mass communication.

Media and society are closely related to each other. The extensive impact of the media on society can easily be seen these days. Media reflects our society, how it works and what it constitutes. With the advancement in the technological domain, our society has also observed the expansion in the thoughts and ideas of people.

The mass media occupy a high proportion of our leisure time: research has shown that people spend, on average, 25 hours per week watching television, and they also find time for radio, cinema, magazines and newspapers.

While school, home and friends are all acknowledged as major socializing influences on children, a huge debate surrounds the possible effects of mass media and findings both in favour and against effects are controversial.

## GLOBAL REACH OF MEDIA

The speed and global reach of media has resulted in bringing people across the world closer. You cannot conceal news anymore- be it positive or negative. Let us take an example.

When you watch a cricket match between Sri Lanka and another country live on television, you feel you are part of the crowd in that stadium. Events, happy or sad, happening anywhere can be seen live. Sometimes we feel that the entire world is one big family. You might have heard the term "global village". You can even broadcast 'live' to the entire world using a smartphone.

Media helps a democracy function effectively. One of the tasks of the media is to ensure that democracy thrives. News agencies - print and electronic inform the public about Government policies and programmes and how these programmes can benefit the people. This helps the people voice their feelings (positive or negative) and must assist the Government to make necessary changes in their policies or programmes for the benefit of the people.

Governments must heed the voice of the people, which is carried by unbiased media. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is the right of every human. Among the most important questions to enhance media freedom and capability are: Who holds the power to communicate to the society; who has access to the means of communication; and to whom are they communicating?

Because of its function as a watchdog that monitors the running of the Nation by exposing excesses and corruption, and holding those in power accountable, the media is regarded as the Fourth Estate, supplementing the three Branches of Government (Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary) by providing checks and balances.

If by the effects of the media, we mean that exposure to the media changes people's behaviour or beliefs, then the first task is to see whether significant correlations exist between levels of exposure and variations in behaviour or beliefs. The cultivation theory was developed by George Gerbner in 1967. It is based on the assumption that mass media has subtle effects on audiences who unknowingly absorb the dominant symbols, images, and messages of media. He calls it "cultivation of dominant image pattern". According to this theory a long persistent exposure to TV is capable of cultivating common beliefs about the world.

According to the Agenda Setting Theory -the term coined by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L Shaw in 1972 in the context of an election campaign where the politicians seek to convince the voters about the party's most important issues. This theory tries to describe and explain how stories are selected. (a)Packaged and presented-a process known as Gate keeping, (b) by resulting agenda (c) how this agenda affects what people think about the relative importance of the issues presented. This theory also "predicts" that when a particular news item is presented prominently and frequently by the press, the public will come to believe that it is important.

Today's audiences are smart. People filter and understand much better than decades ago. People will log onto Google and other sites to verify what you have reported. You cannot fool your readers, listeners or viewers with biased one sided reporting, although some news agencies indulge in this unprofessional approach to news. Why do they do this?

Because to begin with companies that offer biased news to ultimately gain benefits for themselves or propagate their selfish ideology, are owned and operated by people with no media related experience. This is a global trend. They invest their money and recruit people who will be servile and loyal to them, and not transparent in their news reporting. Some news editors of newspapers, TV and radio channels are guilty of endorsing news that is untrue, biased and promoting division among people. This is not a healthy trend at all.

## SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

Social media sites allow teenagers and adults to stay connected with friends and family, making new friends, sharing pictures, and exchanging ideas. Different researches indicate that social media participation can offer users deeper benefits that extend into their view of self, community, and the world. Such communication is an important step for all and affords the opportunity for respect, tolerance, and an increased discourse about personal and global issues.

Today people do not have to wait for the dissemination process but the condition is such that every social media user, with a smartphone has become a source of information on their own. The news and views which the social media user comes across cover a wide range of topics. These topics or subjects are related to the happenings of our surroundings. People can like or show emotions through the list of emoticons or comment accordingly. Social media acts as an umbrella that constitutes a variety of interesting news.

In this background all news must be honest and circulated in a professional manner. News reporting must not provoke people to racism,

segregation, violence, politically induced bias and religious hatred. News agencies and outlets today have a big competition to be the "first" with breaking news. In the rush to be the first- news agencies and outlets globally often do not think of the timing of their news and how people will receive it in a multi-ethnic and multi- religious society. In this process, sometimes the truth also becomes a casualty.

News of any kind always deals with people, with human beings. Biased news reporting creates ripple effects that have an impact on an entire nation, and even a world region. People respond to news in various ways - therefore reporting must be presented in a manner that creates awareness and meaningful change. News reporting can be a platform to solve issues.

In the past few weeks the Ukraine - Russian conflict has been presented in many ways by foreign TV news, which is a clear reflection of which side that TV station desires to project depending on their geographical location and their countries' ties to either Ukraine or Russia.

Another dangerous aspect of social media news is the rapid adoption of this medium by terrorist groups. In the last couple of decades, incidents of terrorism have occurred on a global scale, not only in Muslim-majority countries, but also in Europe, Russia, and the United States. Terrorist groups have been using and manipulating social media for their benefit- for gathering information, recruiting members, fund raising, and propaganda schemes.

Media is one of the few jobs that presents dangerous risks and the threat of death, something that people do not realize. The International Press Institute (IPI) claims that 45 journalists were killed in 2021 globally. Out of this

total, 28 were murdered in retaliation for their genuine reporting. The people have a right to the truth in the world. Threats and bullets may temporarily halt the process of truth, but the truth will manifest with time. Violence against journalists remains a global challenge.

A free, objective, skilled media is an essential component of any democratic society. On the one hand, it provides the information which the polity requires to make responsible, informed decisions. Media also performs a "checking function" ensuring that elected Government officials uphold their oaths of office and campaign promises and that they carry out the wishes of the people's mandate. It is only through critical audiences that the press can strengthen democracy.

As the media becomes increasingly commercial there are also questions about the quality of the news and information. Every media professional must strive to build a vibrant nation

where everyone is equal. Media men and women should work with a pure conscience and be true to whatever religion they follow. They should use the media to enhance the lives of the people and build a progressive nation. This would be a true success for the media, worldwide.

