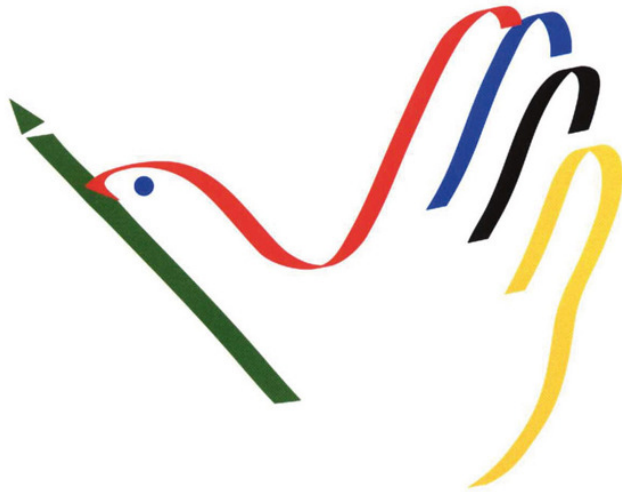


# UNESCO should reopen debate on media freedom

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We have been holding World Press Freedom Day for decades? Has it made any difference any where? Among any sections? In any way to do with freedom of media? Can UNESCO claim any difference it made in this regard? But it can be credited for keeping the idea alive!

Ranking of countries on the basis of extent of press freedom enjoyed too did not make any difference. Nor the increase in the number of deaths of journalists? How come? Has the idea become mere rhetoric? Which are the examples where institutes have made a difference, any where?

First, is the desirability of a national policy on media... UNESCO as early as early 1970 took initiative of advising countries to have national media policy..some countries did but India did not. Is such a national policy far more relevant today with multimedia taking roots?

Second, with technology changing the very scope of media, their role and impact, what change in the existing laws have been envisaged. What has been the experience? Abandoned Convergence bill in India was only an example a few years ago.

Third, although fundamental freedom of citizen is provided in the Indian Constitution, no institutions have been provided for in any specific way to

ensure and protect freedom of mass media in any specific way. Perhaps because there is no explicit provision in the constitution for freedom of press as such. Press council of India perhaps is the only body that has been provided, but that is neither to protect nor to promote culture of freedom of media. Had it made any difference?! Wage Board for Journalists is another (futile) unique provision.

Fourth, no use of building institutes without promoting what is meant by freedom of media, accountability of media by way of sensitivities of citizens, users and stakeholders. Particularly because of heterogeneous socio-economic and linguistic background of people with different kind of influence.

Fifth, every person is a user of mass media today, either as a sender and also receiver(s). They need to understand and be sensitive to immediate implications and delayed or deferred influences of what is sent or received from out of mass media. Building institutes without stakes of citizens provided for makes not much a difference.

Sixth, Rights regime in many countries has become a new leveler. Right to information or freedom of information (as in some countries) is changing the very course of relationships. Whether mass media are brought under such rights of citizen and if so in what way that made a difference to the freedom of media need to be enquired into.

Seven, best bet for a responsible and accountable media is active citizenry. Problem today is passivity of users, stake holders and the citizenry.

Eighth, neither journalist bodies, nor academic or civil society forums are pursuing or engaged in protecting fundamental aspects of freedom of media in a consistent way or in a campaign mode. Such efforts often are isolated or confined to individual instances.

Ninth, although UNESCO's standing in the comity of nations is not same today as it was a few decades ago, it should take up once again a global project in the new communication and media scenario. But that should be less to do with financial budget and project support. It should be more as a movement from bottom up?

Tenth, but the very idea of freedom in the context of mass media, in the current context of new media, need to be re looked into, in a desegregated way and repositioned. This can be done better and more seriously by UNESCO or at its behest but as its agenda. And there after UNESCO should come up with a new package of initiatives for different levels. Only then continuation of this Day, as Press Freedom Day, could make a difference.

By Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao

The author, Founder Chairman CMS, E. nbrao@cmsindia.org; W. www.cmsindia.org , at UNESCO roundtable...The Indian Media...Protecting Fundamental Freedoms and Building Accountable Institutions. May 3, 2016, IIC, New Delhi on the eve of World Press Freedom Day.