



Transparency Review

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Digital India: a pipedream or a new vision

Dinesh C Sharma

Among the new ideas espoused by the Prime Minister in his maiden independence day speech is his vision of a 'digital India'. Referring to the country's success in the field of information technology in the past three decades, the PM pointed to the transformation of India's image from that of a country of snake charmers and black magic to an exporter of high technology. Undoubtedly, the success in this field has given India a new identity globally. Using the same skills and strength for the benefit of our own people is what constitutes the basis of this new vision called 'Digital India'. Can India's strength in information technology be used to solve basic problems of Indians, such as providing quality education and health services in underserved areas? Can computers and broadband connectivity be used to provide good governance to people at all levels in the society? Is 'digital India' just a new name for ideas which have been doing the rounds all these years?

Hundreds of e-education, telemedicine and e-governance projects have been rolled out at pilot or full scale level all over the country in the past two decades. Some of these projects even predate the internet and broadband eras. The passenger ticket reservation system of the Indian Railways, which became functional in mid-1980s, is a unique

project of technology application globally. Nearly one million railway tickets are

booked everyday using this system. About half of these tickets are booked by people online. The system was designed and implemented at a time when the word 'e-governance' was not even coined, and at a time when computers were not yet 'personal'. After the dawn of the internet age, Andhra Pradesh was among the first states in the country to have rolled out e-governance in a big way. The efficacy of telemedicine too has been demonstrated in difficult areas, such as high altitude regions, hilly states and island territories.

The use of technology in education is actually not new. When radio was a new technology in 1960s, it was used for transmitting radio lessons, which students could listen in the presence of teachers. Later on television was used in the same way. India pioneered the use of television in education with the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) in the 1970s. With the launch of more sophisticated satellites such as Edusat, the concept of countrywide classrooms ushered in. Several thousand school children are given lessons in science and other subjects using two-way satellite links.

The logic behind the idea of 'digital India' is that information technology can help us overcome shortage of manpower in sectors such as education and health. If trained doctors and specialists are not willing to travel and stay in rural areas, then telemedicine is the solution. In the same way, distance education using technological means is



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Note from the Editor

Transparency Review, which started its publication in March 2006, is an attempt to bring into focus research, opinion and news related to vital issues of transparency, accountability, governance, media trends and the Right to Information. Over all these years, the journal has published several articles and research papers by leading experts and activists engaged in the transparency movement in India.

Our endeavour is to constantly make changes in the coverage of different issues keeping in mind changing media landscape and public discourse. New columns such as Social Media Watch, Book Reviews and international trends are proposed to be introduced. Researchers, academicians, media experts, rights activists are invited to offer insightful contributions to Transparency Review. Publishers and authors may send books on relevant subjects for review. Please contact the editor at transparency@cmsindia.org for specific queries.

MEDIA REVIEW

Role of media and civil society in combating corruption Justice G.N.Ray,
Former Chairman, Press Council of India

Social media to guide govt's policy matters: soon you can send your suggestion & feedback to PM
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Editor: Dinesh C Sharma

About CMS Transparency

The CMS Transparency team focuses on issues of good governance, raising awareness about the Right to Information Act (RTI) and empowering citizens to benefit from the legislation.

The Right to Information Act 2005 represents a historic breakthrough in recognising the citizen's democratic rights to monitor measures affecting the public good. Following adoption of the Act by the Parliament of India, the CMS has set up a Transparency Studies wing to document, examine and publicise the interrelation between governance and society in all its aspects. It facilitates dissemination of relevant material, confers with experts and field workers and networks with the media to promote implementation and awareness.



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being projected as an alternative to shortage of schools and teachers in rural areas. We will have to carefully analyse our experience in telemedicine and distance education, before we start scaling up existing projects or setting up new projects. Both of these ideas are capital intensive, involving use of digital equipment and setting up of costly communication networks. If they are implemented without any proper study and without studying local needs, such projects could prove to be a drain on national resources. In addition, we must bear in mind that 'one size does not fit all'.

As far as e-governance is concerned, experience shows that it can't succeed in situations where underlying governance structure is bad. This

means e-governance is a good tool but it is not a substitute for bad governance. The idea of e-governance should not be taken in the narrow perspective of people being able to pay utility bills online or being able

to pay house tax online. This can be done by just tweaking with the front-end of an existing service system, as is done by many utilities. Gearing the whole system for smart governance or user-friendly governance is much more than a single-window system. Government departments often mistake e-governance for electronification of existing system. All existing processes have to be reviewed, forms modified and digital processes have to be adopted. The ongoing digitization of the income tax department is a good example of using digital technologies. Not only can you file your income tax return online, but you can track all TDS and other tax-related transactions. This has resulted

in great relief to many tax-payers. The same thing can't be said about the online property tax payment in Delhi. Even after three years of the system being in place, books have not been updated physically (or all records have not been digitized), forcing citizens to produce proof of online payment of tax. A new approach to governance is necessary for any e-governance project to be meaningful and successful.

In his speech, the Prime Minister also referred to the mobile revolution and posed a question if such deep connectivity can be used to move in the direction of 'mobile governance'. He further envisioned a situation in which the poor will be able to operate their bank accounts, demand

various services from the government, submit applications and conduct their business from their mobile phone. It's certainly a grand vision that would gladden the hearts of every mobile service provider

because every such transaction made by people on their phones would add to profits of mobile service companies. However, before such vision could be translated into reality, we will have to cross several barriers, most important being the language barrier and data security. Our phones come with loads of apps but how many of them can be useful to people who don't know English language or are not literates. In addition, what about millions who still don't own a phone or any digital device at all?

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[A different version of this article first appeared in Metro India on August 17, 2014]



Game changing rules for media ownership

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

In the third week of August, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) came up with game changer recommendations to do with mass media of the country. Through these recommendations, TRAI reminds the nation of 20-year old landmark judgment of the Supreme Court, but forgotten even by the government and the Courts themselves. The Supreme Court had also suggested in 1995 setting up of an independent regulator for media of the country. TRAI went beyond and specified curbs on ownership, limits on cross media stakes and threshold levels for dilution of controls.

“A controversial suggestion of TRAI is barring media ownership of political parties, religious bodies and a host of publicly funded bodies including government departments and local bodies”

A controversial suggestion of TRAI is barring media ownership of political parties, religious bodies and a host of publicly funded bodies including government departments and local bodies. Barring elected bodies and constitutional bodies like Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha or agriculture bodies from reaching out to concerned public across the country or in specific pockets as a part of an obligation, is something TRAI could have detailed as it did with specifics regarding to its other suggestions. For such bodies do not come under purview of cross media or corporate influence as they also do not depend on commercial advertisements.

Limits are suggested for investments of non media corporations into news channels in particular. But their indirect control by way of advertising priorities, etc, is not even referred to.

The relevance or significance of TRAI recommendations cannot be brushed aside simply because its mandate is limited to broadcasting and content is not within its purview. Obviously, the issues cannot be viewed independently or dealt in isolation and without taking in context the larger national scene. Besides plurality and diversity of view points, conflict of interest view is what TRAI

is rightly concerned with. Without addressing the issue of conflict of interest, no sane media can be expected in a country.

The issue here is the linkage between influence of media and ownership, including the extent of cross media ownership on the content priorities, public perceptions and policies. TRAI rightly recognises the significance of news and current affairs channels and plurality and diversity of viewpoints in their coverage and contents.

Every year in the last ten years, one or other issue threatening the very scope and structure of media is being revealed or exposed. It was first allowing 100 FDI into “media supporting services” which set the concerns and course for news media. Then non-implementation of Wage Board, private treaties, paid news, Radia tapes, special privileges to media as “Fourth Estate”, TRP hoax exposed second or third time - all these never led to logical correctives or initiative. The extent of “subsidies” enjoyed by news media in different direct and indirect ways would be much more than any other service including political parties of the country. They were all connected and yet hardly any correctives were made, even symbolically.

The Right to Information (RTI) Act has completed eight years. Has that made any difference in bettering transparency in the operations of news media? Why are media establishments resisting being brought under RTI? Today we cannot make out who owns which channel and to what extent. Details about sources of revenue are also not divulged. In the case of newspapers there is at least practice of annual mandatory declaration of shareholding structure. In 2009, TRAI itself made recommendations on “media ownership”. In mid-2010, SEBI ordered

that media houses should disclose stakes of corporates in their own websites. But so far there has been no initiative on the part of the Government or willingness on the part of media owners to disclose structure of ownership. Against this background, TRAI has now rightly recommended a series of interrelated declarations as mandatory for public, as it found that the situation “has become grave”.

It is well known that hardly a dozen news channels are revenue earners out of over 400 news channels and yet another about 150 are waiting for license. Is it for leveraging the control clout of channels and visibility of their coverage which is being sought by them? Is that the reason for corporates taking control of news conglomerates?

Some media barons talk of “healthy competition” and claim that any restrictions on ownership amounts go against “unfettered growth of media”. An analysis of two critical indicators of growth and impact brings out no convincing evidence on both the counts. First, growth trend in terms of reach across sections of people in different regions of the country indicate that it is marginal (hardly five percent annual), no where commensurate with the proliferation of channels and newspapers in the last decade. What difference has proliferation made on readers and viewers? It’s more of the same phenomena. They are being availed more for (temporal) influence (often undue) on markets than for (long term) impact of communities.

Based on extensive research on impact and implications of media, CMS has written and advocated over the years the desirability of caution and restrains on media, its control structure, contents and policies. In 2000, we had written a

detailed article pointing to paradigm shift in the media operating of the country. CMS had suggested that the need is to have a national policy first on media before taking to critical decisions on licensing television channels left and right, allowing FDI into media without a debate, and without having concern for future implications and transparency on their operations. Licenses were issued by successive governments more with temporary interests, without including even minimum and essential disclosures as licensing conditions.

TRAI had also suggested that editorial independence be guaranteed through an independent regulatory framework. It asked the government to desist from regulating the media and called for a self regulatory mechanism.

TRAI recommendations should not be put on the back burner. Its recommendations need to be debated. Based on such public discourse, government should come out with a national media policy. The advertising sector and rating activities too

should be brought under the same debate as they are much related. For reasons not known, TRAI has ignored the linkage between what is happening in the advertising, PR and MR sectors and corporatization of media. The government should freeze any further change in the structure of media in the country including FDI into media and any further takeover of control of media by corporate until this debate. Implementing any of the recommendations by way of “executive decision”, as a part of rules and regulations and guidelines, will not go far as they are likely to get into a legal riddle.

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“Every year in the last ten years, one or other issue threatening the very scope and structure of media is being revealed or exposed. It was first allowing 100 FDI into “media supporting services” which set the concerns and course for the news media”

China shows new ways of censoring social media

Social media platforms are considered a media for free expression of ideas, information and news. But a new study published in international journal *Science* has shown how social media messages can be censored or suppressed in countries that do not encourage freedom of expression.

The study by Gary King and colleagues suggests that comments posted to social media sites in China that criticize the government, its leaders or its policies are generally permitted to be published. But, posts about collective action — those that reference some kind of public protest or gathering — are often censored.

The research was done in an interesting way. King and his team used popular software to launch a social media website in the Peoples' Republic of China and studied the options that webmasters have in censoring their users' comments. They then created accounts for 100 different social media websites and posted more than 1,000 comments about events that were being discussed in the news at the time. Some of the events referenced collective actions that were, in general, pro-government and others referred to collective actions that were either neutral or anti-government.

The researchers were able to monitor which of their comments appeared online briefly, which remained online indefinitely and which were never published at all. King and his team used computers located all over the world to keep track of the posts that appeared immediately and those that entered into an automatic review process. About 40% of their comments were reviewed by some sort of

editor — human or automatic — and a little more than half of those were prevented from ever appearing online, they say.

Censorship has a long history in China, extending from the efforts of Emperor Qin to burn Confucian texts in the third century BCE to the control of traditional broadcast media under Communist Party rule. However, with the rise of the Internet and new media platforms, more than 1.3 billion people can now broadcast their individual views, making information far more diffuse and considerably

harder to control. In response, the government has built a massive social media censorship organization, the result of which constitutes the largest selective suppression of human communication in the recorded history of any country. The study

shows that this large system, designed to suppress information, paradoxically leaves large footprints and so reveals a great deal about itself and the intentions of the government.

Chinese censorship of individual social media posts occurs at two levels: Many tens of thousands of censors, working inside Chinese social media firms and government at several levels, read individual social media posts, and decide which ones to take down. At the second level, they also read social media submissions that are prevented from being posted by automated keyword filters, and decide which ones to publish.

To study the first level, researchers devised an observational study to download published Chinese social media posts before the government could censor them, and to revisit each from a worldwide network of computers to see which was censored.

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To study the second level, they conducted the first large scale experimental study of censorship by creating accounts on numerous social media sites throughout China, submitting texts with different randomly assigned content to each, and detecting from a worldwide network of computers which ones were censored.

To find out the details of how the system works,

scientists supplemented the typical current approach (conducting uncertain and potentially unsafe confidential interviews with insiders) with a participant observation study, in which we set up our own social media site in China. While also attempting not to alter the system we were studying, we purchased a URL, rented server space, contracted with Chinese firms to acquire the same software as used by existing social media sites, and—with direct access to their software, documentation, and even customer service help desk support—reverse engineered how it all works.

Criticisms of the state, its leaders, and their policies are routinely published, whereas posts with collective action potential are much more likely to be censored—regardless of whether they are for or against the state (two concepts not previously distinguished in the literature). Chinese people can write the most vitriolic blog posts about even the top Chinese leaders without fear of censorship,

but if they write in support of or opposition to an ongoing protest—or even about a rally in favor of a popular policy or leader—they will be censored.

The researchers have clarified that the internal mechanisms of the Chinese censorship apparatus and show how changes in censorship behavior reveal government intent by presaging their action on the ground. That is, it

appears that criticism on the web, which was thought to be censored, is used by Chinese leaders to determine which officials are not doing their job of mollifying the people and need to be replaced.

Censorship in China is used to muzzle those outside government who attempt to spur the creation of crowds for any reason—in opposition to, in support of, or unrelated to the government. The government allows the Chinese people to say whatever they like about the state, its leaders, or their policies, because talk about any subject unconnected to collective action is not censored. The value that Chinese leaders find in allowing and then measuring criticism by hundreds of millions of Chinese people creates actionable information for them and, as a result, also for academic scholars and public policy analysts.

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[Based on research summary published in journal Science]

All the World's a Tweet

The Twiplomacy Study 2014 has found that the vast majority (83 percent) of the 193 UN member countries have a presence on Twitter. More than two-thirds (68%) of all heads of state and heads of government in have personal accounts on the social network. However, the Twitter craze is not evenly spread around the globe. All European countries except San Marino and all South American countries except Suriname now have an official Twitter presence. Only three countries in North America do not embrace Twitter communications, Barbados, Nicaragua and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. In Asia, Africa and Oceania 78.7%, 77.4% and 62% of their respective governments are using the micro-blogging service. The 32 countries without an official Twitter presence can mainly be found in Africa, Asia and in the central Pacific.

(Source: Twiplomacy.com)

Perils of governance through social media

Dinesh C Sharma

“Only Tweets, No Press Meets” – this was the provocative title of a discussion organised by the Forum of Media Professionals at the Press Club of India in August. The context was overdependence of the present central government on social media at the expense of print and electronic media. The prime minister has not addressed any press conference or given interviews after he took office a few months ago. This is in contrast to his media outreach prior to becoming the prime minister. Most of his cabinet colleagues and even leaders of the ruling party are also following the same policy. For the first time in several decades, the prime minister’s office does not have a media advisor. It is almost as if there is an unwritten policy not to respond to media queries at all.

The government, it appears, has chosen to communicate only through social media websites- Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. All ministries have been asked to create their Twitter handles, Facebook pages and YouTube channels so that the government’s policies and programmes can be communicated through such digital platforms. Let press and television pick stuff from there. Microblogging site, Twitter, has almost become a government news agency through which ministries are posting press releases, photographs, infographics, podcasts and other content. Publicity and media officers are being trained by social media companies on how to use these internet channels to their advantage. As Twitter representative at the panel discussion revealed that his company is consulting central government ministries as well

as several state governments. Government need to be transparent and accountable, he said, and Twitter is helping them execute this crucial role.

Traditionally journalists have played the role of intermediary between the government and people, and people in governments have always recognised this. Holding regular press briefings is one of the important ways of engaging with the press, and

through the press with the people. That’s why national parties hold regular press briefings, some even do daily meetings. The official spokesperson of the central government too followed this tradition for many years. Besides serving as a channel of communication, such meetings also give an

opportunity to people in the government and political parties to informally exchange notes and build bridges. This was the philosophy behind monthly press briefings started by P Chidambaram as home minister in the wake of 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai. Frequent press meetings also keep officials on their toes as they have to get their ministers ready with answers to all sorts of questions. Making yourself available to questioning – including uncomfortable- is critical part of two-way government communication. With sole dependence on social media, the Modi government has sought to rubbish this arrangement altogether.

Viraj Gupta - a Delhi High Court representing K N Govindacharya in public interest writ on the use of social media by the government – has raised issues relating to legality of government ministries and offices of the Prime Minister and the President using social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Gupta says the government data shared



on these platforms becomes property of social media website – as clearly stated in ‘terms and conditions’ which one has to agree to at the time of signing up. For individuals it may be fine, but government ministries agreeing to such terms is violation of several laws like the Public Records Act and the Information Technology Act, Gupta has questioned. In any case, data protection is of paramount importance, in view of Snowden revelations. India is respected globally for free and vibrant press. When newspapers are closing down in the West, print media is registering impressive growth rates. The number of news channels is also multiplying. On the other hand, the reach of social media is still limited to ‘digital haves’ –people who

possess smart phones and have knowledge of English. In such a situation, is it right for any democratic government to shut out the press? The government is right when it says that it has not blocked flow of information. Yes, a lot of information is being dished out through all digital outlets to the press and to the people at large. The government is also right when it says that the flow of information is two-way because people can respond to what the government is saying. However, such sterile digital information does not have any room for critical analysis and questioning – the basic role of the press.

[A different version of this article first appeared in
Metro India on August 10, 2014]

Planning should be participatory and people-centric

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

Several articles have been written since Prime Minister Narendra Modi formally announced decision to wind up the Planning Commission on August 15th. I do not know how many others have responded to PM’s appeal for suggestions in this regard. But only a few in the past have diagnosed what ails the commission and correctives needed to keep it relevant. The decay of the planning body has not occurred overnight but over several years. It had lost its direction particularly since two of its most vital divisions were made defunct many years ago - the division of public cooperation (participation) and programme evaluation.

I had first argued in 1989 that basic problems of India are not amenable for a five year perspective. And later I wrote that the processes at the Planning Commission lacked a vision and even envisioning India of inequalities and diversities. Equally pertinent, the Commission had lost public pulse despite that the fact that Planning Forums were set up in 1957 (they functioned almost for a decade) across the country in most collages to create sensitivity about planning for India and criticality of citizen participation in that very process.

It was for this very reason that 15 years ago I walked out of **AP Vision 2020**. I developed the idea based on my book **India 2021** and devoted some months in constituting 12 panels of experts and guided them to think about the future and envision the State. But the then Chief Minister preferred to have a foreign consultancy and was not prepared to consult a larger section of people of the State by way of open house sessions at a few places across the State. Vision has to be that of people of the state not of foreign consultants however well known they may be. Modi Government has lessons to consider in its efforts to come up with a new body to think big about India and strategize its growth with equity. It should not be “in lieu” “or “In place” of an outlived Planning Commission.

What I wrote two years ago and reiterated a few months later (**both published in Transparency Review of March 2012 & September 2012**) indicated some such lessons.

Lay down standards of transparency

Prashant Bhushan

How we decide the vexed issue of the method of selection of judges of the Supreme Court and the high courts would determine the future of our democracy and the rule of law in the country. We are faced with the twin problem of selecting the best judges and also ensuring that the judiciary would be insulated from executive interference.

The attempt to undermine the independence of the judiciary originated in 1973 after the landmark Kesavananda Bharati judgment of the Supreme Court. Indira Gandhi decided that only those judges who are committed to the ideology of the government should be appointed. At that time, judges were appointed by the government in “consultation” with the Chief Justice of India (CJI) as provided by the Constitution. The government then said that it was not bound by the advice of the CJI. Successive Congress governments thereafter appointed judges who had proximity to the government. The saying, that in order to become a judge, it was not important to know the law, but more important to know the law minister, became the prevailing wisdom. The subversion of the independence of the judiciary by the appointment of convenient judges became a major issue, especially with increasing corruption within the executive.

Finally, in 1993, the system prevailing at that time was reversed and the judiciary wrested the control in the matter of judicial appointments from the executive. The words “in consultation with the chief justice” were interpreted to mean, “with the concurrence of the chief justice”. The meaning of “chief justice” was interpreted as a collegium of the CJI plus two senior judges of the court. A new elaborate procedure was laid out by the court for the appointment of judges, in which the role of the government was reduced to returning a name recommended by the collegium for reconsideration. If the collegium reiterated its recommendation, the president would have no option but to go through with the appointment. High court appointments

would also go through a similar procedure, except that the recommendations there would originate from the collegium of the high courts.

In 1998, the Supreme Court further tweaked its judgment of 1993 in a Presidential Reference on this issue. The collegium was widened from three to five judges. Consultation with other judges in the court, who came from the same high court as the proposed nominee, was also provided. But the control over the appointments continued to vest with the judiciary.

This system of appointment of judges by the judiciary did lead to the depoliticisation of the judiciary to a large extent and did substantially improve its independence. But the process of appointments was still shrouded in secrecy and keeping the control over appointments with sitting judges, who had little time from their judicial work, coupled with the lack of transparency in such appointments led to nepotism and arbitrary appointments. No criterion for selection was laid down, nor was any system devised to evaluate various candidates in the zone of consideration on any criteria. No system of inviting any applications or nominations was devised either. Thus the quality of appointments did not substantially improve even in this system. Even late Justice J.S. Verma, the author of the original judgment, came to say that he did not anticipate that his judgment would lead to such poor appointments by the judiciary.

Selecting about 100 judges of the higher judiciary every year in a rational and fair manner is an onerous task requiring a full-time and not an ex-officio body. An ex-officio body of sitting judges and ministers cannot devote the kind of time required for this job. We therefore need a broad-based, independent constitutional body that would make appointments of judges in a transparent manner by calling for applications and nominations of candidates and evaluating them on set criteria. This body can be on the lines of the Judicial Appointments Commission (JAC) of the United Kingdom, which is also a full-time body, which has

adequate time, expertise and resources to select the best candidates.

The Committee on Judicial Accountability (a voluntary body of senior lawyers and retired judges) proposed a bill for the constitution of a full-time and independent body called the JAC for the selection of judges to the high courts and the Supreme Court. It was proposed that such a body could be

constituted from among retired judges or other eminent persons who are selected in the following manner: The chairman to be selected by the collegium of all judges of the Supreme Court. A second member by the collegium of all chief justices of the high courts. A third member by the Union cabinet. A fourth by a collegium of the leaders of opposition of the two Houses of Parliament, along with the speaker of the Lok Sabha. A fifth by a collegium of the CEC, the CAG and the CVC. Each of these members of the JAC would have a tenure of five years and would thus be independent of the government as well as of the sitting judiciary. This body would be mandated to function transparently and would have to publish the names of the persons shortlisted for appointment for the information and comments of the people, before the final selection. Being a full-time body, it would lay down the criteria for selection and would be mandated to go about its task in a structured and rational manner. The body would be given adequate staff and resources to do justice to its onerous work.

However, neither the government nor the judiciary was interested in creating an independent full-time body as exists in the UK to select judicial appointees. A national judicial commission bill of

2013 was eventually introduced by the UPA government, which sought to create an appointments commission in which the appointments pie was sought to be divided almost equally between the judiciary and the government.

The proposed commission was supposed to have the three senior-most judges of the Supreme Court along with the law minister and two eminent

“The minimum level of transparency would require that the names of shortlisted candidates ought to be made public so that the public can send any evidence, if any, against any of the shortlisted candidates to the said body, which would then take that into account”

persons nominated by a committee consisting of the prime minister, leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha and the CJI. Thus, the commission was still conceived as largely an ex-officio body of people who would have little time to devote to appointments and it did not lay down any standards of transparency either in the appointments. The bill, which lapsed with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha, is much worse than the existing system since it suffers from the vices of both the pre-1993 system and the existing system, and does not offer any improvement.

It is therefore essential that the government moves a constitutional amendment bill to create a full-time, broad-based body that would make appointments to constitutional courts in a transparent and rational manner. The minimum level of transparency would require that the names of shortlisted candidates ought to be made public so that the public can send any evidence, if any, against any of the shortlisted candidates to the said body, which would then take that into account. We need a bill along the lines suggested by the Committee on Judicial Accountability.

The writer is a lawyer and founding member of the Aam Aadmi Party.

(Source: The Indian Express, 11 August 2014)

Backlog piles up as disposal rate of info commissioners comes down

Despite a backlog of over 24,000 cases, the Central Information Commission (CIC) appears to have slowed down in its hearings. An assessment by former information commissioner Shailesh Gandhi shows that disposal of cases has come down though the number of information commissioners has increased.

Gandhi's assessment indicated that in the six months (January-June) this year, individual

commissioners disposed 730 to 1,441 cases. The total disposal of eight commissioners was 8,485, which would give 16,970 cases annualized, an average of 2,121 cases per commissioner.

"Eight commissioners this year will do less work (16,970) than six commissioners (22,513) in 2011. At this rate, they will need about 18 months to clear the present backlog of 24,834 cases," Gandhi said.

(Source: *The Time of India*, 15 July 2014)

Most Information commissions fail transparency test

Himanshi Dhawan

Information commissions — watchdogs for the transparency regime under the RTI Act — are some of the most opaque organizations, according to an independent report.

Of the 29 commissions in the country, only 17% have the facility of online filing of appeals and complaints. What's more, 42% do not display information on the cases that will be heard that day or that week, 58% do not display the updated status of pending appeals and complaints while 35% do not have a system of making their orders

public within a reasonable timeframe, the report showed.

The report prepared by Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) also revealed that there was a steady increase in the number of RTI queries in 2012 as compared to the previous year. While Gujarat and Odisha saw a 46% increase in applications, Karnataka witnessed 29% increase. There was a 19% increase in RTI appeals with the Central Information Commission (CIC).

(Source: *The Time of India*, 14 July 2014)

BJP reverses stand on bringing parties under RTI

Anuja & Liz Mathew

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government on Thursday said bringing political parties under the Right to Information (RTI) Act would hamper the smooth functioning of parties and the information could be misused by opponents, in a departure from BJP's earlier stance.

"Declaring a political party as public authority under the RTI Act would hamper its smooth internal working, which is not the objective of the RTI Act," minister of state for personnel and training Jitendra Singh said in a written reply to the Rajya Sabha.

He said no representations from parties opposing the Central Information Commission (CIC) order seeking to bring six national parties under RTI, have been received by the government.

(Source: *Live Mint*, 01 August 2014)

66,000 RTI complaints pending in six info panels, Maharashtra tops list

Anahita Mukherji

The common man's favourite law, the Right to Information Act, turns nine this year. Information commissions were set up to decide on complaints and appeals filed by people against government authorities for blocking access to information. How have they performed?

At present, over 66,000 complaints and appeals are pending at six information commissions.

Maharashtra tops the list with 34,158, followed by the Central Information Commission

(CIC; Delhi). Kerala, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir are next. The states are the only ones to provide pendency figures besides Sikkim and Tripura, which showed no pendency.

The findings, which have been made by the non-profit Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), raises questions about the composition of the commissions.

(Source: *The Time of India*, 06 July 2014)

Won't hear RTIs of personal nature: central information commissioner

Sanjay Kaw

The central information commissioner (CIC) has directed that the Right to Information (RTI) applications seeking personal details to settle personal scores on frivolous grounds should not be entertained.

A senior government official said that the order, which would act as a deterrent against frivolous RTI applicants, has been circulated to all the principal secretaries, secretaries, heads of departments and heads of local and autonomous bodies. The commission had passed these directions on an appeal related to a RTI seeking

information about Delhi government employee Ramesh Chander Gupta and his family in March 2012. The RTI, filed by Mr Gupta's brother, had sought information related to his date of birth, his appointment in the city administration, details of movable and immovable assets held by him, his mother, his wife and children, details of his bank accounts, his source of investments, medical expenses claimed by him in his office and details related to the properties developed by him by virtue of will.

(Source: *The Asian Age*, 21 August 2014)

Give reasons for seeking RTI info: HC

In a serious blow to the transparency regime in the country, the Madras high court has said that RTI applicants must give reasons for seeking information as it gave relief to its registry from disclosing file notings on a complaint against a chief metropolitan magistrate.

A division bench comprising Justices N Paul Vasantha Kumar and K Ravichandrababu said an applicant must disclose the object for which information is sought and also satisfy that such object has a legal backing, a decision which may

have far reaching implications on getting information under the RTI Act and which was decried by legal experts and activists.

However, the legislature had while passing the RTI Act specially incorporated Section 6(2) which says an applicant requesting for information "shall not" be required to state any reason.

Terming the order "illegal", lawyer Prashant Bhushan said it is against the "letter and spirit" of the Act.

(Source: *Hindustan Times*, 22 September 2014)



Role of media and civil society in combating corruption

[The Central Vigilance Commission organised a national seminar on “Combating Corruption: Role of Accountability Institutions, Investigating Agencies, Civil Society and Media” in February this year. The commission has recently published proceedings of this seminar. We are reproducing here edited excerpts of the proceedings of the session on role of civil society and media. The views expressed are those of the speakers]

Introductory Remarks by Justice G.N. Ray, Former Chairman, Press Council of India

I am not from a media house but fortunately I had the privilege of remaining the Chairman of the Press Council of India for about 7 years. I had some close understanding about the function of media and also civil society. Therefore, perhaps the organizers thought it fit to invite me here to chair this session and as I said I am quite thankful for it.

The first one is positive role of media – print, electronic and social in combating corruption. The media is the representative voice of the people. You will understand that in the Indian Constitution freedom of speech and expression has not been given in so many words to the media but this question came up as early as 1950 when the Constitution was created and the Supreme Court started functioning. A matter appeared before the Supreme Court and there was no hesitation on the part of Shri Patanjali Shastri who was chairing the bench. He became the second Chief Justice of India to declare that media has freedom of speech and expression like ordinary citizens. It is by this declaration by the Supreme Court that media got it. Why?

Let us ask that question because media is a representative voice of the citizen of India and all the citizens are represented. It is called the watchdog of the nation. It is the mirror of the society and media being the Fourth Estate has a

responsibility to look at where the deficiencies are in the functioning of the Government and civil society. What should be done, what should not be done. Unfortunately, today the way the media is functioning, it is not attaining that level and that is why the question has come up as to what should be the role of media really. The corporatization of India has become a reality. Media must expand because in good old days if you remember the media of that time, the printing machine was not that much efficient. By this machine hardly 2000 copies used to be printed though it had a tremendous impact on society. The village headman in the light of a lantern used to read and speak to the people. The media was engaged in social reforms and doing excellent work.

The first newspaper which was published from Kolkata is known as the “Calcutta Gazette”.

True to the speech of a journalist it raised its voice against the misdeeds of East India Company. The result was disastrous. Ultimately, the publisher suffered jail terms and penalty as the news was the truth. That is the real spirit of the journalist. But today unfortunately that is not happening. Corporatization has led to demands for increasing profit. Profit must be there but one must try to understand that there is a limitation once you have taken the responsibility to the guide the nation. At one point you must stop. There must be a Lakshman

Rekha which you cannot cross. The corporatization problem is required to be tackled and at the same time there is another difficulty - cross media ownership. Today big newspapers, big houses, TV channels and also the print media are covered by it and there is a danger inherent in it.

The Second Press Commission of India spoke against the view that this will bring monopoly.

It pointed out that there was legislation in America and in Australia while in India we were not even thinking about it. These are matters that require to be considered very severely. Both civil society and the news media including print media may sit together and try to find out what should be done about this. Until the media plays this role with absolute neutrality there is a difficulty.

The most difficult situation which I have noticed is the “paid news syndrome”. The “paid news syndrome” came to light in India when it came out that many big media houses were taking money for the purpose of publication of news in favour of one political party or in the favour of one candidate. Another difficulty is that even in the economic world many of the media houses are taking the side of the media corporate houses for money. That is the most difficult situation.

If by talk shows or by your article or any other thing you control the financial market and create hype, there is a severe danger in it. I can cite an example when shares were floated by Reliance. There was so much hype built up through talk shows and through the print media and electronic media that ultimately the share was oversubscribed by 3 to 4 times and every share was sold for about Rs. 430 or 440. Today it is less than Rs. 100. Thousands of crores have gone down the drain. This is really a difficult situation. In America and Europe also the same problem is being faced.

Therefore, time has come for a serious discussion amongst us on how to control and regulate the functioning of the media in the best possible manner so that the media really becomes the Fourth Estate of the country. That topic would be very important for discussion I am sure. The panelists today will throw light on it.

The second subject is corporate ownership of the media. Corporate ownership of the media is bound to flourish because in earlier days when I was saying 2000-3000 copies were issued is not possible today. Today, media houses are printing newspapers from several centres all at the same time. The total circulation is in figures that range from 20 lakh, 25 lakh or 30 lakhs. Therefore, corporatization of the media is bound to happen.

However there is a limit which should not be crossed and that requires a serious discussion.

The third issue is of strengthening and supporting citizen engagement in increasing integrity and transparency in the

Government. This is not really related to the media’s functioning but is a common subject.

There are issues of social media and citizen empowerment. Citizen empowerment is essential because the country is governed by the citizens ultimately and, therefore, until the empowerment of the citizen is there it will be very difficult to achieve all round success.

There is also the role of Right to Information in empowering the citizen. The interrelation of the media and citizen is outside the scope of today’s discussion but it is quite important because Right to Information is certainly among the very important legislations ever done by the country and we are thankful for that. But Right to Information also has its limitations. Sometimes you may have noticed some abuses. Sometimes the Right to Information is not being heeded.

“There are issues of social media and citizen empowerment. Citizen empowerment is essential because the country is governed by the citizens ultimately and, therefore, until the empowerment of the citizen is there it will be very difficult to achieve all round success”

Remarks by Jawahar Sircar - CEO, Prasar Bharti

I would submit that the first decade or even 14-15 years of free India belonged to the Parliament. Not the same Parliament that we see today, but a Parliament where an allegation made by a Party member of the ruling party could force the Prime Minister to drop his Finance Minister. I can go on to names. We had the Mundhra Scandal, Sahu Jain case etc. Everything was rocking Parliament. We had Parliamentarians like Feroze Gandhi (who was also a son-in-law) and we had Pilloo Mody and others who were rocking Parliament. In the first 15 years of independence, the Press had a secondary role and except bringing out the proceedings of Parliament it wasn't as what you see today. This was just to bring you a historical perspective. Then, in 1975 the chord between government and the press would break, never to be repaired ever again by any government. And then began the tumbling out of a lot of scandals. I can mention several: Antulay Trust '81, Bofors '87, Harshad Mehta '92, Telecom '96, Fodder Scam '96, Hawala diaries, Ketan Parikh etc.

What am I getting at? The first part was the bonhomie between Parliament and the Media. If we look at corruption then we find a scenario where people, including the Finance Minister, would have to resign because Feroze Gandhi, the son-in-law, had indicted them and the Prime Minister was gracious enough at that point. What happened thereafter is another story. If we fast forward, we see that the first time air waves were actually handed over back to the nation is after a judgement in a sports case in 1995 in Jagmohan Dalmia Vs. the Ministry of I&B, Government of India. Until then we had a tame media (where the electronic media is concerned) because today when you talk of the media it is first and foremost the electronic media that grabs your eye balls.

Where India is concerned, there are a few more facts that I would like to talk about. The general feeling about corruption, and there is no measurement of corruption, is that it has increased substantially. What was Rs.64 crores and once a major issue that rocked governments is now taken as a pittance. The numbers and volumes and transactions have increased and there is no doubt about it. Where I stand I feel that a lot of our colleagues are not really that corrupt but what

corrodes the nation's heart is "user-friendliness". It is "user-friendliness", of making things easier for the 'system' that is actually worrisome. But where does the Press

come in? I have already told you through a series of examples of where the press got into the act and could bring in, let us say, scams to light.

Let me talk about another phenomenon - collusion between a large segment of the media and the three establishments has reached astounding proportions. If you go into the list of Members of Parliament, you will see that it is a matter of pride to be elected by a party to the Rajya Sabha or other seats and you can go into how many people in the establishment actually have a hand there. This would lead to the collapse of faith in the Fourth Pillar that was to take on the ills of the first three pillars (Legislative, Executive and Judiciary). Those that did take it on are now also today a largely colluding force. I can give examples but that will take too much time. It is not the fact of becoming an MP that corrodes or corrupts you. The fact is that public perception is that the 3 pillars and the Fourth Estate are now together.

Let me give you a few examples of what Justice Ray had said. We have no regulatory environment. He was Chairman of the Press Council and we now have another very active Chairman of the Press Council. The Press Council is a voluntary body, it is almost like a Church get together. It can't bite. Libel takes too long. I feel that neither the Press Council nor libel would work. There is no

“Media - political nexus is a development characterized by “paid news”. We are unable to distinguish between what is paid news and what is “news”.”

regulatory mechanism over the print media or the electronic media which is more dangerous.

Third, media - political nexus is a development characterized by “paid news”. We are unable to distinguish between what is paid news and what is “news”. There are newspapers that make it almost an unwritten policy that you be nice to me in terms of cash and we will look after you. The world now is moving in a digital age, and though much of it is hype, let me assure you the choice at which we stand today on corruption is flexibility within our own system. To catch the ones that we know to be corrupt is another thing. The choice is now between a social media that has no normative rules of conduct, that could pack off thousands of boys from the North-east on the basis of a rumour from Bangalore or do we bring in a Regulatory Body or a multiplicity of Regulatory Bodies that take care of the concerns of the people on all the issues including transparency and probity. We move either towards responsible governance through a series of transparent regulators or it will be the possible anarchy of the ungoverned space of citizens.

Remarks by Raj Chengappa, Editor, The Tribune

Justice Ray asked me to speak of the corporatization of the media. I am happy to say that The Tribune is probably the last newspaper that is run by a Public Trust. It has five Trustees who do not take any money. It is a non-profit Trust for 133 years, started by Sardar Singh Majithia.

I am happy to say that despite all the gloom that Shri Sircar had pointed out, the media is not a big bad boy as yet. Though there are cases and aberrations that we all need to take note of, I would not take such a dim view of what he has said. I am saying this with a great sense of responsibility. Yes, we have done a lot of wrong and so has much of the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the executive,

the political leaders and everybody else. But to shoot the messenger at this point, I don't think, is the sort of theme that we should follow. There has to be a lot of regulation I agree. Whether it should be self-regulation, and I support self-regulation, we can discuss subsequently.

In many senses the Aam Aadmi Party, Shri Kejriwal, Shri Anna Hazare have become the lightning rod of all our anger, in some senses “public anger”, towards corruption. They have channelized that into something that has been dramatic and has shown results in the recent elections in Delhi. They have also become the symbols of the crusading spirit that is there.

Let us not forget that before that, if you take a sweep of history, you would find that the media was a prime catalyst in a lot of this action against corruption. I think Vinod Mehta's magazine, if I recall in 1997, did it if you go back into the 1980s. Of course you have the Bofors, you have Arun Shourie, if you see the 90s you had a whole lot of things and particularly I remember since Vinod is here as a senior colleague the cricket betting scandal which they exposed. That was very quickly followed in early 2000 by a whole range of politicians getting caught, including Bangaru Laxman and the tactics adopted, the cash for question scheme where lot of MPs had to resign and more recently, the 2G scam followed by the Commonwealth Games and the allocation of coal resources. In all these, the media had a role to play. In some of them they were the initiators, in others they were the catalyst and in the third they performed the force multiplier role. They highlighted these things considerably and were able to garner public support to it. Therefore, you saw a movement of an unprecedented kind which is why I am optimistic. This has resulted in a most historic Act finally coming into play on the 1st of January 2014 which we should not in any way denounce, the Lokpal Bill.

“The Aam Aadmi Party, Shri Kejriwal, Shri Anna Hazare have become the lightning rod of all our anger, in some senses “public anger”, towards corruption”

If you see what has happened in the last couple of years as a result of all these actions, and that is why I am saying there is a positive spin to all this, we can look at everything negatively and say everything is going down the tube and things are going wrong. Of course they are, I am not saying no, but there is this whole architecture that is coming up and I think one of the political leaders recently talked about it and there is a need to pass the other parts of this architecture, the six Bills still pending before Parliament (may be there 8 or 9 if you actually look at the numbers). Each of them, whether it is the Whistle Blower's Act, whether its judicial accountability, whether it is procurement or money laundering each of these Bills provides a platform through which the public and the media can address all this concerns with regard to corruption.

What is the role that we have to play? I am slightly deviating I think. You all have to understand where we have come from, since there is this cry for self-regulation, I mean a cry for regulation of media not self-regulation and things must be put to order, as they say. Firstly, when you look at the RTI enabling legislation, the media used to do a lot of this digging up before the RTI came up and had contacts and sources and was able to expose some of this. But that was limited; it was really difficult to do that. I think in some senses the coming of the RTI empowers the citizen as well as the media to go ahead and find out uncomfortable facts the government wanted to hide for long but is now able to now uncover.

I was speaking to some of the people that have done a lot of the exposes and I like to quote

Anirudh Behl of Cobra Post who has done some of the most outstanding investigative works that happened. He says if you look at what happens to us, the amount of litigation that he faces as a result of his exposes including where his money is coming from, the amount of hours he has to spend in a

court defending what he had to write and proving that the person he had exposed, whatever he wrote was correct, whatever he put on video was correct, that itself is a major constraint.

It is not that editors, all of us including Vinod, are not responsible. Our first responsibility lies with the reader or the viewer. If the 'Tribune' has endured for 133 years, it is because there is a trust

between the reader and those who bring out the paper. That trust is broken like a human relationship if you provide untruths. For instance, if you find a friend who you rely on

for information gives you an untruth you would never go back to that person for information after that. You would say he is completely unreliable. I would not trust him after that.

Day in and day out we are put to that test with the reader. He trusts us intrinsically to bring news and let me tell you the collection of that news is an amazing job. For a price of Rs. 2 or 3 we bring the world to your door step every morning. We select tremendous amount of news that comes in an information chaos every day and the 10 most important things that you have to look for on the front page are identified and then we take you across the inside pages depending on the States that you stay in, the areas of your interest. We present news in a cohesive fashion and put it together. Every day we might be handling over a thousand stories that are there and we are liable in case anything goes wrong. If that trust is broken the first person that is going to stop reading us is the reader or the first person that is going to switch off is the viewer. So an Editor has a tremendous responsibility to ensure that trust is not broken.

He is also accountable in a different way. If, for instance, and I don't agree with Shri Sircar, there is some incorrect fact or if you have exposed someone, he can sue us. These days the moment someone sues us becomes news as well. That is propounded so immediately it is all over the place and he can keep pushing you into courts for about

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10 years where you have to go as an editor. I might face 500 cases which means my personal presence is required in many of these cases just to get bail. It is both a criminal and civil offence. I have to pay money if I am found wrong and I can go to jail as well. You already have a large amount of control in terms of both the reader cutting you off and if he cuts you off and your circulation goes down, that is the death of the newspaper. No one would advertise and you would not be able to sustain. At the same time you can go to jail for all these things. So, it takes a lot to be an editor.

The Whistle Blower is there, even within the government, so he is protected. What happens to the Press? They were the biggest Whistle Blowers at one point or continue to be. What is the level of protection that the Press have when it begins to blow the whistle on Government Actions and everything else? If you think big business is bad, Government can be terrible. They can unleash a slew of things against your press or against your organization as a way of getting back against you. We have had issues of our own in the 'Tribune' when we exposed the nexus in the transport policy that the Punjab Government had under Prakash Singh Badal.

It is not that we are not confronted with a lot of these problems that are there. We have our limitations which you all must understand and we do it under great pressure. It is not that the press is waiting to cash in at all times. Yes, there are issues. I said I am not trying to play that down. But if you look at what we are trying to do, where are these interjection points that come in? One is with the Right to Services coming, the Press has a greater role to play in terms of making the Act viable which means that it's watchdog role comes in again.

Once you begin to clean up that act then you are looking at the "big" corruption. Again the

Press has a role to play. On one side the Press has a very positive role to play in terms of taking a lot of this legislation and converting it into action and making sure that action happens. On the other side, of course, there is the big corruption that you see. If you look across it is really real estate, the

allocation of resources, development projects, huge amounts of money are going. Again, the press has a role in questioning each of these findings. That role has now partially been taken over, thankfully, in some senses, by the CAG which is doing audits. You might argue against it. Government might say that they have exceeded their brief. But the fact is they have exposed a lot of stuff which we have been able to then act on and make public. You need that kind of action against corruption as well and there the media can play a major role.

The third aspect which I think is important for a major organization like the Central Vigilance

Commission or any of the organizations that is dealing with corruption is to make itself available to the public and brief them regularly as to what are the ways they can go about themselves exposing corruption. For instance, with no criticism to the organizers, I would love to see what the CVC has done in 50 years? How many cases has it brought to book? What has happened to all these people who have been booked? Where have they gone? That I think would also frighten a lot of people. I think that is the greatest pressure that all of us face and, therefore, is the responsibility of the press.

I agree we have faulted many times on that and my advice to my colleagues is to remember what we hear on cricket, when you watch Sunil Gavaskar give commentary. He says "never forget the basics". Most of our batsmen forget to ground their bat when they run and he keeps reminding us that "they are test players, they should do that". Part of those basics is like your airline rules when you tighten your seat belt, push your chair forward, those set of rules must operate for all journalists when they work on stories. If there is an accusation we must have a rejoinder from the person who is being accused. We must be able to find out what is their point of view and present it. I found in most cases if you do present their point of view the anger against that particular report that you have done diminishes. I am not saying dilute it, but give them a chance to give their point of view in the matter. So that is something that I think all of us need to do.

Remarks by Vinod Mehta, Editor-in-Chief, Outlook

I am here before you as a member of the Fourth Estate but I am not an uncritical member of the Fourth Estate. So, I will tackle this subject from both perspectives. But, first let me just state the obvious—that corruption is a hot button issue. I mean that it is self-evident, if you just read the papers, you see the environment, you see the success of Aam Aadmi Party. I think whatever they have been able to do, their success is a reflection of the deep revulsion that the people of this country have for the traditional parties. Somebody asked me which party I supported and I said “the party Rahul Gandhi supports”. Rahul Gandhi supports the Aam Aadmi Party!

But why it is a hot bottom issue, I think, is that there is absolutely no unanimity about how it should be tackled. We have no agreement, we only agree that it needs to be tackled but how it should be tackled, we don't know. I found in your conference an extraordinary spectacle where the President of India and the Prime Minister of India disagreed on how corruption is to be tackled. So it gives you an idea of the deep divisions. Corruption is seen now as subjective thing.

What is the role of the media in cleansing corruption? Some people think we are a negative force and particularly politicians who think we are a negative force in this fight because we highlight corruption stories because it helps to sell newspapers, it increases TRPs etc., etc. Some others go to the extent of saying that we are perverse, that we enjoy spreading gloom and doom and negativity. As an Editor I am constantly being asked ‘Why don't you print good news?’ I just tell them I find it very difficult to find good news these days, and if you can help me find it, I will print the “good” news.

The honest answer about the media's role in exposing corruption is that they are both a force

for good and they do it also for self-serving reasons. For me to deny that the TV channels and newspapers don't profit by printing corruption stories would be wrong. But I think for you to assume that the media has no national interest, that it is full of people who are only concerned with their own newspapers and channels, would be very unfair. The answer is both.

I don't mind confessing that a negative story or a corruption story or a breaking news story of corruption does help to sell newspapers and helps to increase TRPs. This ‘breaking news’ has become so absurd that one channel had a scroll running saying the “next breaking news will be at 8.30”. The problem with the media is that this power that we have is going to our head. It is intoxicating us and we constantly justify that power, by saying that all the other Estates of the nation

“The media's role in exposing corruption is that they are both a force for good and they do it also for self-serving reasons”

don't work, therefore, we have to take an activist role. I mean, the judiciary works but all the other Estates don't work. In fact, the judiciary and the media are supposed to be the two Estates that work hand in hand while the others are sleeping. This becomes the excuse for the media to play judge, jury and executioner. This is a very dangerous role that we play. It cannot be justified in any way. It cannot be justified by weaknesses and lacuna in the system.

I became an editor in 1974 and I saw my role as that of putting information in the public domain, again and again. And then we allow other institutions of our democracy to take over. This Arun Shourie kind of idea that we are guerrillas or we are activists, that we must take this right to the end, that editors must get involved in PILs, etc. is something I don't believe in. I have been an editor for 40 years but I have never got involved in this sort of a thing. That is not my role, it's the role of civil society. My role is to give you information, by putting it in the public domain. If you need more information, I will give it, if I have it. But it is not my role to become an activist. I am really scared of becoming an “Editor Activist”. Editors are not

supposed to be activists, we have enough on our plates. Corruption is a very important issue and the role of the media in exposing it is very important. But we must understand the boundaries, the lakshman rekha of our roles. We should not assume other people's roles. Nobody has given us that mandate. We take it on ourselves, it is a self-mandate. And to some extent, it is the public that is responsible, because they applaud this thing. I think this is a negative thing and must be criticized. While we must applaud the role they play in exposing corruption, commend them on their diligence, on their consistency and their repetition of a corruption issue, we must tell them that this is

none of their business. Pronouncing anyone guilty is none your business. And to suggest that due process is some sort of systemic failure, and the media gets very upset if it is suggested, is wrong. I know a lot of people get exasperated by the system and blaming the system is usually a way of procrastination, an excuse for non-action. That problem has to be tackled, but the media must be told that whatever good work they do in exposing the role is encroaching on the role of other agencies like the CBI.

At the end of the day, I would say that we are still a force for the good. Our credibility with the public is very high.

Social media to guide govt's policy matters; soon you can send your suggestions & feedback to PM

PM Narendra Modi

If you are the world's third most followed leader on Twitter, and have 18.8 million 'likes' on Facebook, the internet not only has to be the centre of your governance model, but it also has to be the key means to interact with the public, listen to their views and, wherever possible, redress their grievances too.

This is what Prime Minister Narendra Modi is keen on doing now. People interested in sending their grievances, feedback and messages to Modi will soon have a dedicated forum to do so.

The BJP's IT cell is in the process of creating at least two dedicated ids for people to send in suggestions to the Prime Minister's Office.

Considered part of the Prime Minister's 'Social Media in Nation Building,' the IDs will have a dedicated team monitoring the letters which will be forwarded to the PMO once in 15 days.

"We want to leverage the power of social media for healthy interaction between the government and people. We are in the process of setting up a strong server for the systems to start receiving emails," said Vinit Goenka, National Co-Convener, BJP IT Cell.

Depending on the nature of the letters, they will be forwarded to the respective cell in the PMO and acknowledged with replies, Goenka added. The mails could range from feedback to schemes to major grievance against policy decisions.

Goenka said the grievance redress system was not confined to emails alone."All BJP offices have been asked to get a grievance cell up and running, and collect letters of feedback and complaints from people and send it to us. We can forward them to the PMO," Goenka said.

(Source: The Economic Times, 08 July 2014)

News media losing its role as gatekeepers?

A new study from the University of Georgis says that news media is losing its role as gatekeepers to new ‘social intermediaries’. The American government is doing a better job of communicating on Twitter with people in sensitive areas like the Middle East and North Africa without the participation of media organizations, it has found.

The study looked at the U.S. State Department’s use of social media and identified key actors who drive its messages to audiences around the world. In particular, it examined the role played by news media and the government in bridging the State Department communication with people domestically and internationally.

Published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, the study’s authors say the main reason is that the government is making an effective use of “social mediators” critical to the communication process.

“News media tend to use social media in the old fashioned way,” explained Itai Himelboim, an associate professor of telecommunications in the UGA Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. “They send out their reports like it was a broadcast-going one way. Communication on social media is a two-way street.”

“They need to engage people in the conversation,” added Guy Golan, an associate professor of public relations in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. “They need to recognize that not all users yield equal influence. Organizations need to strategically identify and empower social mediators as bridges that connect their various publics.” The study defines social mediators as the entities that mediate the relations between an organization and its publics through social media. They are the people and organizations who re-tweet, re-blog and re-post material published online.

“Communication via these social spaces, such as Twitter, depends more than ever upon the willingness of third parties to participate in content distribution in the form of retweets or content endorsement,” said Himelboim. “Twitter is a hybrid

between mass communication and personal communication.” The study examined the U.S. State Department’s use of #SecClinton on Twitter. It analyzed the engagement and curation techniques used with that account. In the process, it identified social mediators who control the flow of information between the Department of State and its publics worldwide.

The key findings are:

- Engagement with users was medium-high for both formal and informal social mediators, but low for news media. Government-related formal and informal social mediators showed similar levels of bilateral relationships. In contrast, news media, the most traditional public relations mediators, were rarely found as social mediators and demonstrated the most unilateral relationships.

- Social mediators vary in terms of their formality and interdependence. Formal social mediators were primarily U.S. government agencies while informal social mediators were nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals (bloggers).

- Different types of social mediators influence the State Department’s relationships with stakeholders in different parts of the world. The results showed that relationships with populations in the Middle East and North Africa were mediated primarily by informal actors, and formal mediators played a key role in connecting with the public everywhere else in the world.

The authors of the study note that the social mediators—the people retweeting those posts—will add their own message and their own comments and may disagree with the original posting. But the message is still getting out. They say government agencies in these sensitive areas are beginning to recognize that social media is playing a growing role in how they communicate with their publics, domestically and internationally. It is a lesson that news media groups need to recognize as well, the researchers said.

“Based on our findings, the news media could take a lesson from the federal government,” Himelboim said.




Social Media Watch

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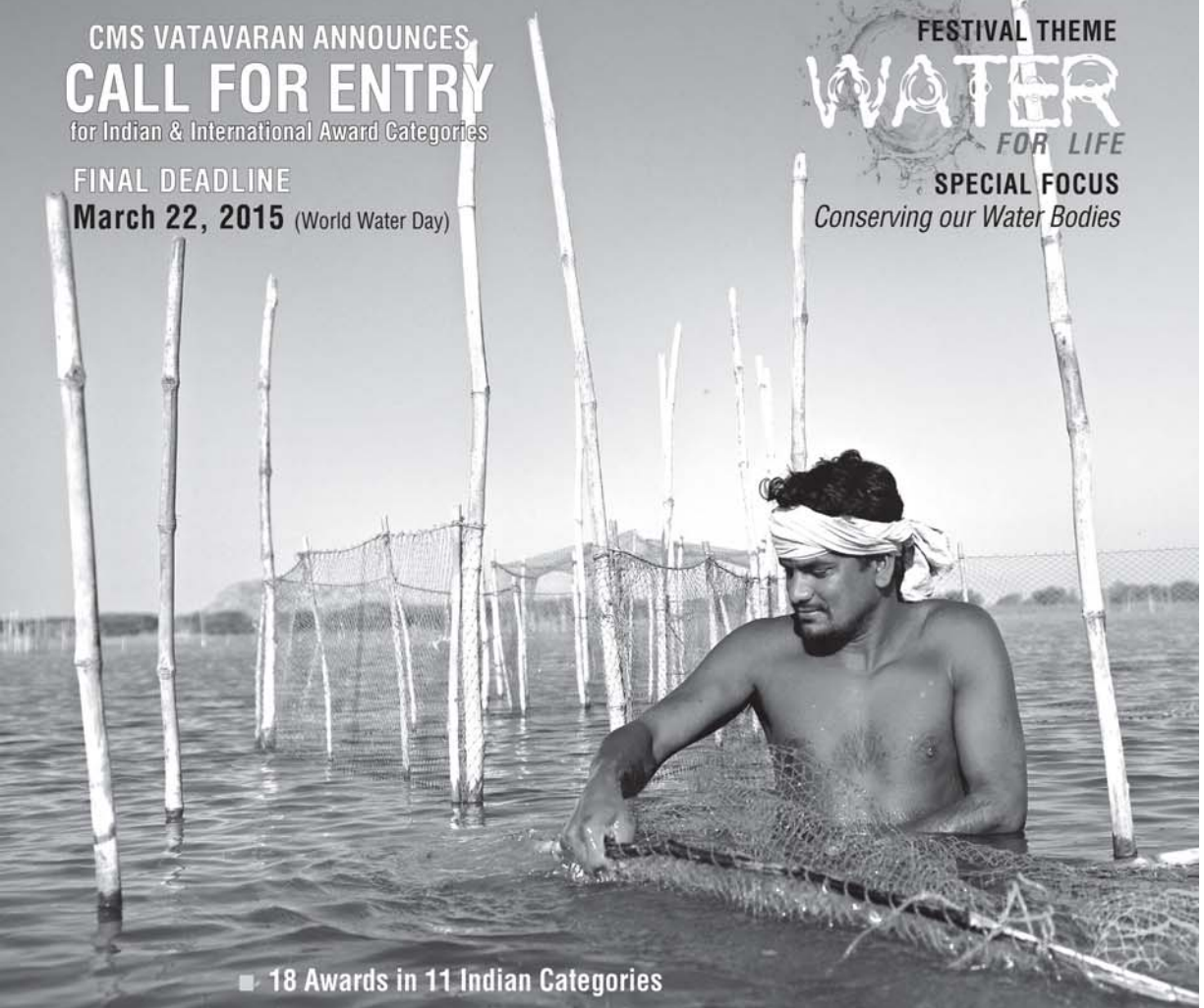
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