

# VIDUARA

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# Of content and control – where advertising and PR still rule



When the path and the pace of the media in India are by and large set by advertising and market research, which are often controlled by foreign corporates, any debate on the entry of foreign capital into the print media may be irrelevant. This was what **N. Bhaskara Rao** had said in 2011. His article (reproduced here) was written for the September 1-14 issue of *Frontline* that year. A lot of what he had written eight years ago holds true even today

The Indian media scene has gone through a dramatic shift in recent times both in terms of content and control. While media content is more and more market-driven, control has now shifted, although indirectly, to ‘foreign corporates’. And yet our political masters continue to revive irrelevant debates such as the 1955 Cabinet decision against the entry of foreign capital into the Indian print media, when in fact the ‘foreign factor’ is already ‘moderating’ the priorities of most media in the country. The debate on foreign equity is perhaps meant to sideline the core of the issue – the direction of the Indian media.

Today, advertising and market research, in many ways, determine the scope of the media. Both these functions are in the hands of corporates controlled by foreign corporates. Let us examine this phenomenon, which we could either brush aside as a ‘global trend’ or get down to understanding the larger implications. The path and the pace of the media today are set as much by advertising, market research and media planning as much by ownership patterns and journalistic trends. The control of these ‘determining factors’ has, by and large, slipped out of Indian hands with no one making an issue of it.

First, the share of advertising in the total revenue of the media has been on the increase, from a “supplementary” 25 to 30 per cent some decades ago to a ‘supportive’

45 to 55 per cent today. In fact, in the case of television channels advertising has been a ‘primary source’ (50 to 70 per cent) to sustain themselves and to the extent of ‘determining’ their priorities and preoccupations. Even in the case of some big newspapers, revenue from advertising constitutes 60 per cent of the total revenue. The recent media boom in India is often attributed to advertising. That is, advertising today sustains and steers the media.

Second, advertising in newspapers and on television today is mostly by multinationals and big corporates. In fact, the top 15 advertisers account for three-fourths of the advertising revenue of news papers and television channels. Except for Dabur, Tata, Bajaj and Videocon, all other top advertisers belong to the multinational category. Top brands that are being advertised in the media belong to these corporates. There has been a wave of foreign brands recently – all giving a big boost to the media as well as consumerism in such a way that as a country we cannot reverse the trend even if we want to.

Third, the advertising agency business in the country has been getting concentrated in fewer and fewer hands over the last few years. The top five advertising agencies, with majority holding abroad, account for well over half the advertising business in the country, and this trend has been on the increase. The entry of foreign advertising

agencies has been going on alongside the entry of foreign brands and the increase in the share of foreign corporates in the total advertising in the country. In fact, lifting the limits of foreign capital in the advertising agency business has opened the floodgates.

Now, global conglomerates such as WPP, TWT, O&M, BBDO, DDB-Needham and JWT have gained majority control in Indian advertising and the bulk of the market share too. A little over half of all Indian advertising now is accounted for by agencies based abroad, whose majority control in India is with foreigners. In fact, among the top 20 agencies there may be just two without foreign partnership. Except for these, the others are answerable to either private groups based abroad or dollar-trading stock markets in London or New York.

Fourth, market research is the basis for the proliferation of brands and consumerism, as well as for the preoccupation and priorities of the media, and the very scope and character of advertising. Until a few years ago we had six or seven market research agencies, mostly Indian-owned.

Today, the top seven or eight market research agencies, accounting for more than two-thirds the total number, have either been taken over by a foreign corporate or a foreign corporate has acquired a significant interest in them. In fact, with the recent mergers and acquisitions, a certain monopolistic trend

is evident in this business, which has an annual turnover of over Rs 350 crore.

More specifically, market research agencies conduct 'readership' surveys and determine the 'rating' of television viewership, and thereby directly influence advertising agencies as well as the media about their priorities and preoccupations. The point here is that the methodology being followed for readership surveys and TV ratings assessment is not without bias in favour of the sponsors and the subscribers.

As the one who was involved in launching India-specific readership and rating studies 25 years ago, I feel guilty for what is happening today, particularly the way the findings of these surveys are being used both by newspapers and by TV channels. The "TRP trap", as I call the phenomenon, has larger and long-range implications for India than we seem to realise. The distortions are already evident in our media scene. This dilemma has been causing concern even in the United States at the highest levels of policy-making.

Fifth, with the media becoming complex and also specialised, two 'new' mediating functionaries have emerged in the last two years, with serious consequences to the very nature and character of the Fourth Estate. Both these functionaries of media planning and public relations (PR) in a way erode the core prerogatives of the media functionaries and their "editorial control". And the fact that both these functions have become corporatised, with foreign agencies in control, should cause some concern in the country before it is too late.

These days, media planners are the ones involved in buying space and time wholesale for advertising and selling it on a retail basis on their terms. They are yet to expand nationally. Think of the implications, particularly because some of these corporates

are controlled by foreign agencies and they have been in business in a big way trying to determine the terms of advertising in India. In a way, this amounts to undoing what Doordarshan initially did in terms of providing a level playing opportunity to small and regional advertisers, by way of special concern for them so that they could compete with big corporates and in larger markets.

In the case of 'public relations', the functioning of these 'experts' implies a certain undermining of or interference in the functioning, particularly of reporters and editors. For, the function of PR is to ensure coverage for a particular viewpoint or otherwise. 'Disinformation', which is being talked about recently, is a part of this new phenomenon. Today majority control of these PR corporates in India, some six or seven leading ones operating nationally, is with foreign agencies.

In fact, some of these have entered India as a part of one or other advertising agency already having majority foreign equity.

Most of these PR agencies cater to the interests of foreign corporates or

their collaborators in India. Many Indian concerns, including some public utilities, now use the services of these PR agencies in order to make their presence felt in the media, as if it is a compulsion.

Giving out the findings of their analysis in this regard, P.N. Vasanti, director of the Centre for Media Studies, New Delhi, said that "communication business has now moved into foreigners' control and this reflects on the scope of the content of newspapers, even more so in the case of television channels. Even Doordarshan's programming today is based on the guiding formula and criteria promoted by foreign-dominated agencies having their interest in big corporates".

Against this background, a debate on the entry of foreign capital into the print media is irrelevant and contradictory in view of what the government has already done by opening the floodgates to the electronic media. ■

*(The writer is chairman of the Centre for Media Studies, New Delhi.)*

## **The Hindu adds 5.47 lakh readers**

*The Hindu's* total readership grew by 8.8 percent over Q1 2019, registering the highest growth rate among the top three national English dailies, as per the Indian Readership Survey's recent report released by Media Research Users Council (MRUC) in the second quarter of 2019.

*The Hindu* added 547000 readers over Q1 to register a total readership of 6773000 in Q2 nationally. Its Average Issue Readership grew by 4.1 per cent over Q1 2019. The Hindu's all India performance is attributed to its sustained leadership in Tamil Nadu and gains in markets like Bengaluru, rest of Karnataka, Telangana and Hyderabad. It registered the highest Total Readership in South India and continues to be South India's largest read English daily, while retaining the number one position in Tamil Nadu and Chennai. ■