

What is dot common about Indian media?

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It is very intriguing that the Union home Ministry instead of being seriously concerned and doing something about the revelations made by Tehelka, wants to look into the methods used by the dotcom company. That Tehelka itself unfolded its methods to the government is now known by all in this country. It goes without saying that such methods need to be looked into, but by professional bodies. And in any case there is a commission appointed by the government, under the chairmanship of a retired judge, which is in the middle of looking into the revelations made by Tehelka, including its modus operandi. And Tehelka is voluntarily cooperating with all such efforts.

The attacks on Tehelka sound more less the same: "Tehelka expose will benefit India's enemies", George Fernandes asserted. "It was a conspiracy", a minister shouted. "tehelka is destabilising the government", a politician lamented. However, the Prime Minister himself has lent credence to Tehelka's coverage and has taken it in the right spirit by describing the expose at the very outset as a "wake-up call" for the nation.

Tehelka's methodology was of course unusual and of questionable nature. There has been much talk about the ethics of journalism, of aspects of privacy and legality. Nevertheless, initially most felt that the means justify the end when it comes to such devastating revelations that have a great impact on a nation. If such methods were not used how else could one penetrate the defence establishment and bring to public notice the corruption? In India we don't have specific laws to regulate the use of covert investigative technologies by journalists. In this field Tehelka has set an unprecedented example although controversial. And its initiative of going to the Army's court of enquiry as well as to vigilance commission and the Venkatswami Commission with all the floppies and assuring cooperation adds to its credibility. However, the latest revelation that it had to "use women" as well for muddled the "means-ends" controversy.

Instead of members of Parliament failing to elicit full and prompt answers to sensitive issues of national importance though their questions are plenty. On some such matters only journalists have been able to get to the bottom of things. In the absence of any other way of going about investigating corruption in defence deals Tehelka had to take up what it considered, “extraordinary methods” to expose an “extraordinary issue” in the larger “national interest”. The issue of ethics is involved when journalists “leak” or “plant” stories with the purpose to dis-inform at the behest of some interested party including ministers. In most such cases the modus operandi is not known. Tehelka could have easily avoided spilling the beans about the methods it employed. That it did not do. In the context two things have to be discussed, first the core of the expose and the ethics of the methods used.

It is generally believed that even a larger team of reporters belonging to a big newspaper, even if there was editorial will and management back-up, could not have come up with such revelations and with such dramatic effect as Tehelka did. That is how Tehelka today is looked upon by younger journalists, with a certain degree of admiration. Many senior and established journalists are aware of the things that have been exposed by Tehelka, but have not been able to do much on this. In fact, discussions with several journalists in the wake of Tehelka bring out a certain new realisation of the potential of the profession, in the context of newer Technologies.

Thelka did what big media houses could not do on their own. Realising the degree of corruption and the dramatic manner in which Tehelka has unfolded the story and that the visual footage has the potential to rake in windfall revenues, television channels went into a frenzy. That times of crisis and controversies help the media to reach out, compete and excel is well known; but that they also help television channels make unprecedented business in a recent phenomenon for India. Television channels welcome crises; of course, one at a time.

However, the means adopted by Tehelka, by way of offering bribes and prostitutes, have also raised questions about its credibility. Those who “suffered” from Tehelka’s revelations are bound to take advantage of this and rake up issues like the morality of journalists and the “unethical” tactics used to get a scoop however significant that may be. “Kamala expose model”, a few years ago had set a good example about how to go about in such instances. Tehelka would have served the nation better had it taken to some such methods. But this aspect should not vitiate the very revelations.

This is not just the media that continues to be very interested in politics and scandals involving politicians. Even Parliament is. For, how else both the media and Parliament could have ignored a recent study on the extent of corruption in urban India? Conducted, for the first time, by a well-known research agency using a transparent methodology, the findings of that study brought out the extent of corruption in most urban services and the menace of middlemen in six cities. Yet, hardly a couple of news papers have carried that story and no television channels had featured the findings. They are after all not interested in corruption that affects millions of ordinary citizens. And, not even one question was raised on this matter in Parliament.

While Tehelka will continue to be debated in the country it is time to take stock of the impact it will have on Indian media and the journalistic profession. Irrespective of the political upheaval tehelka has caused in the country, certain aspects inherent in “dotcom journalism” are likely to change the very scope of journalism in the coming years.

First, “the speed” possible in dotcom journalism to complete an investigative report and bring it to public notice could be unparalleled. Second, dotcom journalism could be a “solo affair” unlike in the case of newspaper or television where it is more often a team affair. Third, dotcom journalism could be a “one-shot-affair”, unlike in television where a story has to go through a series of steps before getting aired for the public. Fourth, dotcom journalism can ensure utmost “secrecy and suspense” about what is likely to come out. Fifth, “content” once again could be far more critical than

the media itself. Sixth, newer miniaturised technologies will empower and enable individual journalists offering him or her a lot more depth, analysis, backup and manoeuvrability.

However, we have not yet realised the implications of computer generated techniques for morphing, interposing and of course editing itself. All of which, with the Convergence Bill not far away, we need to understand; so that dotcom is not the route for “adventure journalism”. Even more so since the “Freedom of Information” Bill too is likely to see light in 2001.

With the recent transformation of metro based mass media into marketing media, with increasing preoccupation with corporate communication, beauty parades, food festivals and the like, media is being viewed more as a part of establishment, or as status – quo journalism. Even a part of larger “nexus”. Recent field surveys on media credibility in India have indicated such public perceptions about mass media. In fact, in view of such complacency in the established media about issues of larger significance the very notion of media being a Fourth Estate has come under question recently. How else do stock market scams, match-fixing, real estate and of course defence deals, going on for a long time, remain unexposed? Tehelka has in a way reminded India’s mass media of its watchdog role. It is against this background that Tehelka has unleashed dotcom journalism and has shaken certain fundamentals particularly of those who are content with the size of their media enterprise.

A CMS research recently has brought out the “appetiser effect” of the electronic media. That is, the more one sees the “news on television”, the more one is likely to read a newspaper. This will be even more so now in the case of dotcom journalism. That is, television news is likely to benefit from Tehelka-type expose by the new media. That is why I say that media in India should not remain a “blow hot, blow cold” phenomena.

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