

More of marketing than mass media

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Mass media's tendency to go overboard in its coverage of events and occasions is nothing new. Today, with the proliferation of television channels. The phenomenon is perpetuated too often and too glaringly. Even a farmer from Bharatpur could not help commenting on it when suddenly his village was pushed under the glare of arc lights following the explosion in the arms depot. A week later, Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot did not hesitate to say that drought in his state was being overplayed by private television channels.

Kargil, Kandahar, the Orissa cyclone, the match-fixing controversy, Chandraswamy, Romesh Sharma and Ilyasi - all glaring examples of over enthusiastic coverage, almost as if nothing else matters.

It would not be fair to mime individuals or channels guilty of such excesses. For it is to do with the very nature of television. The phenomenon becomes more pronounced when television channels, particularly the round-the-clock news channels, compete with each other with the sole objective of generating more ad revenue. Which is what it is all about anyway.

This is certainly not because our television anchors or channel managers are inexperienced in covering such events or lack the training and expertise in tackling and depicting these situations. On the contrary, some of them have done a commendable job from the field. It is the compulsion of a market-driven medium which forces them to present things the way they do.

Even in a country like the USA, television channels behave no differently. Various state agencies in America are, however, better equipped and more forthcoming to interact with the media.

Increasingly, it is television which is calling the shots and setting new rules for the media. Today, it's television which sets the agenda and newspapers just fall in line. Straight reporting is no good any longer. It has to be much more than that. Which is why we ought to be concerned about hype that television perpetrates.

More importantly, unlike newspapers, competition between channels does not necessarily lead to better or more balanced coverage. And abundance is not diversity or in-depth. In fact, what we are confronted with today is “illusion of information overload”. More of the same is being dished out. The focus is remarkably similar. Cloning, rather than competition, is more the tendency. Increasing proliferation of news channels/news bulletins and cut-throat competition between them has added to the phenomenon. For a positive impact, television has to be free from commercial pressures and civic society has to be lot more sensitive.

At the moment, issues and events covered and their presentation are guided by the media's own considerations. The amount of time/space devoted to an event by television channels/ newspapers is what determines its importance when it should actually be the other way round. The implications of such a paradigm shift is yet to be fully understood.

"Public interest" today is mixed up with "what interests the public". This phenomenon is the motivating force, particularly for television. More so for news channels. Repeating the same visuals every half-hour on television amounts to hyping up an event with implications of eulogising or scarring it. One has to look really hard to find an example where a television channel has hyped up a positive event or development, the way it does calamity, crime and worse. Television cannot afford to be unconcerned about the implications of its coverage. But it appears that it is. It seldom follows up the events it enthusiastically overplayed at one point. Which leads us to say that television has been blowing hot and blowing cold – hot on events with negative or sensational ramifications and cold on those with positive potential.

The proliferation of television channels and spurt in viewership has led to a rat race among channels. In the process, concern for implications of hyped-up coverage is sacrificed. From the very outset, TV channels get into an advertising motivated 'TRP trap' which leads to the tendency for an overkill. With all this, wouldn't it be more appropriate to call 'mass media', 'marketing media' instead?

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