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Emerging Media And The Changing Press Scene: Role Of Small And Medium Newspapers

Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao, Eminent Expert On Media, Marketing And Communication Research

The Press in India today is going through a phase of certain lull, as if before a storm. The recent proliferation in the number of publications is to do more with the economic and market reforms. In any case it has not lead to a steady or commensurate growth in circulation or readership. Infact, the gap between big, medium and the small newspapers in terms of "health of the estate" is not narrowing as one would expect. Also, certain monopolistic tendencies are getting consolidated now.

The newspapers in general, and the small and medium sized ones in particular, are in for a more serious times ahead. Some of the reasons include - increasingly competitive media and pressures from electronic media; ever increasing newsprint and operating costs; squeeze on advertising flows to small and medium sized ones despite ever increasing total advertising outlays; shrinking markets with local cable and T.V. channels getting into localised news, etc., lack of trained professional, etc.

Newspapers not going to be redundant

The days ahead are those of electronic media. With emergence of multi-media, newspapers will be on further test with declining growth rates and will be forced to pump in more resources and focus more. However, proliferation of TV channels will not make print media redundant. Infact, newspapers will continue to be competitive, complimentary and, may be, even more credible. Also, total turnover of newspapers would go up almost 8 to 9 times from Rs. 4000 crores today-both circulation and advertising put together. But newspaper readership by then would not be beyond half of India's adult population.

Reposition

Small and medium newspapers should on a priority take up the task of "re-positioning" themselves in the market. Unfortunately neither readership surveys nor any such research encompass small and many medium sized publications. Infact, all such surveys and studies are adding to the

problems. When television channels could claim "premium" for having small segment of audience, why not the small and medium newspapers?

In todays changing scene, no particular support or intervention from Government could be said is helping the small and medium sized newspapers to cope with the increasingly competitive scenario. DAVP-oriented approach will no longer bail them out. Infact they should avail inherent strengths, rather than eternally looking for external assistance. They need to bring out research based facts about their reach and readership. Equally important is the need to orient the staff (Journalists/Publishers) as to the media scene and the new compulsions to reposition themselves vis-a-vis the big newspapers as well as the local TV/cable/radio channels and the changing life-styles of local people.

The proliferation of TV/Cable channels available locally should be viewed as an opportunity to position and strengthen themselves rather than as a threat. So far there is no impressive evidence of small and medium newspapers taking advantage of new technologies. Are these newer technologies to the advantage of only bigger publications?

More than a decade ago I brought out in "Perspectives into media Scene 2001", the likely scenario and the need for the press in India to prepare itself to capture the new opportunities. But there is no evidence to that. The bitter competitive strategies of a few big newspapers infact have adversely effected the small and medium ones. Now, in my latest book, "Mass Media and Marketing Communication: Perspectives into 2020", I again reiterated about similar trends ahead.

According my latest book, the share of print media would not be more than one-fourth of total turnover of all mass media put together, including advertising through press.

Structural Changes Ahead

Indian media will go through structural changes, even media character will. Decline of editor will continue, no

more shorthand-journalist but software-reporter will be the centre stage. So also, it would be more of anchoring and field reporting. Media becomes less of editing and more of designing.

Certain structural changes in press and TV are also indicated. The reliance on advertising by media, particularly of newspapers, would be far more than at present and vice versa in the case of circulation. The spare of press in the total advertising in the country also will decline from 66% to 45%. So also the ratio of space for editorial and advertising.

As a mantra for survival for the small and medium newspapers I would reiterate : refocus editorial priorities, concentrate on local issues, re-establish "independence", go for computerrisation earliest, think of diversifying into community radio and cable TV earliest, train and reorient staff, and, together, conduct periodic field surveys and bring out the "unique position" of small and medium newspapers in the increasingly multiplying and competitive media scene. Small and medium size newspapers should scout towards expanding and diversifying with so many new options with in mass media and marketing communication field.

Together with T.V., Cable, Radio, Newspapers, Books, Films, Music and Multi-Media, Mass Media would have

high growth crossing Rs. 100 billion mark by 2015. Even assuming a low 20 percent share in the total advertising outlays going to press, the share of small and medium newspapers, today works to about Rs. 460 crores in 1995 and this is projected to be Rs. 1000 crores by 2000 and beyond Rs. 1500 crores by 2010. But, then, infact their share should be not less than 25 per cent.

About the Author



Founder-Chairman of Centre for Media Studies. Dr. Rao is a pioneer in India with 30 years of dedicated media research, including readership surveys, opinion surveys and market research. He has been a senior advisor with Govt. and many international agencies and written/published extensively.

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