

Truth is a Rare Commodity Despite the Freedom Enjoyed by Media.



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The word 'media' refers to imparting and exchanging information on a large scale to a wide range of people at a rapid speed. It entails print media (newspapers, magazines), broadcast media (radio and television), and the internet (online newspapers, blogs, Facebook et cetera). The programmes of entertainment telecast and broadcast on television and radio also fall into the ambit of media but in the relevant context of the topic, 'media' is predominantly the means of disseminating information to the public by different media organisations. The role of media for a state is so important that it is generally termed as the fourth pillar of state. Since democracy ensures basic human freedoms, emancipation of the media from clutches of the government becomes a hallmark of true democracy. However, owing to minimal control of the governments, different media organisations have begun to enjoy a greater freedom and they are misusing this freedom to achieve their own vested interests. In addition, many business groups, political parties and powerful institutions have set up their own media houses to promote their respective interests. Consequently, truth has become a rare commodity despite the freedom enjoyed by the media. In the succeeding paragraphs, an attempt is made to see why and how media has become a lapdog of the powerful rather than a watchdog of the people and how it has deviated from its basic role of publishing and presenting facts, disseminating correct information and making fair analyses.

Free thinking is only possible when we think in an environment where there is nothing that can impinge on our opinion. We should be free to interpret facts and make our own judgement. However, media has started directing our thinking in a predetermined direction. It does this by blurring facts, misdirecting our attention and misinterpreting data. The role of media before and during US attack on Iraq in 2003 is highly deplorable in this regard. The western media; through a plethora of news items, talk shows, so-called expert analyses and current affairs programmes; presented cooked facts about the presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq creating an unprecedented hype about Iraq's alleged plans to destroy Israel and other countries of the West. This false alarm lulled public opinion in western countries, particularly America and the United Kingdom, in favour of attack on Iraq. Though, the UN team of nuclear watchdogs sent to inspect Iraq's nuclear sites under the headship of Hans Blix declared Iraq free of WMDs, the western media deliberately downplayed his findings to mislead the European and American people.

"In the months preceding the invasion, the UN inspection force that I headed had carried out some 700 inspections without finding any WMD, and in the months that followed investigators from the US came to the same conclusion. If the aim was to eradicate WMDs, the bloodshed, death and destruction has been meaningless."

Hans Blix

Later on, Iraq was attacked and the attackers were justified as facts were blurred by means of **free** media.

“One cannot wage war under present conditions without the support of public opinion, which is tremendously molded by the press and other forms of propaganda.”

Douglas MacArthur

When the Taliban captured Afghanistan in 1994, they were immediately courted by Uncle Sam to achieve some new-found geo-strategic and economic goals. The American media started heaping praises on them and their delegation was officially invited to visit Texas in December 1997 to negotiate the deal of TAPI gas-pipeline. However, when the Taliban refused to accept the American offer, the same media turned against them. All the mainstream media, whether print or electronic, started maligning their image by hook or by crook. They were painted as violators of human rights, destroyers of educational institutions, enemies of women and whatnot. In this volcanic eruption of hate against them nobody bothered to learn the Taliban’s point of view and the American media portrayed them as the greatest threat to the world. Osama bin Laden, who was present in Afghanistan even when the Taliban delegation was receiving red-carpet welcome in Texas in December 1997, suddenly became a bone of contention between the Taliban and US in media space. Truth about the Taliban was assassinated first in the media and then Afghanistan was carpet-bombed in 2001.

“The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power; because they control the minds of the masses.”

Malcolm X

Billions of minds boggle at the case of so called terrorist attacks on Twin Towers of the world Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. There are ample reports and analyses that attribute the planning and execution of the September 11 attacks to parties other than, or in addition to, al-Qaida. Ample evidence has surfaced that there was advance knowledge of the attacks among high-level government officials of the US. The most prominent theory is that the collapse of Twin Towers of the World Trade Center was the result of a controlled demolition rather than structural failure due to impact of aeroplanes and fire. Yet, the Bush Administration’s version, which focused only on Al-Qaida’s involvement and then linked Osama bin Laden with the Taliban, could survive in the mainstream media as the websites which published doubts about government’s story were removed from the internet just to give a walkover to the allied media, which presented only American government’s stance. The truth regarding this cataclysmic incident of 9/11 which destabilised the entire world is still elusive, proving the fact that truth is rare in the age of so-called freedom of media.

A classic example to prove that truth is a rare commodity despite the freedom enjoyed by media is a hoax interview of Pakistani real estate tycoon, Malik Riaz, taken by Mehar Bokhari and her co-host Mubashir Luqman and aired by a prominent TV channel of Pakistan. The cameraman deputed to record the interview did not turn off his camera during the break for commercials and got the informal chit-chat of the anchor persons and the interviewee recorded. After some days, this video found its way to another channel to reveal that the entire interview was fabricated and all the characters were planted to merely perform a melodrama according to a pre-decided and agreed upon script. It was very disappointing for the public that they were supplied with scripted conversation rather than the realtime interview. It can be safely assumed that many more such interviews and

documentaries might have been telecast by God knows how many channels. Is this the objective of the freedom of media? Compromising on truth seems to be a rule in the world of media rather than an exception.

Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in front of hundreds of people and cameras close to the venue of a public rally where she had delivered a public speech on 27 December 2007. She had already reported that there were threats to her life, and even named the persons whom she suspected to be behind any such violence against her. The media also sounded alarm bells about these potential threats with all the professional agility. It must have kept an eye on every stir of a leaf near Benazir Bhutto. Even then she did not escape the assassins. Her political party came into power in Pakistan soon after her death with her own husband at the helm. The greatest reason for her husband's victory was that he had promised her supporters and sympathisers to find out her killers and bring them to book. However, all the five years of his tenure as the president of the state passed; all the reliable eye-witnesses of this incident got killed one by one; the investigative journalists became wealthy overnight by getting money from God knows whom in return for scrapping their own findings under the carpet and the truth about this national catastrophe is still elusive despite the freedom of media.

Though free, different media houses have their own respective political agenda and business interests due to which they select news items suiting their own vested interests. In August 2014, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf staged a sit-in in Islamabad, which lasted for 126 days to protest against the then sitting government of PML (N). The protesters' camp became a hotspot where men, women and children would gather daily to listen to their favourite politicians. Different media groups would cover the happenings of the sit-in all day and show their own side of the picture to the viewers who would bank on newspapers and TV channels to read the situation. Ary News, Samaa and some other news channels and newspapers gave an impression that the government would be toppled the next day; while Geo News, Capital TV and a few other media houses would give the impression that the sit-in camp would be erased within a few hours. One group would focus the spot where the crowd was congested and highly charged; the cameras of the other group would zoom in sections where there were lots of empty spaces and vacant chairs to give the impression that the protesters had lost public support. A true picture could not reach the people despite the media was enjoying full freedom.

The Indian media also picked up the movement of Anna Hazare and created unprecedented hype about his protests against corruption of Indian Parliamentarians. Kisan Baburao, 'Anna Hazare' launched a drive against corruption in 2011. He conducted hunger strikes to further his cause. Media made him a hero overnight inflating his stature to equal that of Mohandas K. Gandhi. During his hunger strike, he became so popular that his *topi*, 'the cap of Anna Hazare' became almost a fashion statement. Sales of *topis* hit an all-time high thanks to media campaign about Anna Hazare. However, the truth about him remained hidden from the lenses of all cameras. He is anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit. He is also known to be a member of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a notorious Hindu extremist organisation, whose hands are stained with the blood of many an innocent Muslim. He was also found to be involved in corruption by a Commission of Inquiry under Justice PB Sawant in September 2003 to enquire into allegations of corruption against several people, including four ministers as well as the "Hind Swaraj Trust" headed by Hazare. The Commission submitted its report on 22 February 2005, indicting the Trust for corruptly spending Rs. 220,000 on Hazare's birthday celebrations. The Public would little know about this darker side of his picture because truth is elusive in spite of the freedom of media.

Free media grabbed the attention of our masses by the hoax of invention of a motor car which would run on water. Such funny jokes used to be of interest in some village fairs of the olden days where farmers would gather to get some amusement. The officials working in media houses—the news producers, news casters and anchor persons—are supposed to have this much sense and education that a combustion engine cannot work without some combustible fuel. But to befool the viewers they started giving huge coverage to the inventor, who was not even a university graduate. Were he a university graduate, he would not be so naïve as to display such nonsense so blatantly. Our media kept the people glued to their TV screens to see how they would enjoy life after buying such *miraculous* automobiles as would run on water. The hoax was busted when some professors from engineering universities came to the rescue of the TV viewers. Before this the people remained hostage to media mafia and did not see through their misleading stories.

Freedom of media is one of the most fundamental rights of people because it is supposed to be the people's watchdog to ensure transparency in matters of governance. The people, especially the ones living in developing or backward countries, pin high hope on their media as they believe it will disseminate the right information. No doubt, some media organisations have done commendable work in this regard, but their proportion is negligible. The overall role of mainstream media is not up to the mark as the right information is mixed with the wrong information to such an extent that the truth remains hidden in the dark. Those who still get a fairer idea of what is happening around them are the ones who are not blind followers of the media and are educated enough to see through the tricks employed by the media. It is, therefore, very essential that media become more authentic and the viewers and readers be more critical in following what is being brought to them through media in the name of truth.