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Media's Dual Role: Catalyst and Peacemaker in Times of Social Unrest

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ABSTRACT

“Knowledge is power.” These words continue to hold the same importance from whenever they were first uttered. With the advancements in technology, the process of attaining information or knowledge has been reduced from an extensive process to the clicking of a few keys or the tapping of a screen.

As our society advances and the process of propagation of information becomes easier than ever and the Information Industry or Media has truly benefited from the same. With the ease to spread facts also comes the ease to spread a message or an opinion and this power at times can be used to spread social unrest or create disharmony. Many a times, the Media is responsible for presenting biased views which creates fear and unrest among the people thus leading to strife in our society, but at times information presented by the Media is responsible for bringing the people together to root for the right cause.

The following paper aims to analyse the role of media as a propagator or instigator of unrest as well as the one who brings peace in this time of strife and to understand to what extent does this unchecked power of media behind the veneer of “propagation of voice of the masses” range.

Keywords: *Media; Social Unrest; Unchecked Power; Possible Solutions.*

I. INTRODUCTION

We live in an age of information; with the evolution of technology it seems impossible to not know anything about events around the world. This boom in technology and increase in availability and access to information has indeed worked in favor of the human civilization but most of all, this has been profitable for the “Information Industry” or what we in normal parlance call “The Media”.

Media as a term encompasses all means of information or representation of content to the masses, therefore including in its ambit from print media to news one reads on their phones to what they see on their TV Screens as well as any form of artistic representation such as movies, documentaries or even books and music.

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When one looks at this development in terms of technology and access from a bird's eye view, one might only appreciate the aspect that is the evolution of Human Society. But when go deeper into the rabbit hole of advancement and increase in importance of Media in today's day and age, we see the repercussions that accompany this somewhat unchecked power and at the same time we come across instances of what happens when such power is used for the betterment of society.

Human Society is divided based on numerous varying opinions and at times this difference in opinions based on faith, religion, political inclination or basically any personal belief which forms different opinion-based communities. At times this dissent or division takes a violent form and causes discontent and disturbance in our society.

Now, in times of social disharmony, different people or authorities play different roles. Within the context of this paper, we need to understand the role that media plays in times of Social Unrest or Social Disharmony.

To what extent does its powers as a source of information and opinions range?

Is the power rather unchecked and is that the right thing to do considering it can not only bring about peace but at the same time be the fuel to an already raging flame?

The following paper aims to discuss the same and more.

(A) What is Social Unrest?

India is the largest democracy in the world, which comprises many different ethnic and religious communities. With the presence of such a diaspora of people, the problem of differences in opinions comes into play which amounts to conflict between the parties, and if such an issue becomes so big that it affects a vast majority of people then it results in social unrest. Social unrest is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can be observed in societies across the world. It typically arises from a combination of socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors and is characterized by collective actions, such as protests, demonstrations, strikes, or acts of civil disobedience, undertaken by groups or communities expressing their discontent and dissatisfaction with prevailing conditions³.

The governments in a country like India have to be careful when forming statutes for the people in order to cater to everyone in the country including the factions of the society that are considered neglected. With the presence of such different kinds of ethnic and religious groups,

³ Winnifred Wanzala-Silva, Social Unrest Manifestations, Effects, and Examples, (Sept 24, 2023, 12:01 P.M.)<https://study.com/learn/lesson/social-unrest-overview-behaviors.html>

it becomes almost impossible to address the needs of every group which results in dissatisfaction among such communities and results in mass protests against governments amounting to social unrest in the country. Peaceful protests in India have been a part of freedom of Expression under the Indian constitution to show dissatisfaction, but sometimes they turn into acts of mass violence due to various factors like fake news and incitement.

Social unrest in a country can be caused by various factors including the circulation of misinformation by the media. It sometimes is caused deliberately to cause mismanagement in the country and to cause strains in communities.

Social media has become an integral part of the lives of people, and with the increase in access to social media to everyone, the spreading of information and misinformation has also become easier which fuels the social unrest in the country. It leads to mismanagement and violence in the country and amounts to public unrest. Very recently in the Nuh district of the state of Haryana, violent clashes erupted between two communities due to rumors spread on social media, such violent clashes led to the deaths of many people and the destruction of public property. Hence it becomes important to stop the spread of misinformation by regulating and moderating the information that is being put out by the media in order to prevent social unrest.

II. RIGHTS AND POWERS OF MEDIA IN INDIA

Media is an integral part of the democratic fabric of a country, it serves as a watchdog, disseminating information, and facilitating public discourse. Media is also known as the fourth pillar of Democracy, as it serves as a crucial check and balance on the government's powers, facilitating the flow of information, and enabling public discourse. It is a dynamic force that shapes opinions, holds power accountable, and serves as the bridge between the government and its citizens. India's media landscape is as diverse as its culture, with a vibrant and dynamic sector comprising newspapers, television channels, radio stations, online platforms, and a burgeoning community of citizen journalists. The constitution of India provides various rights to the media and is upheld by various legal frameworks:-

1. **Freedom of Speech and Expression:** The Indian Constitution, in Article 19(1)(a), explicitly protects the freedom of speech and expression as a fundamental right. This protection extends to all citizens, including media organizations. It encompasses the freedom to express one's thoughts, opinions, ideas, and beliefs through various means, including writing, speaking, printing, and more⁴. It is considered as 4th pillar of

⁴ Malavika Rajkumar, What are the Rights of Press in India?, (Sept 24, 2023, 01:42 P.M.) <https://nyaaya.org/guest-blog/what-are-the-rights-of-press-in-india/>

democracy, It empowers individuals and media organizations to engage in open, robust, and even critical debates on issues of public interest, fostering a thriving marketplace of ideas. As an independent entity, the media acts as a check and balance on the government and other institutions, ensuring transparency, accountability, and the protection of citizens' rights.

2. **Right to Information (RTI):** The Right to Information (RTI) Act, enacted in India in 2005, represents a significant milestone in the country's journey towards transparency, accountability, and good governance. While the Indian Constitution does not explicitly mention the right to information, it draws its strength from Article 19(1)(a), which guarantees the freedom of speech and expression. The right to information is provided to all the citizens of India including the journalists which empowers them by granting them the legal right to request information from public authorities. This includes government departments, ministries, public sector undertakings, and other institutions that are funded by taxpayers' money. Journalists frequently file RTI requests to obtain information that might not be readily available to the public. This information often forms the basis for investigative reporting, exposing scandals, and holding officials accountable.
3. **Public Interest Litigation (PIL):** Media often acts as a catalyst for Public Interest Litigations (PILs) by drawing attention to issues of public concern through investigative journalism. These PILs can lead to court actions and legal reforms, benefiting society as a whole⁵.
4. **Legal Protection:** Legal protection is a crucial aspect of the media's functioning in India, ensuring that journalists and media organizations can operate without undue harassment or censorship while upholding the principles of freedom of speech and expression⁶. Legal protection to the sources of information is also one thing that is necessary for effective investigation. In this regard, some legal protections are available like the right to privacy of the sources, to shield journalists from revealing their sources, as long as the information is in the public interest and its disclosure is deemed necessary. The sources of information also include whistleblowers who help the media in

⁵ Manmeet Singh, Freedom of Press - Article 19(1)(a), (Sept 24, 2023, 2:15 P.M.) [https://www.legalservicesindia.com/article/1847/Freedom-of-Press---Article-19\(1\)\(a\).html#:~:text=The%20heart%20of%20the%20declaration,media%20and%20regardless%20of%20frontiers.%E2%80%9D](https://www.legalservicesindia.com/article/1847/Freedom-of-Press---Article-19(1)(a).html#:~:text=The%20heart%20of%20the%20declaration,media%20and%20regardless%20of%20frontiers.%E2%80%9D)

⁶ Shivansh Agarwal, Media: Fourth Pillar Of Democracy, (Sept 24,2023,, 02:30P.M.) <https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-3487-media-fourth-pillar-of-democracy.html>

uncovering cases of corruption and malpractice.

5. **Editorial Freedom:** Media organizations have the authority to determine their editorial policies and content. They can publish investigative reports, criticize the government, and express opinions freely, reflecting diverse perspectives.

The media possesses a lot of powers, these powers are derived from the media's ability to disseminate information, provide a platform for diverse voices, and hold power accountable.

Some of such powers are:

1. **Informative Power:** Media organizations in India serve as primary sources of news and information for the public. They have the power to report on a wide range of topics, providing citizens with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their lives and the nation.
2. **Agenda-Setting Power:** The media plays a crucial role in setting the national agenda by highlighting certain issues and events. By giving prominence to specific stories, media organizations can influence public discussions and government priorities and can draw the attention of the people to such an agenda.
3. **Public Influence:** With the presence of the Indian Diaspora in various countries, the Indian media wield a lot of power to influence public opinion. Media can influence the minds of people by providing them with information supporting or opposing any matter.
4. **Mobilizing Power:** Media outlets can mobilize people during times of crisis or for social causes. They can facilitate the organization of protests, rallies, and movements that call for change and reform and play a very important role during times of emergency by providing people with proper information.

III. ROLE OF MEDIA IN TIMES OF SOCIAL UNREST

Media has the power to influence the opinion of the public at large, and with that kind of power, it can either act as a catalyst of social unrest by fueling tensions or act as a peacemaker by promoting understanding and reconciliation. The way media organizations report and cover social unrest can significantly impact the course and resolution of such events.

(A) Media as a Catalyst of Unrest:

1. **Misinformation and Fake News:** Misinformation is one of the main problems in the modern world as it can force people's opinions in such a way that it can fuel social unrest. The rapid spread of misinformation and fake news through social media

platforms can escalate social unrest. False or misleading information can incite panic, hatred, or violence, making it crucial for responsible journalism to counter such narratives.

2. **Amplification of Grievances:** Media, with its extensive reach and influence, has the ability to amplify the grievances of marginalized or discontented groups. When these grievances are reported on extensively, they can attract attention, mobilize support, and spark protests or demonstrations that in turn lead to more Social unrest.
3. **Sensationalism and Polarization:** Sometimes media outlets engage in sensationalism to increase viewership or readership. Sensationalized coverage can exaggerate the severity of unrest, create fear, and deepen societal divisions. Biased reporting can also contribute to polarization, where different segments of society become entrenched in their positions.

(B) Media's role as a Peacemaker:

1. **Fostering Dialogue:** Media can facilitate dialogue between conflicting parties, providing a platform for them to communicate their grievances and demands. It can facilitate the ideological exchange between the leaders of the government and leaders of social movements in order for them to come to a common ground to solve the problem. These dialogues can lead to negotiated settlements and conflict resolution.
2. **Discrediting Extremism:** Media can play a role in discrediting extremist narratives and ideologies. By exposing the harm caused by extremist groups and their tactics, the media can discourage support and recruitment. It can promote peace by eliminating any kind of ill agendas of any extremist group and helping the authorities identify such elements⁷.
3. **Educating the Public:** In times of social unrest, media can educate the public about the root causes of conflicts, historical context, and potential solutions. Informed citizens are better equipped to engage in peaceful dialogue and advocate for change through non-violent means.
4. **Promoting Tolerance and Empathy:** Through storytelling and in-depth reporting, the media can humanize individuals affected by unrest and promote tolerance and empathy among the broader public. It can promote more inclusivity towards the people and can harmonize public opinion in such a way that it is beneficial for the country.

⁷ Md. Azmal Mahmud Khan, Role of Media in Combating Violence and Creation of Peace, Role of Media in Combating Violence and Creation of Peace, *Jahangirnagar University Journal of International Relations Vol. X No.10, (2019)*

IV. THE UNCHECKED POWER OF MEDIA

Over the years, the role of the media in society has only increased, a major reason being the increase in the mediums for the Media to present information to the masses. Starting from Print Media and today being able to get news updates on one's phones is proof enough of the increase in Media's spread.

The Media through all its mediums is the primary and only source of information of the people.

The role that the Media is considered of that of a watchdog. Its purpose of printing and telecasting news was to bring facts and issues to the people and to hold the Legislature and the Executive responsible by reflecting the views of the society.

But, after a while when the competition increased amongst the News Channels and one of the biggest issues was to remain relevant with the changing times, it is then that a change in the way the Media presented the News started to become evident.

The Media now had to present the news in a way that catered to their audience at home. And this led to new ways in which the Media presented the news or ways in which the Media acquired information.

As the role and importance of Media in our society increases, we also witness a tremendous increase in its ability to affect perceptions regarding issues by presenting carefully curated information for the masses.

We have already discussed the role of media as a Catalyst and a Peacekeeper. In this section we will present examples as to instances where the media has been the fuel to the fire as well the water to put the fire out.

Many a times the media is criticized for its habit of declaring a suspect or party to a crime or offence as the perpetrator before the courts could even decide upon the same, or as we call it, Media Trials which is when the media publishes or presents information which have a great impact on a person's reputation and status in society.

There have been numerous instances of the same in India. For eg:

The Jasleen Kaur Case: In 2015, Jasleen Kaur, a student of St. Stephen's college, took to social media, where she accused a man named Sarvjeet Singh of verbally harassing her at a traffic light. The story got picked up by various news outlets. Sarvjeet Singh retorted to the accusations to tell his side of the story. But, no one paid heed to him. In a matter of days, Sarvjeet Singh was declared as "Dilli ka Darinda" by various news channels and websites. While, Jasleen Kaur on the other hand was being lauded by leaders and celebrities. The Media turned the public

opinion in the favour of Jalseen Kaur. The case filed in the Delhi Tis Hazari court lasted for 4 years, during which time, Sarvjeet's life fell into shambles. Throughout the proceedings, Sarvjeet maintained his court appearances, while Jasleen Kaur missed 14 court hearings as she had academic commitments in Canada. After 4 years, the court declared Sarvjeet to be innocent and acquitted him of all the charges. This led to a mass outrage against various news channels. But even though there are plenty of examples for the Media Trails being a misuse of the Media's power and influence, there are also many case which if not for the Media's support wouldn't have garnered so much support. For eg:

The Jessica Lal Muder Case: This case is one of the major examples when the media united in order to bring issues into the light. Here, after the murder of Jessica Lal, a case was filed against Manu Sharma and his various companions. Manu Sharma was the son Venod Sharma who was a wealthy and powerful Congress Leader. After the first trial, due to insufficient evidence, Manu Sharma and those with him were acquitted. This judgement of the court resulted in protests and candle marches. The media played a rather large role. In 2006, Tehelka, a new magazine, conducted a sting operation which showed various witnesses being bribed and Manu Sharma's Father's name being taken as well. This acted as a major mode of assistance for the court. The High Court gave its judgement in 2006 declaring the accused guilty of charges and punishing with life imprisonment. When appealed in Supreme Court, it was said that the Media should be held responsible for conducting such Media Trials, but the Supreme Court disagreed and didn't hold the Media accountable for anything.

V. CONCLUSION

From all the concepts and instances discussed above, it becomes clear that not only has the media embraced the role it plays in society but at the same time embraced the power it holds to influence the masses. There is a difference between presenting the information and adding opinions and simply presenting one's opinions in reference to an event.

Nowadays, the media tends to go for the latter more often.

It does seem that this power of the media to influence us and change the public perspectives is rather unchecked, but when we talk about putting restrictions upon the same, we bring the concept of unreasonable censorship into the equation.

The media at times crosses the line between propogation of information and criticisms and that of spreading of hate speech to create social divide. Proper guidelines should be in place to set up a base so as to hold the Media (in any form) accountable for such acts. But at the same time

an understanding must be created criticism and bias; satire and offensive content; facts and interpretation of available information.
