

Linkages between Media & Civil Society: An Analysis

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Abstract: *Civil society has a key role to play in fighting corruption, from monitoring public services, denouncing bribery to raising awareness of all economic and political actors. This paper is an attempt to provide insights into the contribution of civil society in general and the media in particular, to the transition from single to multiparty democratic aspects such as economical, social, political and cultural aspects in India. Treating the media as part of civil society, the paper identifies the specific ways in which the media have contributed to the politics of the transition to multiparty democracy in India. The capacity of the news media to enhance transparency and accountability in governance and the public domain depends to a great extent on the authorities ñ it is possible only as much as the authorities themselves permit it. It is quite clear that journalists cannot tap the state, which can tap them, legally at that. Intelligence agents can recruit journalists (which they willingly and readily undertake), but journalists can only hope that the guardians of state secrets, for arcane reasons, will leak confidential information which may be in the public interest. The media and civil society organizations can attempt to obtain documents through freedom of information acts ñ but it is an easy task for the authorities to limit the access to sensitive data.*

Key Words: *Media, civil Society, transparency, accountability, responsibilities etc.,*

1. INTRODUCTION:

For over two decades now, the process of globalization has been influencing the socioeconomic environment in countries. While globalization provides new opportunities for economic development to countries through trade liberalization, foreign direct investment, capital flows, information exchange and technological transfer, it has meant increased deprivation for those nations which have been unable to adjust to the new requirements of global society. Thus, on one hand while we witness rapid economic growth and prosperity in some regions, there are more than a billion people who continue to live in poverty with purchasing power of less than a dollar a day. In the poorest countries, about one fifth of the children die in the first year of their birth, nearly half of those who survive are malnourished and a significant proportion of the population does not have access to clear water, sanitation, basic health services and education.

The harsh realities of increasing global inequalities had been a major concern to the international community over the years, but the new century opened with an unprecedented declaration of solidarity and determination to rid the world of poverty. The Millennium Declaration, adopted at the largest ever gathering of heads of state in September 2000, commits countries – rich and poor – to do all they can to eradicate poverty, promote human dignity and equality and achieve peace, democracy and environmental sustainability. World leaders promised to work together to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with specific targets, including that of reducing poverty by half by 2015.

2. CONCEPT OF MEDIA:

Media of India consist of several different types of Indian communications media: television, radio, cinema, newspapers, magazines, and Internet-based Web sites. Many of the media are controlled by large, for-profit corporations which reap revenue from advertising, subscriptions, and sale of copyrighted material. India also has a strong music and film industry. India has more than 70,000 newspapers and over 690 satellite channels (more than 80 are news channels) and is the biggest newspaper market in the world - over 100 million copies sold each day.

3. CONCEPT OF CIVIL SOCIETY:

“Civil society is a sphere of social interaction between the household (family) and the state which is manifested in the norms of community cooperative, structures of voluntary association and networks of public communication ... norms are values of trust, reciprocity, tolerance and inclusion, which are critical to cooperation and community problem solving, structure of association refers to the full range of informal and formal organization through which citizens pursue common interests” (Veneklasen, 1994).

Civil society must also have foundation in a mature democracy and a mature political culture. It can be built only if there is widespread determination on the part of society to demand respect for, and observance of, individual rights, and popular will to hold accountable anyone or any institution, which violates them.

There are five specific areas where civil society discourse and initiatives have made very important political and social contributions. These are: a) women's rights b) ecological justice and environment protection c) human rights of ethnic, religious, race, and sexual minorities d) movements for citizens' participation and accountable governance and e) resistance and protest against unjust economic globalisation and unilateral militarisation. In fact, even in these specific areas there is a multiplicity of civil society discourse. Media and civil society seem to be connected and mutually dependent, no matter how civil society is defined. Researchers and theorists have studied this relationship in a number of ways and have found either a positive or negative impact of the media on civil society and civic participation.

News for the public good, and in the public interest, can survive, grow and flourish but not through market forces and new technology alone. To survive, news media will have to adjust and adapt to changes in technology and a harsher commercial environment. New ways of ensuring the space for, and independence of, news and current affairs journalism that purports to be for the public good, need to be found to preserve and protect the public interest and encourage a healthy democracy. This is not the same as preserving and protecting news organisations, or even the news, as we know it. In a world of communicative abundance there is, more than ever, a sense that there are many things that news journalism ought to be doing – monitoring, holding to account, and facilitating and maintaining deliberation – but is not doing in a fully satisfactory way, and we neglect this at our peril. To ignore it is to accept that the market can be relied upon to deliver the conditions for deliberative democracy to flourish. However, when markets fail or come under threat, ethical practice is swept aside in pursuit of financial stability. Civil society associations have a key role to play in this extended news environment. They can act as wardens of, and contributors to, news media at local, regional and national levels; they can facilitate deliberation and expand the diversity of views on news platforms, and develop news platforms of their own. They could also provide crucial funding for news organisations or consortia deemed to be operating on a not-for-profit basis. Establishing a more collaborative relationship between news organisations and civil society associations should be encouraged in order to:

- enable participation;
- increase effective engagement;
- expand the public sphere; and
- enhance democracy

Moreover civil society associations can play a role in ensuring a diversity of viewpoints and arenas for dissent in the media. The extent to which this necessitates their involvement in media production or ownership can range from ensuring there is an infrastructure for a plurality of media, online and offline, to (co-)producing or (co-)owning media. Here, the focus of the report is on alternative models of funding that may help ensure a plurality of media, but the research found that other elements are also of importance when considering ways in which civil society associations can play a role, such as maintaining standards, supporting infrastructure and platforms, and fostering media literacy to assist full access to diverse viewpoints.

4. LINKAGES BETWEEN MEDIA & CIVIL SOCIETY:

India in the 21st century has witnessed dramatic boom so far as both electronic and print media are concerned, quite contrary to the '80s and '90's of the last century when the only available form of media was the print media. Now with the flourishing of satellite technology and increase in the number of 24X7 news channels in the national as well as the regional languages, information dissemination to the public has been simple, trouble-free and fast. In addition to this, the growth of social media (which include e-Newsletter, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) has also opened up newer avenues of information spreading and reaching out to a wider public within fractions of seconds. Hence, it is very important on the part of the CSOs to engage with media for the purpose of showcasing their works and generate public awareness. Media, and especially social media, if used fruitfully, can act as a silver bullet for fundraising as well because it provides opportunities to tell the world about the work done by the CSOs (civil society organizations) at a pretty low cost and connect with the outside world swiftly.

Post the Anna Hazare movement since April 2011, the term civil society has been quite frequently used in the public discourse and even by the media; it is now a part of the public lexicon, thanks to electronic media which has played an important role in highlighting the atrocities on marginalised, corruption in the system and opinions of social leaders. This media has played a considerable role in bringing the world of CSOs into public currency. 'Mass media has always been the partner of voluntary organisations to achieve social and economic changes. It is not only a tool for public education but also influencing the policy makers. The advocacy groups use it to share their concerns whereas grass roots groups highlight their field experiences through mass media. But since the last few years, the change in the structure of media has made it very challenging for the voluntary organisations to get social issues highlighted.' The rising cost and take-over by the corporates, huge impact of the heady market forces – all have resulted in the commercialisation of media. At the same time, greater focus of the media on portraying the protest activities and not the constructive and innovative work that the CSOs have been involved with (examples of innovative model building, showcasing new ideas, etc., by the CSOs hardly gain visibility in the media) have created a public psyche which

revolves around ideas that CSOs are meant only for protests and struggles; the constructive aspects of institutionalized CSOs beyond the radius of protest movements remain shrouded in darkness.³⁶ However, attempts of monitoring the media can also be noticed through formation of media-watch organisations like The Hoot (not for profit organisation run by the Media Foundation, New Delhi; its mission is to critique the media in India, to revive the concern for media ethics, restore focus on development in the subcontinent as well as preserve press freedom).

Probably the time has come when both the CSOs and the media must attempt to redefine their relationships and identify new ways of working with each other. 'Rather than going through sinking feeling many voluntary organisations have adopted changes in their approach towards media. The programme staffs of voluntary organisations are being trained to write press briefs, new features and mechanism of feeding information regularly.

Charkha is one such successful initiative by the voluntary sector. Rather than having one time event, the organisations are trying to have ongoing relationship of information sharing. We need to search for journalists who are committed to the cause of social change and ready to write. Such friends in media must be nurtured. In order to get space in the news slot whether in electronic media or in print, even journalists has to negotiate with content editors'. Organisations like VANI efforts to reach out to media and the public to sensitise them on concerns related to the sector. On the whole, greater and more positive engagement of both the CSOs and the media can help foster a better relationship between the two, which in turn can help the former to bring themselves and their achievements/challenges more under the limelight.

- **Trust Funds (Polly Toynbee)**

In March 2009, The Guardian journalist and president of the Social Policy Association, Polly Toynbee, suggested that one way forward for the local press was by developing local trust funds that would run the local news. The money could come from a variety of sources, including the current publicly-funded news providers, such as the BBC, and local councils through both buying space in the local newspapers and by investing council tax. The trust would then have an 'obligation to good reporting, fair rules and open access, and you could have independent local news across web, print, radio and television offering a genuine community service' (Toynbee, 2009). The idea of local trusts running local newspapers has received some support, notably from the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). This type of governance would have to safeguard the independence of the local press, particularly if there is state funding involved. Pete Murray, Vice President of the NUJ, maintains that as long as this support (from either local or national government) takes place at 'arm's length', this could be a viable way of operating local newspapers (interview with Pete Murray, May 2009). It could also increase the involvement of civil society associations who could contribute funding and be actively involved in ensuring independent practice in the public interest. It is worth noting, however, that trust status does not in itself relieve commercial and competitive pressures, and that safeguards may, therefore, be necessary to protect its core remit: to serve local publics operating in and for the public interest.

- **Other partnerships between Media and Civil Society Associations**

Partnership schemes are not a new phenomenon, but have attracted new interest, particularly within the BBC, as a way of ensuring the legitimacy of its public funding. In December 2008 the BBC outlined its plans for partnerships with different types of actors in the broadcasting sector and beyond. Even though most of the partnerships are aimed at other media providers – such as local newspapers, commercial broadcasters and community radio – the plans also extend to the cultural sector in a wider sense, to enable 'more public sector organisations to harness the power of digital content' (Digital Britain, 2009: 139). If established media, civil society associations, government and regulators fostered the creation of this type of partnership structure, the collaboration between mainstream, traditional content providers and nontraditional media sources would need to be based on the pursuit of specific public interest goals, and the drawing up of agreed operating procedures, in order to contain the danger of limiting, rather than enhancing, plurality.

- **Collaborative Journalism**

The NUJ (2009b) in the pamphlet 'Disappearing Freelance Work', pointed to cuts in freelance work in the media. At a time when many staff journalists are being made redundant and may turn freelance, the disappearance of freelance work is troubling. There is already evidence that the BBC has cut the fees awarded to freelance correspondents and producers (Currah, 2009: 54). Civil society, in the form of the National Union for Journalists (NUJ), and other campaign groups like the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, already play a role in trying to protect the rights and working conditions of journalists, including freelancers. The Freelance Industrial Council of the NUJ was established specifically for its freelance members and has been operating for about 25 years. Internationally we see, however, that civil society associations of freelancers have been constituted not only to lobby and influence policy but also to distribute their work. The Network for Reporting on Eastern Europe (N-Ost), links 250 journalists and media initiatives from more than twenty European countries. Based in Berlin, it started as an informal network of correspondents in 2002, and was launched as a professional journalistic civil society association in 2005. It works with a subscription service for articles from and about Eastern Europe and has major European

(mainly German) media as its clients. This form of collaborative journalism is successful both in the distribution of the work of its members, and in setting standards for the industry. For example, when media organisations pay too little for articles they publish, that organisation is banned from using the services of the Network. Another example of successful collaborative journalism, even though not specifically for freelancers, is the American Global Post. Focussing on international reporting, GlobalPost is formed of a network of part-time foreign correspondents from all over the world who write material for the website. However, as it does not see online advertising as a sufficient and sustainable way to support its correspondents, the business model is based on a combination of online advertising, syndication of the material and paid membership. Global Post, a for-profit enterprise, provides an interesting model that could also function as a trust model (note that every employee and correspondent of the company is also a shareholder). One of the oldest examples of journalistic networks is the co-operative of photographers, Magnum. Set up in 1947 by four photographers as a response to their experiences in the second world war, it now operates through its editorial offices in New York, London, Paris and Tokyo, and a network of 15 sub-agents. It is still owned and run by those who provide the content: the photographers. These examples of collaborative journalism provide an interesting business model that can be explored from a civil society perspective.

- **Tax Concessions**

One government incentive to stimulate the provision of public service content by different types of providers would be to offer tax breaks such as the extension of the zero rating for value-added tax (VAT) that newspapers currently enjoy, to an array of (news) media, as proposed by Currah . A possible pitfall, as Currah notes, lies in defining the organisations that would be eligible for such exemption.

- **Direct Taxation**

Direct taxation, channeled to local news media by a process of tender and clear guidelines of public interest would be the most straightforward way of providing new money for the media. With a clear public service remit that includes the close involvement of civil society, the plurality of media could truly be enhanced. However, this type of funding is contested and is unlikely to be popular, as it involves both extra funding from the public and an increased governmental role in the media.

5. 12 ROUTES TO MORE EFFECTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY IN INDIA:

- **Show Government the Value of Civil Society and vice versa:**

Civil society organisations (CSOs) share a symbiotic relation with government. A strong civil society can only exist within a democratic framework guaranteed by government. CSOs need to acknowledge that law-making should be the domain of elected representatives in a democracy, rather than un-elected ones. Similarly, civil society's role as a facilitator of democracy and development and a watchdog must be acknowledged by the government.

- **Open Lines of Communication:**

Dialogue is key. It takes two to dialogue. While it is still early days to assess what the prime minister's office thinks about the development sector, the only real engagement with civil society so far is via leaked reports. That's not the best way to have a healthy dialogue.

- **Make Friends in High Places:**

Identify your allies within the government and ask them how to present data and information. Taking a confrontational stand only complicates matters. This is what we've learned, as LGBT citizens deemed criminals by some in this country.

- **Engage the Public:**

NGOs need to take outreach to a wider audience. The middle class and youth need to be engaged. There is a link between economic and political capture by a small group and projection of certain kind of development.

- **Support other Organisations:**

NGOs are a divided community in India and have failed to make a compelling case for themselves, not just in the public eye, but also with government. There has been too little solidarity in the community for those who are prosecuted by the government.

- **Campaign for More Government Transparency:**

There is still a lot of information on legal and financial compliance that the NGOs don't have easy access to. This causes quite a few issues. There is a real need for transparency on the processes and decision making by the government. This information should be easily accessible to NGOs.

- **Don't be Complacent:**

The Delhi High Court order was brilliant and it will certainly have an impact on the brazenness of state impunity in so far as restricting foreign funding of Greenpeace. But there is no room for complacency and I do see a trend of growing intolerance towards all sections of society who dissent and not just NGOs.

- **Work in Political and Public Spheres:**

CSOs should also learn to work more strategically with political parties. As CSOs operate in the space between public and political arenas, government responsiveness is improved by engaging both arenas.

- **Create a Counter-Culture:**

It is important to recognise that we live in an age of political capture where the power – economic and wealth – is more concentrated than it has ever been, with this impacting how policies function. We need to create a popular narrative with a clear vision of what change looks like – in terms of poverty, gender and social inclusion. We have stopped working on creating a counter-culture which is fundamental to allow people to ingrain the idea of democracy and equality.

- **Improve the Sector's Reputation with the Upper Class:**

Many sections of Indian society view NGOs with suspicion, particularly the upper echelons. While it is true that a few black sheep have tarnished the image of the sector, much of the opposition is because it clashes with the class interests of the elite in India. NGOs need to work much harder to convince people of their motivations.

- **Take Responsibility for Accountability and Transparency:**

Businesses have been accused of using NGOs for money laundering. NGOs should account for the money they spend while working within the parameters of national governing frameworks and laws. The best NGOs strategies about how they can be accountable to the communities for whom they work.

- **Convince the Middle Class that Poverty Affects them too:**

Highlight to the middle class that in the long run governments focusing on the interests of the top 1% is detrimental to their interests, not just that of the poor. This is a challenge in the UK as much as it is India. Globally we need to work harder on scripting a new narrative and as the recent elections in Greece demonstrated, it is possible.

6. CONCLUSION:

The media, as opposed to civil society organisations, are much more focused on information-gathering. This may entail some analysis, but their overriding concern is to put out timely information. Civil society organizations, in contrast, see for themselves a role that has much more to do with public education. Information is, of course, the first step in awareness-building, but, beyond that, there is the business of influencing public reasoning and debate. Although it is also true that just as there is evidence-based policymaking -- that is, you don't make policies without evidence to support them -- there is policy-based evidence-making. The media, to some extent, do that. They may be in favour of a policy, say privatisation, and they constantly ferret out information that supports that position. But the good thing is that readers invariably discern this. Today, there are so many different sources of information that I don't fear that the position of one newspaper or TV channel is going to make a great difference.

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