



Media Bias and Democracy

This editorial is based on [“Press must remain free if a country is to remain a democracy....”](#) which was published in the Indian Express on 24/03/2023. It discusses the issue of freedom of press in India and ways to address the same.

For Prelims: Article 19, Freedom of Press, Fake News, Madrid Principles

For Mains: Role of Media in Promoting Democracy and related challenges

The **media is the fourth pillar in the conception of the State**, and thus an integral component of democracy. **A functional and healthy democracy must encourage the development of journalism** as an institution that can ask difficult questions to the establishment — or as it is commonly known, “speak truth to power”.

Article 19 of the Constitution of India **guarantees the right to freedom of speech and expression** and is typically invoked against the state. However, **despite the constitutional protection, journalists and media outlets in India have faced a range of challenges**, including threats, attacks, and intimidation from government officials, politicians, and non-state actors.

Media is the engine that **drives democracy forward, based on the quest for truth, justice, and equality**. In today's digital age, **the need for journalists to uphold standards of accuracy, impartiality, and responsibility in their reporting is paramount to successfully overcome the challenges** posed by the rapidly changing media landscape.

What Role does Media Play in Promoting Democracy?

- **Providing Information:**
 - The **media informs citizens about political issues, policies, and events, allowing them to make informed decisions** about their leaders and government.
- **Holding Leaders Accountable:**
 - The **media acts as a watchdog, scrutinizing the actions of government officials** and holding them accountable for their actions.
- **Encouraging Public Debate:**
 - The media **provides a platform for public debate and discussion** about political issues, which is essential for a healthy democracy.
- **Representing Diverse Perspectives:**
 - The media **should represent a range of perspectives and viewpoints**, giving citizens access to a variety of opinions and ideas.
- **Educating Citizens:**
 - The **media should educate citizens about the democratic process**, helping them understand how government works and how to participate in it effectively.

What are the Challenges with the Role of Media in Democracy?

- **Media Bias:**
 - **Media bias can distort the information that is presented to the public**, leading to a lack of objectivity and an imbalance in the information that is available. This can result in a polarized public opinion and a lack of trust in the media.
 - The mainstream media in India is often indulged in either being pro-government or totally against them they are choosing extreme point of views and are not trying balancing out, rather ignoring issues related to common folks.
- **Fake News:**
 - The **rise of social media has made it easier for fake news to spread rapidly, often leading to confusion and misinformation** among the public.
 - This can undermine the credibility of the media and lead to a lack of trust in the information that is presented.
 - Recently, [two men in Haryana were killed on suspicion](#) of illegal transportation, smuggling or slaughtering of cows by cow vigilantes highlight the issue of **Mob Lynching**.
- **Corporate Influence:**
 - Media outlets are **often owned by large corporations, which can influence the editorial policies and reporting of the media**. This can lead to a lack of diversity of perspectives and a focus on profit over public interest.
- **Government Censorship:**
 - Governments may **use censorship to control the flow of information and suppress dissent**. This can lead to a lack of transparency and accountability in the government and limit the ability of the media to act as a watchdog.
- **Issue of Legitimacy:**
 - A **diverse and representative newsroom is essential for media institutions to provide well-researched and complex stories** that explore a multiplicity of perspectives and voices.
 - The issue of legitimacy with media refers to the concern that media outlets may not always provide accurate, unbiased, or truthful information.
 - This can **arise due to various factors such as political biases**, commercial interests, sensationalism, and lack of journalistic standards.
- **Gender Diversity:**
 - The lack of gender diversity in the media is another important issue to consider. Women are underrepresented in both the ownership and workforce of media organizations, which limits the diversity of perspectives and voices in the media. It also perpetuates gender stereotypes and reinforces patriarchal norms.
- **Media Trial:**
 - **There have been instances when the media has carried narratives that make a person guilty in the eyes of the public**, even before the court finds them guilty.
 - **Example:**
 - One example of a media trial in India was the 2008 Aarushi Talwar-Hemraj double murder case. The case received extensive media coverage and the media played a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing the investigation and subsequent court proceedings.
 - This can have long-lasting repercussions on the life of the affected individuals, as well as on due process.
 - According to the **Madrid Principles on the Relationship Between the Media and Judicial Independence**, it is the job of the media to **“convey information to the public and to comment on the administration of justice**, including cases before, during and after trial, without violating the presumption of innocence.”

What Should be the Way Forward?

- **Promote Accuracy and Fact-Checking:**
 - It is the **collective responsibility of journalists as well as other stakeholders to weed out any element of bias or prejudice** from the process of reporting events.

- A **comprehensive fact-checking mechanism should be in place to verify all news items before reporting**. Media houses are expected to act cautiously while publishing news.
- **Provide Diverse Perspectives:**
 - The media **should strive to represent diverse voices and perspectives to ensure that all viewpoints are heard** and considered. This can help to promote a more informed and engaged citizenry.
- **Hold those in Power Accountable:**
 - One of the key roles of the media is to **hold those in power accountable by reporting on their actions and decisions**. This includes investigating corruption and abuse of power.
- **Foster Public Discourse:**
 - The media can **play a key role in fostering public discourse by providing a platform for debate and discussion**. This can help to promote understanding and dialogue between different groups, leading to more informed and inclusive decision-making.
- **Avoid Bias:**
 - The media **should strive to avoid bias in its reporting to ensure that it is perceived as fair and objective by all parties**. This can help to build trust in the media and promote its role in democracy.
- **Addressing Online Harassment of Journalists:**
 - Journalists are facing online harassment due to the rise of social media. This affects their safety and freedom of expression. India needs to take measures to address this issue and ensure the safety of journalists.
- **Encouraging Media Literacy:**
 - While the media has an important role in promoting democracy, citizens also have a responsibility to consume news critically and discerningly. **Media literacy programs can help citizens to better understand how the media works**, how to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources, and how to engage in informed public discourse.
- **Promoting Independent Journalism:**
 - In addition to large mainstream media outlets, **there is a need to support and promote independent journalism in India**. This can include funding for investigative reporting, support for community-based media, and protection for freelance journalists and stringers who often face greater risks than staff journalists.
- **Strengthening Legal Protection for Journalists:**
 - Often journalists and media outlets are subjected to threats, attacks, and intimidation from various sources. Therefore, the government could consider enacting a law that specifically protects journalists and media outlets from harassment and violence.
 - While **Article 19 of the Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression**, there are no specific provisions for the protection of journalists.
- **Adherence to Media Ethics:**
 - It is important that the media stick to the core principles like truth and accuracy, transparency, independence, fairness and impartiality, responsibility and fair play.

Drishti Mains Question

What is the role of the press in promoting democracy, and what are the key challenges that the press faces in fulfilling this role effectively?