

The Media As Middle Man

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The sudden interest in the involvement of some Indian media persons in what appears to be lobbying has posed the question about ethics, but it has a lot more to do with the cult of icons. Readers and viewers tend to blindly believe in taglines about 'truth' prevailing and 'we were the first to go there' with high-profile columnists and anchors; the audience now feels let down and covertly awkward for having propped up these news-bearers.

There is also anger that the exposure was not covered by news channels and only by some print publications. The media is a tightly-knit incestuous lot in India. They know that if they allow one head to fall, theirs will be next on the chopping block.

The story appeared relatively simple. A lobbyist, Nira Radia, working for industrialist Mukesh Ambani called up journalists and discussed ministerial portfolios. The media people offered to set up meetings with ministers and even revealed what stories could be run. There was loads of money - \$40 billion - involved in the 2G-spectrum deals that would benefit the corporate lobby. The question is: did it benefit the journalists and how? The newspapers/channels get ads, the political party gets election funds and the media can carry convenient stories along the election trail with staged 'objective' moments. The media is the new fiefdom of the politician and political power – from the front door or the back entrance – is the journalist's reward.

There have been conjectures that these conversations were to make the lobbyist give away information, a snoopy journalistic tactic. But has it been taken to its logical conclusion? Has there been an expose of a nature that could compromise the government which is culpable in this case? No. Are the journalists to blame? The motives and 'real' reasons are a non-sequiter when facts stare people in the face.

No one can call acting as conduits between politicians and corporate lobbies as part of journalism, but in the past the arrangement was tacit. Press conferences by business houses that handed out goodies were major draws. Does anyone even know about news reports that are paid for and often written by the PR departments of business houses? Does anyone care that such PR people carry press passes and are members of the press clubs? When captains of industry write guest columns for publications, this is advertising passing off as editorial content.

Journalists have often got prime posts in social organisations or are sent on junkets; many of the hugely respected senior names conduct all their 'investigations' over the telephone, which means they are fed information by interested groups. While opinions are by nature subjective, reportage ought to be objective. What is reported and how clearly conveys which side the person is on or has been asked to be on. What about owners of channels who get elected and become MPs?

To push the envelope (no pun intended) further, what about freedom of speech? Does the industrial house not have the freedom to lobby? Does the lobbyist not have the freedom to push her case? Does the journalist not have the freedom to act as a go-between? Great media stalwarts like Arun Shourie have played a role in bringing down politicians and governments. Why did they become heroes and why are today's newsmakers considered unethical? The reason is that they appear to be co-opted, whereas a Shourie fought against

the establishment. It is another matter that the fight could have been dictated by the opposition. This is the crux of the argument.

Sting operations get a whole lot of points by a gullible public that assumes those blurred video clips are done as an act of public good. No one bothers to check out the motives behind these moves. It is high time people made the mainstream media answerable, but the alternatives are not always as above-board as they appear simply because they too depend on the largesse of sponsors, advertising and benefactors.

Political stooges have always existed, only the level of subtlety has altered their persona. There are TV channels that have given preference to young recruits merely due to their proximity to and sometimes family connections with powerful people.

The recent revelations have become such a talking point, ironically, because they have been exposed with much flourish outside the mainstream media in India. Internationally, the *Washington Post* mentioned 'paid news' and reported that The Foundation for Media Professionals plans to host a conference on journalists as power brokers. The organisation's spokesperson said, "We are actually happy that these practices have come out in the open. It forces us to address the problem. We as journalists sit in judgment of others all the time. We should hold ourselves to a higher standard."

Journalists are fallible and their standards should be decreed by ethics and not morality and most certainly must not become a ruse for nobility. The self-examination should also raise questions about the media conducting kangaroo courts and making a spectacle of helpless common people.

Prominent anchors and columnists are deified only because their visibility, especially during crises and calamities, immediately imbues them with a halo of legitimacy. This gets further sanctity when a scam uses the name of one individual. This does not, in fact, work as a "lynch mob" but serves to buffer the cult. Today's flawed Twitter hero is tomorrow's Facebook martyr, for the truth may lie not in what was said in the tapes but what was left unsaid. □□□

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