

Is Indian media responsible?

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Photo: Mint

Last week, lobby group Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) organized a discussion titled *Responsible Media Versus Sensational Media*. Among those who participated were news television and newspaper editors (and former editors) including T.N. Ninan, Shekhar Gupta, Vikram Chandra and Rajdeep Sardesai. Prasar Bharati chief executive Jawhar Sircar was there too. The discussion was followed by the panel taking questions from the audience. The queries, which usually ended up being long comments/personal vents, were aggressive and the public did not hold back its criticism of the media.

Although, one of the panellists said that the comments from the audience should not be considered hostile as these were “just people with opinions but no knowledge—no different from the average drawing room conversation”. The trouble is such conversations are being heard over and over again in drawing rooms of middle- and upper-middle-class homes. Media bashing is now a trend. This wasn’t the case earlier. Increasingly, media personnel find

themselves coming under fire from non-media friends and relatives.

To some extent, we may have brought this anger upon ourselves. Television news channels, for instance, have been receiving flak for a while now for sensationalizing news. (It is another matter that people still watch them). Objective reporting has given way to opinions. In the race for television rating points, channels spew out news that may not always have been rigorously vetted. The doctored tape of the speech of Jawaharlal Nehru University student activist Kanhaiya Kumar is a case in point.

In all societies, you have the tabloid press and sensationalism in media. But you also have the broadsheet press, which is usually considered more responsible. “But when the mainstream guys themselves go tabloid, so to speak, then we need to look at it not as a media question but as a social question,” said Ninan, chairman of Business Standard Ltd, during the CII discussion.

Social media is probably one of the reasons for sensationalism in traditional media as well. According to television anchor Sardesai, who is consulting editor at TV Today Network, when social media outrages, mainstream media picks on that outrage and amplifies the surround sound. “As a result we are creating a cacophonous society,” he said during the panel discussion.

Ninan, in fact, raised the most pertinent question when he asked if media was getting angry about the real issues rather than about whether someone will say “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*” or not. People question the credibility of media, as increasingly a lot of it is owned either by large corporate houses or politicians. According to Gupta, who is now the founder-editor of digital media venture *The Print*, the key to the contradiction of media’s growing popularity and popular anger lies in how the business has morphed from “journalism” into “media”, which has more of a commercial ring to it.

Interestingly, a lot of the anger of the people against journalists is also more visible now, thanks to online and social media. Earlier, newspaper and news television editors and anchors were inaccessible. Not any more. They are all out there on social media, which also provides a platform for anyone who wants to criticize the media.

A couple of days ago, the country’s largest selling English daily *The Times of India* came under attack on social media for its front page picture of the Duchess of Cambridge Kate Middleton with her white dress billowing in the wind at Amar Jawan Jyoti at India Gate in New Delhi.

But not all criticism is fair. While it is true that people are angry with media for some of its flaws, it is also true that increasingly people get angry with the media when the news does not match their own views. “An adversarial media angers a section of the population which is intolerant of any criticism of the ruling establishment: a certain illiberal spirit reflects in their responses,” Sardesai has said.

Equally, there are also people intolerant of any praise of the government.

Gupta later pointed out that the middle and upper-middle class is now polarized between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Aam Aadmi Party. Each has efficient social media armies to promote its views and intimidate those who don’t buy into these. In playing to these new

galleries, and driven by the desperate need for more Twitter and Facebook followers and retweets or “likes”, journalists tailor their messages to what will sell. “The casualty is not just nuance but also scepticism, so important for a journalist,” he said.

In a later conversation, Sardesai said that television channels are aware of their shortcomings, “but I do believe we focus too much attention on our weaknesses and fail to appreciate our strengths. The surround sound of the prime time noise and sensationalism should not take away from the fact that media continues to break stories, act as a watchdog, report and investigate”.

To be sure, responsible media is one which is committed to the integrity of news, and has checks in place to ensure that the news is not deliberately manufactured or twisted. There may be aberrations, but by and large, Indian media is responsible, added Sardesai.

Shuchi Bansal is Mint's media, marketing and advertising editor. Ordinary Post will look at pressing issues related to all three. Or just fun stuff.