

Host

He's a senior editor, writer, mentor, consultant, and commentator. He has more than 30 years of experience in both Indian and international media environments. He's worked for media entities, including Reuters, The Economic Times, Business Standard, Hindustan Times, after starting out in The Times of India group, he has covered topics ranging from technology to politics. We spoke to Madhavan Narayanan on a range of topics from the state of journalism in India, to government's decision to regulate digital news media and OTT.

You know media almost 100-150 years ago was supposed to be the watchdog. And now if you see particularly from a TV channel point of view, whether it is English or regional or any, any language media that you take in India, it's become more of a barking show, many people say that it is also because you know, viewers wanted, I mean, and these channels are playing to the gallery. So, I mean, is that how it is? Is that because there seems to be some amount of viewership for these kinds of channels as well.

Madhavan

Let me bring in a technology and economic angle to this again, it's a bit controversial, but I am a strong believer in this I've been for about 30 years now, is one of my better known better kept secrets, I would say officially, which is that mass media, when it becomes truly mass acquires a different character. Now, let me explain, earlier because of various restrictions on costs, you know, the only the educated people could work for the media.

Yeah

because it was all about a certain section of well-heeled media, middle class talking to each other, using the newspapers or TV panels as a medium, and the cost of technology in order to own a newspaper or a TV channel about 30-40 years ago, you needed to have big capital, prime real estate, location,

absolutely.

All that is gone. Now, you can now sit in a corner of Amaravati and run a TV channel all over the world, if you want on our YouTube channel. And digital technologies have dramatically lowered the cost of entry. And this is for the broadcasters or people who want to share their opinions. Today I'm doing with my smartphone, I mean, I have 200, 1000 plus followers on Twitter. So, my follower count is more than the circulation of some new leading newspapers, okay.

Host-Absolutely.

Madhavan

So, I have also that is one thing the other thing is the cost of affordability has also gone down. You know, in today's statistics, I read, India now has 750 million internet connections on the 25th anniversary of the introduction of the internet.

Host-correct

Madhavan

It's about two thirds of this population has access to the internet. Now, what does this mean? It means that the technology has become pervasive, but the mindset, the intellectual quality, or lack of it, is essentially associated as you go down the mass. Okay. So, I was just joking yesterday over a

quote from Richard Feynman is it "the trouble with the masses is that sometimes the M is silent. So you have, you have something which you would call a mediocretization of the news discourse. Now, but the point is, thanks to social media and the lower cost of entry of various kinds of participants, they do not see themselves as anything inferior. They see as if their voices have been suppressed for all these years. So today, New York Times has a slogan called all the news that is fit to print based on the editorial discretion of what should be news. It has reached a point where you know, I say one man's editing is another person's censorship. So, they say that censorship, so that has only created a lot of genuine pollution such as fake news, and the propagandists which were forced to use advertising and to some extent PR as a medium, now have a direct access to people through handles and social media and IT stuff. So, there is a there is this whole you know syndrome of propagandists, PR people, mainstream journalists, political parties' spokespersons, NGOs, General activists, anonymous handles all of them coming together on the same single social media platform to shout whatever they want to. And that has basically created a babble of voices in a tower of babble as well. So that is also adding to the confusion. And therefore, news as we knew it, or your father's ideal news has been decimated. What has happened in news is just a mimicry of what happened in politics. So, they used to be the populism. So, to answer your question on whether we just want it the answer seems to be yes and partly because one market research showed in US that, writing audiences want affirmation, whereas the liberals want information.

Host

That's true, and you know that. So do you see this also percolating into business you know, media, business journalism, as well, because somewhere, some also feel that they are also getting in some ways polarized, I mean, business reporting, or business writing is also getting polarized.

Madhavan

Let me give you a blunt view on that, you know, I've been a business journalist for 25-30 years. And I can tell you, I was never too happy with the state of business journalism, which is like, as it is, people, you hardly see a negative business story, you know, Outlook business, for instance, ran some good negative stories. That's a rare exception among magazines. Most of the business stories are positive anyway. So, it was through what I call the double positivity. Business magazines like to be positive about the business, journalists like to be positive about the businesses they write on. And businesses for their own reason, like to be on the good books of the government whoever you know, even when they have disagreements with the government, they explain it very carefully. You know, it rarely does somebody like Rahul Bajaj stand up and confront the government on some issues, because they have their own seniority and personality, that goes back into confronting it 99.9% of the business people either talk behind the backs on some issues are, or they're on the side of whoever is in power. So, and business journalists also hardly ever discuss things. So, there are issues which I feel, for instance, like shareholder value, and corporate governance are rarely discussed in the news columns of business magazines or newspapers. Most of them are about which company is growing and which come, which tycoon who's doing well, and all that nobody really asked, or it's about whether policy will aid growth or not. There are other issues of social importance of political nuances or shareholder concerns are never really addressed by the media. So, in a sense, business media was already sort of, I wouldn't say compromised. But I would say, I know a lot of business journalists are well intentioned people they are unscrupulous as far as I mean, scrupulously honest, as far as individual personalities and go as a concern, but they play to gallery. And that gallery doesn't ask that question. So in fact, you will rarely find a business press conference in which hard questions are asked whether in political press conferences, the temperature is something you can sense whenever there is one. Yeah, that's true. It's like, well, you know what, sometimes I watch

those TV news channels of business channels, I feel I'll get diabetes, everybody's being so sweet to each other.

Host

Yeah, that's true.

Madhavan

So I in the politically yeah, they all increasingly, partly because there are financial issues, and there are government advertisements. So, there is a bit of a compromise on that front as well, they get the instructions from bosses to be nice to the government because they don't want phone calls from ministers or they don't want public sector companies or government advertisers coming away at a time when business models are under threat in the media. And mainstream media is struggling to survive, and there are layoffs. Obviously, you go where the safety and the money are. And that also creates its own compromises.

Host

Yeah. So the last point that I wanted to discuss with you was on the, you know, recent move by government to regulate digital news media platforms, and, you know, OTT per se, so some like what you rightly said one month editing is probably the other man's censorship, right? So how do you see this panning out, I mean, is this something that is going to really help in curbing fake news bringing in more accountability or is it something that's going to end up as more of a censorship than anything else?

Madhavan

Let me ask you a very simple question, even if there is fake news. Who is the government to decide this because regulation, regulation is the special word? regulation is a quasi-judicial character, you know, if you take the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, it is not really part of the Government of India, you know, it was spun off from the DOT. And it had a separate entity status. And you had the Press Council of India, which is sort of autonomous, usually headed by a retired judge, it doesn't have punitive powers, but it has a somewhat regulatory quality in terms of wrapping someone on the knuckles. Okay. Now, then you have the courts, which can actually hear cases subject on libel defamation, or, you know, false, then to some extent, consumer courts have heard about news being not being properly given. But it's important to understand that in a democracy, which promises free speech and freedom of the media, the government is part of the problem, the problem cannot govern the problem. So, if because if the government is close to the ruling party, and if the ruling party is promoting fake news, it bets the question as to how can you trust the government. And the other thing is that media as a news media, as an independent institution, is supposed to be equidistant from everybody. And so it's often to go back to our old talk about watchdog, it's supposed to speak truth to power, how you speak truth to power when power tries to regulate you. So, let's not mince words, it's not regulation, but control.

Having said that, let me ask if there is a case for regulation, I will say yes, some kind of regulation, because even the most liberal free speech activists don't like hate speech. Nobody likes fake news, if they are so fake news and hate speech, are very legitimate part of the media discourse that needs to be in some way, controlled, managed or eliminated. And, and the best way to do that is to in some way regulated, but who's going to regulate it? To some extent, we have fact checking websites as a community-based initiative, the government may be on the right path and trying to do something about audit, but keeping it under the ministry's control is not the thing, maybe they should talk to

the judiciary, maybe they should try some, they tried self-regulation. But as you know, the even the News Broadcasters Association has two of them now, the political divides and the ideological divides have also resulted in the association divides. Okay, just said you are chambers of commerce, what's happening, what happened in the chambers of commerce in the good old days, that traditional family is controlled companies controlling one Chamber of Commerce and the slightly more modern companies going to another Chamber of Commerce. And there was a third Chamber of Commerce that existed essentially for the business tycoons to get access to policymakers. So, I've seen that is happening in the self-regulation, business of news. So, we know that self-regulation either as its limits or has already failed, if that is the case, who's going to regulate it. So logically speaking, the matter should be considered but not controlled by the government. And the government can facilitate some kind of regulation in which a combination of self-regulation or the judicial involvement or highly professional engagement can come into play. But you also have this phenomenon of what are the laws under which you will govern them? Because freedom of expression, you know, you can't go to jail for lying, by the way, unless it is lying to court or lying in a certain

Host-True

So what are the laws that will govern fake news? That is a legislative matter? How will you distinguish between independent media that is essentially digital and character? Let's see a News Minute or, or a very good, no legitimate what I respect outlets like let's say The News Minute or The Print maybe but there are also some digital media entities which may be an OpIndia from the right or The Wire from the left that have a ideological character, right, which are part of the freedom of expression. So can you so if regulating news goes into the realm of regulating freedom of expression, we have run into another problem?

Host-Yes, yeah.

Madhavan

And then you have the syndrome where there is a social media as an entity, lots of people noisily, discuss things, discussing things in YouTube channels. By the way YouTube is one of the biggest sources of fake news if you ask me. So, it's born on YouTube and travels on WhatsApp? It's not even Twitter. At least in Twitter, there are people who are trying to shout you down, or but in a lot of fake news, completely slanderous stuff basis stuff gets created in YouTube videos, and even porn travels on Instagram and Facebook I've seen so how do you control essentially social media? Because digital media, so there should be an incentive mechanism when some digital media entities can have access to press conferences, accreditation and stuff, which is a good characteristic strategy, which not a bad idea, but I do not think we can have the government controlling the media. If there is regulation, it should be based on guidelines should have a clear purpose, it should have a clear understanding of what are the laws it's trying to implement. And it should have a structure that is trustworthy and truly independent. Because you cannot have an adhoc one fine morning notifications from the government saying from here on the government shall regulate you in, that is not regulation that is control.

Host

Yeah, Okay. That's interesting, So Thanks Madhavan, thanks for your time. It was pleasure talking to you. Tune in next week for another episode of Mrigashira.