

Markets, Media and Democracy

Date: April 5-6, 2010

UNICEF India in collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK) organized a round table on 'Markets, Media and Democracy' on April 5-6, 2010. The participants in the round table included

- A.K. Shiva Kumar, Adviser, UNICEF India
- Sharmila Tagore, Chairperson, Central Board of Film Certification and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador
- Shantha Sinha, Chairperson, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights
- Amiya Kumar Bagchi, Director, IDSK
- M. S. Prabhakara
- N. Ram, Editor-in-Chief, The Hindu
- P.Sainath, Rural Affairs Editor, The Hindu
- Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, Member, Press Council of India
- Sashi Kumar, Chairman, Media Development Foundation and Asian College of Journalism
- Biraj Patnaik, Principal Adviser, Office of the Commissioners to the Supreme Court in the Right to Food Case
- Poonam Mootreja, Country Director, MacArthur Foundation
- Vipul Mudgal, Director, Inclusive Media Project, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
- Alka Bhanot, UNICEF India
- Antara Dev Sen, Managing Trustee, Pratichi (India) Trust and Editor, The Little Magazine
- Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Author
- Malini Bhattacharya, Chairperson, West Bengal Commission for Women
- Dipankar Sinha, University of Calcutta
- Achin Chakraborty of IDSK

Buroshiva Dasgupta and Subhoranjan Dasgupta were the coordinators of the round table. The press statement of the round table released on 6 April is given below:

Press Statement

It is commonly accepted that democracy requires a free press; and that there is no real democracy without a free press. Conversely, a free press requires democracy. Democracy is the oxygen that keeps media alive and free. At the same time, a free press can lose its bearings unless there is a public that depends on journalism to be informed and to become politically engaged. Therefore, it becomes imperative for the free media to attack the anti-democratic status quo and embrace again its role of "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable."

The headlong drift of the news media in India into the arms of the market since the early 1990s does not augur well for democracy or for the future of free and independent journalism. The recent stark disclosures of 'paid news' vitiating electoral politics are a deep affront to, and betrayal of, the faith of the Indian people in their news media.

The systematic commercialisation and corporatisation of the news media over the last 15 years; the tabloidization and dumbing down which gives free rein to gossip, voyeurism and

sensationalism in the name of news; the marginalisation of the working journalist and journalists' unions; the capitulation of the editorial department to the dictates of the advertisement department; indeed, the near disappearance of the independent Editor and his reincarnation as Editor-cum-CEO, are all symptomatic of the dangerous erosion in the fourth pillar of democracy.

The news media in India are today in the unenviable position of having to prove that they continue to merit the moral, legal and constitutional high ground that civil society have accorded them. Let us not forget that whenever the freedom of the news media was in peril, when their rights were sought to be denied by draconian media laws harking back to the Emergency of 1975, it was the people of this country who stood shoulder to shoulder with the press in defeating these moves and defending the freedom of the media.

The growing disconnect between the press and the people, and the disenchantment about the role of the press as an agency of democratic empowerment cast a shadow of deep doubt on this long held implicit faith of the people in their media. A cynical press is true to form. A people cynical about their press spells trouble for the press.

These and other recent trends in the news media which tend to undo the cardinal principles and core values of the free media in a democracy were discussed at the Round Table organised by IDSK and UNICEF at Kolkata on April 5 and 6, 2010. The Round Table felt that the conscientious part of the news media must ask itself whether the fourth estate has, even if unwittingly, become a fifth column of corporate aggrandisement.

Since the news media can be no better than their practitioners, the Round Table felt that much of what is wrong with the media must be addressed by the media themselves. But it may be naïve to believe that media as business will shift track and become self abnegating. The public constituency which the news media depends on must put pressure on the media to mend their ways – for their own sake and for the sake of democracy which they essentially sub serve.

Discussions focussed on the role and influence on the media on human development. Do appropriate incentives exist for the media to highlight critical issues of poverty, deprivations and injustice? After all, bad news is good news. If the average reader is not interested in reading about malnutrition, discrimination, poverty and child deaths, then can we argue that these issues do not deserve to be covered by the news media? What does this say about the responsibility of the media? Concerns were expressed about the displacement of serious commentaries by snippets and the trend to look for attractive stories that sell.

Accountability of the news media especially to the public was another issue discussed at the Round Table. While some felt that the news media routinely scrutinize the executive, legislature and even judiciary, others wondered whether this indeed is the case. Do the media really have the means with which to scrutinize others? Very often, even the media do not get answers to questions that are asked of government, the corporate sector or the politician. Participants strongly felt that the news media should not be above scrutiny. The Round Table discussed the need for more systematic evidence gathering and analysis in order to better assess and evaluate the role and contribution of the media to enhancing freedoms, reducing poverty.

The Round Table deliberated upon the need to creatively use media and communication for improving governance, agenda building, addressing injustices and mobilizing public action. The news media must draw on the lived lives and experiences of the people in different contexts in a plural democracy like India. Social and behavioural change by media intervention using entertainment and education needs to be based on understanding peoples' perceptions and

draw on continuous research.

The Round Table felt that the time has come to initiate a media reform movement in the country. The media must be open to social audit and public scrutiny. They must draw up transparent guidelines and adhere to them. From the outside, the state must set the framework for cross media restrictions that place reasonable limits on corporate expansion and on the trends of monopoly and oligopoly in the media sector. The right to information is a landmark legislation in empowering the people of India. They deserve, no less, the right to be meaningfully informed by their media.

As a first step, participants called for self-regulation by the news media and also the setting up of an independent Media Watch Group to monitor the media in India.