
RESPONSE OF THE PRINT MEDIA TO CHALLENGES FROM ELECTRONIC MEDIA: AN APPRAISAL

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During the over two centuries of its existence, the print media in India had faced several new waves of electronic media revolutions. It survived against the onslaughts which came as broadcast Radio, Television, Satellite and Cable Television, and the New Media popularly known as New Information and Communication Technologies. The evolution of each of the above electronic media was perceived as a threat to the very existence of print media but none could replace it. At some stages the impacts were noticeable but short-lived, which the print media could overcome without being critically affected. The Indian press had well responded to the pressures from the electronic media to convert all challenges into opportunities to better serve its readers. Through continuous upgradation of technology, improvement of contents and appearance, and innovative marketing strategies, the print media continues to justify its relevance even in the face of new media technology revolutions. Unlike some developed countries where there is marginal decline in newspaper circulation due to spread of electronic media, especially the Internet, the Indian print media is registering reasonable gains both in terms of number and circulation. The above facts substantiate the belief that the on-going electronic media revolutions are not likely to be a critical threat to the Indian print media, which will continue to evolve to serve its readers.

The Indian print media has been witnessing, over the last half century, the parallel growth of the electronic media as a powerful alternative. Making its first appearance in 1923 the Broadcast Radio has been evolving over the last eight decades, though the pace of growth keeps changing. Television entered India as an experimental project in 1959 only to become the most influential segment of the Indian mass media by the 1980s. The rapid proliferation of New Media especially the Internet during 1990s posed to alter the fundamentals of mass media in India.

The rapid spread of Broadcast Radio soon after independence, Television revolution during 1980s, and the New Media during 1990s had their impacts on the print media in India. There were instances of spontaneous decline in print media circulation due to the entry of a new electronic media. But many of those setbacks to the print media in the past were short lived and the print media could overcome the strains very quickly by appropriately responding to the challenges.

On certain occasions the print media could use the electronic media to its advantage. But the decline in print media circulation in the developed countries in recent years due to the spread of the new electronic media, especially the Internet, raises questions about the future of the print

media. Several experts argue that newspapers are losing relevance and have a cloudy future. An obvious question that arises: is our apprehension about the survival of the newspapers genuine? If no, how is the print media likely to respond to the challenges of electronic media?

This paper makes an effort to explore the impact of the electronic media on the print media and the response of the latter in its historical perspective.

The study has been discussed in four sections. Section I talks about the parallel growth of the print media and the electronic media; section II discussed the response of the print media to the electronic media boom; section III throws light on the future prospects of the print media in a developing country like India whereas section IV concludes the study.

I Comparative Growth of Different Media in India

We have been witnessing the parallel growth of two streams of media: the print media comprising newspapers and

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magazines; and the electronic media comprising radio, television, satellite and cable television, and the new media. The parallel growth of the more powerful electronic media has always been a factor which influenced the growth of the print media.

Beginning its journey in the name of the Bengal Gazette in 1780, the Indian print media now comprises newspapers and periodicals to the tune of 60,413 as on March 31, 2005. In terms of circulation also, it has made impressive gains from 10.932 million copies in 1956 to 15 6.719209 million copies.

As on 31st March 2005, there were 60,413 registered newspapers on record as against 58,469 at the end of March 2004. The total circulation of newspapers increased from 13,30,87,588 copies in 2003-04 to 15,67,19,209 copies in 2004-05. The number of dailies being published in the country was 1834 with a claimed circulation of 7,86,89,266 copies, which is 7% higher than that of the previous year. Circulation of periodicals also increased from 5,83,73,701 copies during 2003-04 to 7,74,76,070 copies in 2004-05.

Starting with two privately-owned transmitters at Mumbai and Calcutta in 1927, All India Radio today has a network of 215 broadcasting centres with 144 Medium Frequency (MW), 54 High Frequency (SW) and 139 FM transmitters, providing broadcasting services to 99.13% of the population spread over 91.42% of the geographical area of the country.

With a modest beginning with an experimental telecast in Delhi in September 1959, Doordarshan today is one of the largest broadcasting organisations in the world with a network of nearly 1044 terrestrial transmitters, 46 Doordarshan Studios producing TV software, 19 numbers of channels and making TV programmes available to more than 87 percent of population. During 1980s, the DD network rapidly expanded from only 19 transmitters in 1980-81 it reached 528 in 1990-91.

Adding to the Doordarshan network is a large number of television transmitters by private satellite and cable television networks. In 1997, the cable TV subscribers reached 18 million, which was 29 % of household which having TV. In 2000, the number of TV sets increased to 75 million and cable TV subscribers to 37 million.

The powerful new media sector is rapidly expanding in India attracting regular subscribers of other media towards it. We have achieved more than 50 million Internet user base in India occupying fourth position in the world after USA, China, and Japan. Our basic telephone connections

crossed 100 million mark and we hope to reach a target of 250 millions by 2007. Almost all important Indian newspapers have already started their online editions.

An obvious indication of the comparative growth is that the print media as well as the various streams of electronic media are expanding their readership/audience base. The rate of growth of electronic media especially the Internet is comparatively higher. There are two possible alternative explanations:

First, the audience of each of the media is growing without inter-media shifts of audience, may be the print media readers are also increasingly using electronic media. Second, a segment of the print media readership is shifting to other electronic media, but the loss is compensated by addition of new readers.

In the latter case, the focus is on the prospective newspaper readership from among the newly-educated populations. In either of the cases, there are no immediate threats to print media in countries like India. They have sufficient readers and potential readers to cater to. But the question that arises-Are they well prepared to respond to the changing tastes and demands of the increasing sophisticated readership? To understand how the print media is going to respond to the challenges of the electronic media, we need to see the issue from its historical perspective.

II Electronic Media Revolutions and Response of the Print Media

The print media has certain inherent advantages over the electronic media. Its strengths are: can be used as record, appropriate source for news behind the news, irrespective of time and place barriers, easy to effort and wider reach, longevity of the print advertisements, high degree of credibility among the masses. But still the new waves of electronic media viz. broadcast radio, television, satellite television, and new media have their impact on the print media. The print media has realized the consequences and responded to the challenges through strategic planning and action.

2.1 Impact of Broadcast Radio

The first challenge to the Indian print media came with the entry of broadcast radio, which created a great deal of anxiety as well as excitement among audience as well as advertisers. Publishers saw radio as a formidable competitor and introduced a number of innovations to survive. They revamped content and formats to broaden their newspapers' appeal among more diverse readers by introducing special

sections, departments, and packages targeted at specific groups like women, children etc. and more orderly packaging of information. Reporting style also changed partially in response to competition from radio. Rather than just telling the traditional 'who did what', newspapers began expanding stories to provide the 'why'. In fact, that gave birth to interpretative reporting.

2.2 Impact of Television

With the explosion of television--a more powerful electronic medium with no dependence on literacy or eruditeness of the audience-- most of the Indian press was paralyzed at least for some time, leading to sharp decline in newspaper circulation.

Television transmitters increased from 19 in 1980-81 to 528 in 1990-91, where as exposure to press fell from 47% in 1983 to 44 % in 1990. There was a sharp decline in newspaper circulation from 84.051 millions in 1986 to 63.880 millions in 1991. However, in 1992 the circulation again registered upward movement to reach 63.667 million copies.

The print media could check the declining trend in circulation by changes in content, design and technology. They made increasing use of computer technology, colour and graphics, to make the product colourful and lively to bring the newspaper as close to television as possible. The press also fought the force of homonization inherent in single channel TV by constantly segmenting its audience.

2.3 Impact of Satellite and Cable Television

The coming of satellite TV in 1992, and the subsequent spread of satellite-based cable TV in India was the third challenge to the press. There was instant popularity of satellite TV among literate urbanites, which forms a large chunk of press' loyal clientele, hinting the fall in newspaper readership. Responding to the challenges from satellite TV, print media also improved its product quality by using glazed newsprint, multi-coloured printing and improved editorial content.

Print publications also started advertising and promotional activities. As a result, despite the rapid proliferation of satellite television channels, there was steady growth in the number and circulation of newspapers and periodicals from 63.667 million copies in 1992 to 89.434 million in 1996 and to 126.964 million copies in Dec. 2000 to 142.05554 million copies in 2003.

2.4 Impact of New Media

The new media especially the World Wide Web and

electronic newspaper raised many concerns about the future of print media. Newspapers faced increased competition from the Internet for classified ads, especially for jobs, real estate, and cars, which have long been a key source of revenue. The significant 50 million Internet user base in India also have easy access to the online editions of newspapers, signaling a decline in the readership of the document format.

However, rather than acting as a threat, most of the new information and communication technologies contributed to streamlining newspaper operations. It is more satisfying to note that rather than being considered as a threat, the Internet is being used to the newspapers' advantage. For instance, the Internet allows newspapers to effectively compete with broadcast journalism in presenting breaking news online in a more timely manner than printing allows.

III Future Prospects of Print Media in India

Due to competition from television and the Internet, overall readership of newspapers is slowly declining in most developed countries. The 57th annual World Newspaper Congress, held in Istanbul in June 2004, reported circulation increases in only 35 of 208 countries studied. It is satisfying to note that the print media in developing countries like India and China have registered increase in their circulation.

The 47th Press in India Report for 2002-03 details newspaper circulation adding up to 142,005,543 copies daily, registering a 24 per cent increase over the previous reported calendar year 2001. Similarly, the 2004-5 report reveals that the total circulation of newspapers have increased to 15, 67, 19,209 copies as on March 31, 2005.

The perceived threats to the survival of the print media and all apprehensions about their future in India seems to be unfounded and short-lived as the print media is maintaining a steady upward movement in terms of number, circulation, and technological innovation. No form of electronic media, however modern it may be, is likely to replace the print media. Rather taking advantage of new technology, the print media could further consolidate its position.

With growing literacy in India, a few million newly literate people will emerge within the next few years. With increase in people's thirst for knowledge, more and more people will take to reading newspapers. To broaden their readership, newspaper organizations will focus more on

the rapidly expanding literate population in the rural areas, which will lead to rapid proliferation of the Indian language press, enhanced developmental reporting, and rural oriented growth of the newspapers.

Competition with electronic media will make newspapers more visual with an increased use of colour, photography and graphics. The Sunday editions will be multi-coloured, multi-section and much heavier. It will be enriched with colour pictures, telling designs and "speaking" headlines. As the electronic media widen their spot and event coverage, the newspapers will concentrate on the local readers, common issues affecting them.

Veteran media critic Paul Levinson once said, "When a new medium triumphs over an older medium in a given function that does not mean that the older medium will shrivel up and die. Rather the older medium may be pushed into a niche in which it can perform better than the new medium and where it will therefore survive, albeit as something different from what it was before the new medium arrived".

IV Conclusion

The study reveals that the print media has successfully converted all the threats posed by the new forms of electronic media into opportunities for its further growth and transformation. Responding to the changes in technology and changing tastes and demands of its readers, the print media sector has incorporated many innovations and continues to justify its relevance even in the face of new electronic media revolutions. These transformations have made the daily newspaper attractive and appealing as

a product. It is colourful, visual and carries something for every section of the society. It has become an essential component of the useful media mix for an average Indian citizen. Thanks to the technological innovations for it has intertwined the changes in the print media sector with the overall communication infrastructure, which makes the newspaper indispensable.

Thus, the revolutions in electronic media are not likely to pose a critical threat to the print media. Rather the print media will continue to serve its readers proactively and innovatively through constant improvement in its appearance, shape and contents. It will be more comprehensive, attractive, and tasteful.

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