

TOWARDS A PRODUCTIVE MEDIA

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There is no doubt now that the Sri Lankan media is in general an object of scorn to all discriminating viewers and readers. Even the so-called independent press has been brought to heel so often, in various ways, that though one welcomes intelligent editorials and some times illuminating features and news items, news coverage and analysis are never really seen as comprehensively credible. As for Lake House, though individual journalists sometimes try to transcend restrictions, the assumption is no longer questioned, let alone challenged, that news as it were is a matter of subjects regardless of what the predicate is. The activities of a or b or c have to be covered, regardless of whether those activities are of interest to the general public.

An extension of this, which makes even more clear the lack of professional discrimination in the media, is that whatever x or y or z says should be covered is treated as news, regardless of its objective value. Thus, the proliferation of news items about the son of so and so going on scholarship somewhere, or the daughter of so and so getting married. Such items, far from being of interest to the general public, are primarily of interest only to the friends and relations of the protagonist, who were probably aware of the news in question anyway. One is reminded therefore of Wittgenstein's ironic description of the man who bought a second copy of the morning paper to ensure that what the first said was true: in Sri Lanka an important function of the media it seems is to shore up the egos of those whose achievements are brought home to themselves only when they see them in print.

It could be argued however that, symptomatic though these might be of a strange concept of news, such items are not particularly significant in a newspaper since there are other items to inform us about happenings of general interest. Similarly, though several pages in the papers are full of a static rather than dynamic concept of news (that is, the noun regardless of the predicate, or the pronouncements of people as opposed to their actions), there could be an argu-

ment that there are other pages to convey more useful information. Unfortunately this is not the whole story, since in the last few years we have got used to sins of omission too, the suppression for instance of news that might be thought to reflect badly on someone or other in authority, the neglect or selective reporting with regard to important persons who do not conform.

At the same time, in comparison with the electronic media at any rate, the newspapers can certainly claim to provide some food at least for thought to the reader anxious to place events of importance in a wider context.

News, on television or on the radio, is more obviously simply a catalogue of formal releases concerning the self-projection not only of persons of importance, but even of those who have roused the often purely personal interest of the relevant bureaucrats. Thus an endless procession of passive statistics, never subjected to interpretation, and ceremonial occasions that are never presented as anything but wholly ideal. And going beyond this, even in the selection of material to entertain, and to edify, which is presumably a prime justification of state input into the media, one sees purely subjective decisions in operation. No publicly accountable attempts are apparent in any quarter to look first and foremost at the interests of the customer, the public that purchases licences and in a broader sense provides the state itself with its license.

The fact that inadequacies are most obvious in the state-controlled media, and that the whims, fancies and personality cults of particular political interests have for so long been assumed to be the *raison d'être* of the media, does not mean that all would necessarily be well if private ownership were allowed to obtain. At its simplest, as we have seen in other areas where private enterprise has been encouraged, one has to be careful of what might be termed the freedom of the wild ass.

Given how the concept of public accountability has been traduced in recent years by an increasingly self-regarding statist dispensation, one can understand the neglect of the wider public interest by a politicized bureaucracy that sees the state as an abstraction, without any fundamental link to the population it was

meant to serve; in that sense, what has occurred with regard to the media is no different to what has happened in so many areas where centralized state control has ignored or abused the individual citizen; but it must be recognized that the abuse of the media is that much more serious, and destructive, for the simple reason that it is one of the primary functions of the media to hold the state to account, to subject the actions of those who wield authority to scrutiny, to discriminate information without which analysis, assessment and adjustments as necessary cannot take place. Without a free media, those in authority are no better than the emperor without any clothes; and, in sitting like Addison's Achetopol attentive only to their own applause, they are likely to damage their own potential too, by lapsing into self-congratulatory lethargy.

One should be discriminating however in one's criticism. The fact that inadequacies are most obvious in the state-controlled media, and that the whims, fancies and personality cults of particular political interests have for so long been assumed to be the *raison d'être* of the media, does not mean that all would necessarily be well if private ownership were allowed to obtain. At its simplest, as we have seen in other areas where private enterprise has been encouraged, one has to be careful of what might be termed the freedom of the wild ass. And even if the media would probably not be the plaything of the robber barons who have made their presence felt elsewhere, the fact is that even in the days of pure private enterprise the media – or rather, the newspapers since the SLBC was always government run and

the Independent Television Network had only a brief spell of life because it became a Government Owned Business Undertaking – also had its weaknesses.

The most obvious weakness, that which led indeed to the various infamous Press Bills of successive SLFP led

governments, was its partisan approach, which made it so clearly out of step with the country at large on a number of occasions. This, it should be added, applied most obviously to Lake House, and sprang from the symbiotic relationship between the Wijewardene family and the United National Party. That in

saddest consequence of this was an internal censorship, born of extreme caution, that is perhaps more dire than anything an outside political influence can impose. One can hardly blame the poor journalists involved, given the penalties in a society as small as ours of falling foul of those in charge, the loss

absence, because it is not a priority, of professional training or development on a coherent basis. Though there are various courses in journalism, these take the form of theory; correspondingly, on the job training does not involve the seminars and discussions and open sessions of no holds barred assessment and criticism that would prove most fruitful. When with this is combined the fact that writing skills are not taught in any specialized way either at school or at university, it is clear that the budding journalist has a number of barriers to cross; while the working journalist cannot claim to have developed any professional skills that would enhance his or her job prospects in the wider market. The result is that, in a society in which job opportunities are in any case limited, the temptation not to run risks but to conform to the demands of those at the top is almost irresistible.

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itself however need not have mattered. What was unfortunate was that extremism on either side should have led to such bitterness. On the one hand there was the internal censoring, as described by Tarzie Vittachi for instance in the account of how he was exiled to London when he published a story refuting allegations the UNP had made about Mr. Bandaranaike (See *New Lankan Review*, Vol. 4, 1986, p, 26); on the other hand there was the SLFP, and the left, reacting crudely and, as it has proved, self-destructively, by taking over one newspaper group and sealing another and thus showing the way (and implicitly providing justification) for a much cleverer and more ruthless taskmaster.

Absence of Independence

But apart from the polarization, which might be attributed to the particular personalities involved, there were also other weaknesses that might have deeper roots, and therefore require more careful consideration if we are to do better in the future. Most notably, there seems in our society to be an absence of a tradition of, not merely independent journalism, but independence in general. There were very few journalists, at the height even of what now seem relatively palmy days of freedom, who were

of a job, the paucity of other opportunities; but the result is that the testing of freedom to its limits, an obligation on all but a particular responsibility of the fourth estate, is rarely if ever exercised.

Now there may be sociologists who would claim, following Michael Roberts' assertion of a Aśokan paradigm, that such fearful obsequiousness is endemic in our society. On the contrary, it seems to me a hangover from colonial days, when authority (as opposed for instance to the relatively democratic dispensation, most recently described by Ranjini Obeyesekere in her translation of the 13th century, *Saddharma Ratnavaliya*) was absolute, because of the lack of contact between rulers and those who were ruled. The rigid mutually alienating language based class structure that arose then, involving mediators lacking in self confidence because without roots in either sector, emphasized a respect for authority as something beyond challenge or comprehension. Equally importantly, colonialism instituted a system where respectable occupations were the prerogative of the state, a system that has been reinforced by the post-colonial political dispensation with its increasing arrogation of all meaningful major activ-

Social Input

At the same time however it should be recognized that, though the reduction of authoritarian controls on the media must be relaxed, and this will most readily be accomplished by a management structure that encourages pluralism, still there remains a case for not only expecting but also encouraging some sort of special input from the media. For this whether or not private sector style management is accepted as the desired norm, there will be a need for clearly articulated state guidelines, and at least some form of input, as occurs with the Public Broadcasting System in the United States. What should be avoided however is the absurdity that has clogged up so many areas in the country, that achieving social goals necessarily requires statist socialism. On the contrary, the latter more often than not, especially when a readily manipulable media lies to hand, leads only to statist rather than to social goals, with a state that has been hijacked by particular interests or even individuals. For the achievement of publicly beneficial goals on the other hand, discrimination is essential, and hence choice; prescriptions by the state perhaps, and subsidies to help in their achievement, but all this in the context of freedom and accountability.

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willing to insist on their professional integrity. There were few people like Tarzie who were prepared to cock a snook at those in authority over them; and even those who were so prepared found in time that, without support from their bosses and often abandoned by their colleagues, they had to give in. The

ity to the centre. The result has been a devaluation of individuality; with dire consequences for all initiative, but most particularly in the media, where professional responsibility is set at naught in comparison with conformity.

Connected with this of course is the

In respect of the media, how can this be achieved? Clearly it makes sense to

look for guidelines from other countries, where the media has contributed to public awareness and discrimination. In this respect, as far as a state owned media is concerned, the BBC certainly has a reputation for even handed excellence, whatever the government in power in Britain. Of course it will be, and has been argued that a developing country needs more restrictions, because the risks of instability are greater. This however is a nonsense, for practical experience itself has made clear that instability develops precisely in proportion to the absence of freedom. Indeed that restriction on a free media are almost always counter-productive is apparent from the fact that

sure proper implementation and a socially constructive approach. Here again we suffer in particular in this country from what might be termed the passive concept of the The Board; a seat on a Board, but also the various Advisory Councils the BBC employs to fulfil its social role, meet regularly and actively, in terms of a keenly felt obligation to make active inputs into the system.

Such a sense of social obligation should not only be expected, but indeed demanded in the case of a publicly financed institution. In the private sector on the other hand, while social ideals should be encouraged, it would be a mistake to impose them according to

taught, as well as writing skills, involving not only the use of language but also the organization of thoughts and arguments. This of course need not be the preserve of training courses for journalists alone – clearly, if the management skills essential for a developing country are ever to be readily found, we need to rehaul our educational system too, so that from early on it encourages discussion and doubt and the awareness that there are two sides to a question, instead of being confined to the note-taking and rote-learning that is so restrictive at present.

That however is a wider issue than cannot-be considered in detail here. With regard to the media itself, another measure that the state can usefully take to develop the range of discriminating journalists is to increase the level of choice in the system. The establishment of provincial newspapers is surely something that ought to go hand in hand with devolution. State subsidies could usefully be used to nurture regional initiatives, that would encourage the development of excellence through competition. Apart from increasing public awareness of various areas of activity that might otherwise be comparatively neglected, and hence encouraging accountability as to what might otherwise pass without much scrutiny, a regional media network would allow journalists much more mobility and, by increasing job opportunities, allow for enhanced independence and professional development.

In sum, what is needed is a cohesive media policy on the part of the state that provides guidance and assistance in pursuit of clear social goals. This can be achieved only with the recognition that the media can only be a means, not a goal. The contrary view leads to state control of the media, which is then transformed into a self-regarding monstrosity, totally unproductive because it becomes in effect redundant. A state that relies for information only on what it has itself fed in is as fatuous as Wittgenstein's caricature; while the assumption that the population at large credits such information flies in the face of all historical evidence. The result is that what should be a touchstone, and a tool for development, is transformed into a blind-fold. ■

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regimes that take over the media in order to disseminate propaganda favourable to themselves inevitably end up trying to restrict the free exercise of the franchise; quite simply, people are not that easy to fool – it is generally only the subjects of adulation in a media they control who believe what they read or see, and those who manipulate the media on their behalf do them a distinct disservice in keeping them away from the reality and restricting them instead only to their own applause.

Restrictions then, on the free dissemination of information and on free comment, should be minimal. However that there might be emergencies when such restrictions are desirable must be granted; and the BBC itself expressly recognized this in its charter. The distinction between that, and the censorship that is so readily applied in many other instances however, is that in regard to the BBC it must be done openly, with reasons adduced that are subject to public scrutiny. The nonsensical situation that permitted J. R. Jayawardene to prevent one of the most distinguished of living Sri Lankans, Prof. Sarchandra, from even being allowed into the SLBC, simply through a telephone call to its then Chairman, would be unthinkable in Britain.

The BBC Charter then would provide a model for preventing abuse; but what is essential too is the personnel to en-

sure any particular preconceptions, since that would be a restriction on the freedom that would best allow a creative media to flourish. Of course the abuse of freedom needs to be prevented, by the establishment of a Press Council, and a Code, that would inhibit false and malicious reporting, and ensure the publication of corrections and responses, and the maintenance of balance. Apart from that however the most positive contribution the state could make is the development of training facilities for journalists, so as to encourage an awareness of social concerns, and the ability to raise issues and suggest modes of progress through skilled reporting and coherent discussion. Certainly there seems a crying need at present to clarify the dictum that facts are sacred and comment is free, which is used at present to justify the most abject nonsense. Aspiring journalists, who have now only the pitiful apologies for facts and comments that much of the media now presents, will have to learn that what is stated in a press release is not necessarily a fact, and that the facts presented to the public as news need to be investigated and checked and placed in a context that has also been studied; equally, they should learn that comment presented in print should be intelligent and coherent, not merely a subjective response, but based on thoughtful analysis.

Discrimination therefore should be