Media as a Catalyst for Higher Education

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Abstract

Media has long been considered as the 'fourth' basic human need after food, shelter and clothes. It has become such an integral part of our individual, social and public life that we can't even think of a life without it at all. This paper endeavours to examine how we can utilize the enormous reach of media for delivering education to the masses cutting across any discrimination. This is because the authors of this paper believe that there is an unimaginably high potential for effectively carrying out such a campaign for the greater benefit of the society in the end by using media as a delivery mechanism for education. We would restrict our discussions only to the field of higher education in this paper. There is lot of potential here because today our country's population is served by many thousands of newspapers, periodicals, hundreds of TV / Radio news and entertainment channels 24 hours a day. Only thing is that we just need to tap these resources properly for delivering the goods to the masses who matter in the ultimate analysis. Otherwise how do we justify accumulation of scientific knowledge in research laboratories and institutions because if they can't be applied for human welfare they do not have any value at all. And it is the media which do possess the potential for doing so in the real sense of the term.

Keywords : Magic multiplier, Psychological warfare, Narrowcasting, Community Radio, Media literacy, Virtual classrooms

1.   Introduction :

"The Press is the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man, and improving him as a rational, moral and social being," Thomas Jefferson, former President of the USA.

"Communication is not only a system of information, but also an integral part of education and development" – Sean MacBride, *One World : Many Voices*.

These two statements above is reflective of the immense importance of communication as an integral tool for spreading and disseminating education amongst the masses to the largest possible extent in any society across the world.

At this point it needs to be mentioned that in today's era the buzz word is "information is power". This is because only when a person acquires information through any formal or informal mode of communication he or she becomes enlightened and thereby is expected to become empowered to tackle the challenges thrown up by life's journey ahead.

Acquiring knowledge is nothing but acquiring various findings, wisdom which are results of long years of research into both pure and applied aspects of things in our day-to-day life. And after processing the same one has to apply it in real life situation for living a scientific and logical standard of life.

In this world, there is hardly any dearth of knowledge in almost each and every field of our life. It is because the institutions of higher learning, dedicated research institutions in so many fields of life (whether it is pure sciences, medical sciences, engineering and technology or social sciences or humanities) are constantly carrying out path-breaking research with results which possess the potential to bring about far-reaching positive changes in the life of mankind.

For example, we have agriculture universities, veterinary colleges, research institutions into various diseases, institutions dedicated to producing medicines, vaccines for different life-threatening diseases etc. both within and outside the country. And they do arrive at results which are highly positive and potentially beneficial if they can be applied to the welfare of the masses.

Herein lies the question – how to disseminate these knowledge base to the masses.

And at this point the significance of mass communication and media comes to the fore.

2.   Why mass media :

Mass media is an 'informal university' where each and every issue of the world can be discussed and in which the target audiences themselves can participate by way of letters to editor, articles, write ups published, discussion forums etc.

Further, media is also termed as the 'leader of the society'. So because the media editors, particularly the print media editorial staff enjoy the privilege of dealing with public issues of all kinds day in and day out for many long years. This makes them experienced enough to be able to properly analyze all such issues and offer both sides of it to the public – positive and negative (if any). After this, it is up to the masses to become empowered and to take one side of the issues and mobilize public opinion if required.

3.   Relationship between media and masses :

In an ideal condition the relationship between the masses or the readers and the media should be highly cordial, constructive, complementary and beneficial. Media should be able to inculcate some good habits among the readers by way of its contents including news and opinions. This is because the influence of media among the people is immense and beyond our imagination which had even moved Napeoleone to remark " A pen is mightier than a sword.".

On the other hand the readership should also be empowered, alert and conscious of its rights, duties, responsibilities so that whenever the media tends to falter in its proper duties it must be reminded of its real goals. Without such a kind of cordial and effective relationship the masses would be deprived of good practices of life because of media's failure to carry out its duties properly.

We have already mentioned that media is an informal university. It is such an educational institution where one does not need any formal qualification to gain entry and also to enjoy its contents (except of course for the print media obviously) and become a 'thinking person'. Media is an 'open source' knowledge database benefits from which can be shared by anyone who cares to do so without any hassle. Only condition is that it should be available at the place of that person's living – whether it is print media or electronic media or today's highly popular social media.

4.   Media for higher education :

From the above discussions we are confident that media possesses the potential for enlightening and empowering the masses to the optimum possible extent and thereby converting them to 'educated persons' in the realistic sense of the term.

It is an irony that in our country even though the literacy rate is 75 % today (India Census 2011), the official definition of a literate person means 'someone who can just sign his or her name, nothing more'. So in reality, it is a matter of one's imagination about what percentage of the 120 crore population of the country is actually literate in the proper sense of the term.

But, if we are committed to the cause of an all-round development of the country, we must promote an all-inclusive growth pattern by involving every person of the society – whether literate or illiterate.

Now, herein comes the big challenge of reaching out to those people at the lower strata of the society who are leading a life without the benefit of formal education in their life.

5.   Formal higher education fails to deliver :

At this level let us take up three important issues for discussion.

First of all – the average percentage of eligible people of the entire Indian population going for higher education is merely 13 %, nothing more. However, according to UNICEF standards this should be at least 20 % for an all-round development of a country like that of ours. This pushes us to the challenging uphill task of enhancing this percentage to at least 20 % from the current one.

Secondly, 372 out of a total of 640 districts in the country have been declared as 'educationally backward districts' (EBDs) by University Grants Commission (UGC) – the highest decision-making and regulatory body of general higher education in India. This is according to a statistical data floated in UGC's website in the early quarter of 2010. This means that about 60 % of the country's districts are EBDs even in the seventh decade of Independence today.

Thirdly, we all know that (at least those in the higher education business) that the Union Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) has been inspired by the National Knowledge Commission's proposition that there is scope for at least 1,500 universities in the country. And already plans have been afoot for setting up 16 more universities under the MHRD and also an equal number of 'world class universities' in the country.

However, the biggest irony of the entire exercise is that most of the institutions of higher education in the country including science and technology, medical, humanities and social sciences are continuing to run with an average of about 30 % non-availability of teaching faculty. Even otherwise when a recruitment process is carried out for selecting teaching faculty members in any university it is an usual fact that just about 60 % of the posts are filled up while for the rest there is either no suitable candidate or there is no applicant at all.

And all these are happening even as the country is about to complete seven long decades of freedom from a foreign colonial power with an established system of governance of our own.

Under these circumstances, achieving the target of enhancing our actual literacy rate as well as a meaningful learning and 'empowering' experience for the masses would prove to be too tall an order to be successful in the near and distant future.

This is why mass media must be roped in for helping the country in achieving this target so that people became literate, knowledgeable and empowered in the end and enhance their living standard.

While attempting to achieve this, how do we go about our business.

We have mentioned above that there is hardly any dearth of knowledge base with potential for the benefit of the masses. Only thing is that they need to be disseminated to the masses properly in a language they do understand conveniently from the high profile scientific research-oriented language versions available in the laboratories and research institutions.

There can be two distinct aspects of this issue.

First of all, the researchers, knowledgeable persons engaged in such works may not be that media savvy and thereby find it difficult to make the people aware of those findings.

Secondly, even though they may be interested in doing so they may not possess the requisite skills and expertise to do it for the benefit of the masses at large.

At this moment of crisis, it is the media which must step in to take up the challenge to disseminate those knowledge data to the masses in a language they did understand properly and transform them into 'empowered human beings' in the end. And there is no parallel to media in this regard both from the point of view of reach to the largest and deepest strata of the society and also the magical power to influence the minds of human beings to a great extent.

Thus, the relationship between media and education – whether it is at the level of higher or lower education – is highly constructive and significant. Both of them must complement each other in terms of facilitating the best benefits to the masses – the end users of all knowledge base of the world.

And, if all these knowledge base of the world's best institutions and research establishments do not deliver the goods to the masses in the ultimate analysis, what is the use of having such knowledge at all.

We have also said that 'information is power'. All these kinds of information must be made known to the people so that they can derive benefits from them in any which way they might like to do so.

6. Power of media :

 There have been numerous debates about the power of media to influence the masses and the society at large in the final analysis. However, it will suffice to give a few simple examples about the power of media in the form of three 'information revolutions' repeated over several centuries apart.

First of all – it was in the middle ages in Europe when the pioneer Johannes Gutenberg invented the first ever principle of printing press without even being remotely aware of the far-reaching revolutionary implications this milestone event was going to have on humankind. This epoch-making event paved the way for making religious epics as well as all other books available to the masses making them free from the exclusive clutches of the clergy and the aristocrats.

As this event had made knowledge sources much more freely available in more numbers, generations of masses became literate and thus empowered, ultimately leading to the growth of the Renaissance movement driven by Martin Luther King and we all know the rest of the things.

Secondly, during the 1960s and 1970s when socialist India's developmental programmes were running at top priority it was the media led by – All India Radio (AIR) which took the lead in mounting a publicity campaign of all types of developmental messages – from family planning to high-yielding variety of seeds, vaccination among others. Things went to such an extent that some of the rice or wheat varieties widely

came to be known as 'Radio Rice' or 'Radio Wheat' as it was AIR which had popularized them among the masses. It was AIR because there was presence of hardly any other media at all except print media to a lesser extent.

In fact, several months ago, Mr Verghese Kurien, father figure of India's Green Revolution had written an article in *The Hindu* recalling the way AIR and the print media dedicated their airtime and space to promoting the government's efforts in all fields of development.

Further, in the 20th century the pros and cons of this information revolution has become much more visible in each and every field of life. Today, right from wars to our personal life everything depends upon 'information' which is transformed into knowledge by the masses after being delivered by the media at their doorsteps.

And finally we all know about the Jasmine Revolution or what the social media has achieved in the Far-East Asian region in mobilizing the public against autocratic regimes from Egypt to Libiya.

Now the question is how can we transform this enormous power of media – whether mass media or social media – into an effective tool of delivering education to the masses, the kind of education which is relevant, useful and meaningful so that people can become 'empowered' in the real sense of the term.

7. Agenda-setting :

We all know about the agenda-setting duty of media. That is – setting the priority of various issues in front of the public so that people can take their pick of the choices available. At this point media has to play a crucial and highly responsible role. This is because the selection and choice of the agenda for the public by the media would have far-reaching implications for the future.

Also, because this activity will mean a lot of differences and decide the future of the society or the nation.

It may be of interest to the esteemed delegates here to know that media has been utilized by established leaders and societies throughout the ages for propagating various issues and ideals cutting across the world from the western developed countries to Asian developing nations.

In our country's context it was Mahatma Gandhi who could envision media's enormous powers to reach the masses way back in 1948 when he said, "broadcasting is power". In his lifetime, during his freedom struggle movements, Gandhiji had utilized media to the optimum possible extent for getting across his ideas of Hind Swaraj as well as all other socially-relevant issues to the masses. Similarly, other stalwarts including Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and later Bal Gangadhar Tilak also utilized media for extending socially-relevant messages to the masses.

We all know about how Hitler used or rather misused radio and newspapers for propagating his ideas of the Third Reich and Nazi ideals.

In Japan, the government under the Emperor's rule produced many films for the sole purpose of expanding their ideals to the citizens of the country and also others whoever mattered.

In the former USSR during its initial formative years, Stalin also used films as a powerful and effective means for getting across the Communist ideals to the people. Radio was also used to a big extent by the Stalin regime for the same purpose.

Columnist Laura Barnett of *The Guardian* Group of Newspapers in a write up in *The Hindu* (May 18, 2011, Op-Ed page) informs the readers about several such programmes from different parties. The British government did it against the Nazi establishment, the Japanese government did it through Radio Tokyo in English to the US troops during the World War II with the aim of lowering troops' morale while fighting against a powerful enemy. The American Forces Vietnam Network (AFVN) carried out similar propaganda against the Vietnamese during the US-Vietnam war.

Not to be left behind, the United Nations Organization (UNO) also established the United Nations Radio with an aim to promote peace and security in 1946 which is operational even now.

Now, the end point is that at a time when we can see people and institutions taking positive advantage of publicity by the mass media why don't we also try to do it and put up an all out effort to utilize it for educational purposes.

It is needless to reiterate here again for the esteemed delegates that media is an integral part of any society in which it is established and it is also the mirror of that society.

If a person would like to study anything about any society, he or she should be able to gather all necessary information just by going through the media of that society or country.

The point is – why don't we or can't we utilize the enormous power of media for positive developments in our society. This includes using it as an able and effective media for delivering education to the masses at all levels of our society.

Mass media with its exhaustive reach and understanding of all social issues should be encouraged to be applied for deriving benefits for the masses so that the society can benefit from its analysis of public issues and thereby showing the masses the right path to growth and development. Media needs to show both the pros and cons of any issue so that the masses can pick up the right kind of path for themselves.

At this point a serious concern may arise about the way the media has been performing its duties and discharging its responsibilities as it has become highly business-oriented in today's era. However, even in the world of business and commercial activities there are certain ethical guidelines and practices which need to be adhered to strictly so that peoples' faith and reliance on them is not hurt.

Here again, this author would like to fix the responsibility halfway on both the parties concerned and involved – media on one hand and the readership or audiences on the other. Media because it has failed to inculcate the tastes of a good life among the audiences. Audience because this has been happening only for their lack of interest and ignorance.

8.   Public Service Broadcasting :

This is one kind of media service through radio or television which is aimed at expanding public welfare by broadcasting basically meaningful and educational contents to the target audiences. This is in sharp contrast to the commercial broadcasting service aimed at earning revenue at any cost.

While the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) of the United Kingdom is a classic example in hand the All India Radio is to a big extent an example of this kind of service.

Most you would definitely be familiar with the educational broadcasts of AIR since the early days which continue even today benefitting a vast majority of the masses in the country.

Further, radio is truly a medium of the masses which is very dear to the people and thereby greatly influencing them in the ultimate analysis.

Hence this mode of radio operation also provides us with a great opportunity for delivering educational content to the masses with good receptivity.

Let me cite an example from Sri Lanka. About three decades ago the Sri Lankan government had decided to build a mega dam on the river Mahaweli in that country which had uprooted lakhs of people from their original place of residence to a new area subjecting them to lot of miseries. During one of those days A Swedish national happened to be there and seeing the peoples' misery a flash of hope came across to the gentlemen's mind. He envisaged the idea of establishing a short range community radio for broadcasting only those programmes basically aimed at educating those people on 'forced migration'.

And with help from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) the famous Mahaweli Community Radio (MCR) was set up which had been providing yeoman's service to the immediate community for whose service and benefits it was set up. Hence this CR is still looked up to as a model Community Radio station for public service and educational purposes by others concerned with such an aim and objective.

Even the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) had launched a series of short range radio stations under the title called Gyan Vani Radio service for spreading educational contents to the largest possible number of people or its target audiences across the country. The initial plan was to set up 100 such stations to be expanded to much more in future.

9.   From broadcasting to narrowcasting :

In the field of mass communication also things are changing from broadcasting to narrowcasting. In simple terms this means the media that is trying to cater to a comparatively smaller portion of audience or readership rather than a huge and unmanageable number.

There are two distinct major benefits of this transition.

First of all - a small population is more manageable and convenient to take care of rather than a bigger crowd.

Secondly - if the population is quite small enough the representatives of the community itself can run the media outlet on their own not requiring to depend upon someone from outside, the community and advertisement revenues for running the media.

The question arises what is the connection of these two aspects towards utilizing media for expanding higher education in the country. There indeed is a distinct connection.

This smaller media can be termed as 'community media' which are 'by the people, for the people and of the people'.

Thus, the community on its own can decide what sort of education and knowledge base they would like to delve into, in what pace and level etc. all crucial aspects of the business of education.

The concept of community media led mainly by Community Radio stations is the in-thing nowadays in developing nations. The example of Nepal in this regard is a major case in point. There – the CR movement has been playing a crucial role in spreading basic education in an informal manner to the people in all the remote corners of the country in a highly successful way.

Further, we all know about the prolonged crisis period following the killing of the Nepal royal family members including the king and enthroning of the new king when all possible modes of communication were blocked by the Royalty. During this period the onus fell upon the CR stations for keeping the people informed both inside and outside the country about the happenings.

10. Virtual classrooms :

The IITs consortium of the country has developed a huge database of audio-visual virtual interactive classes under a special scheme called NPTEL for delivering teaching modules on all the engineering subjects and disciplines so that anyone interested can take a positive advantage of this database. This has been made free for interested engineering colleges of the country.

This is also nothing but the mass media in the service of education to the masses. The best advantage is that these are freely and openly available from the net without having to pay any fees or the minimum or a token fees mostly payable by the colleges or institutions subscribing to them in bulk.

Being the Fourth pillar of any democratic society or nation at large, masses have high expectations and demands from the media which is so near and dear to their life. The media must try its best to live up to these expectations under any circumstances so that the masses can not be hoodwinked by unscrupulous evil forces.

Besides, the Consortium of Educational Communication (CEC) – a unit of University Grants Commission (UGC) has already providing this service for so many years now.

11. Media literacy :

In addition to all the above discussions, there is yet another aspect to the relationship between media and education. That is – media literacy.

This is somewhat of a new concept catching up in our country nowadays which implies the literacy or ability of a person to understand and realize the inner gameplan and intricacies behind the scenes in broadcasting and publication of various types of media contents. This is because in the face of numerous flooding of contents or messages from the umpteen number of media outlets in our society there has arisen a very serious need for educating the masses on the use of media. And make a person understand how to use the same for our benefit by filtering out the unwanted or undesirable elements in it.

This is a great and crucial responsibility bestowed upon the mass media by the society over the years for which it must live up to the expectations of the people.

In other words it is the media which has to empower the masses in two different directions.

First – the masses have to be made literate about the ground realities in life by making them process the information bombarded upon them by the media day in and day out.

Secondly, media must also teach the people not to take all the information available through the media at their face value and always accept them by going through their own mental gate-keeping process once again not depending upon the rounds already carried out by the media as an in-house exercise.

12. **Conclusion :**

These discussions above have firmly established the fact that media possess a great potential for being utilized as an educational medium for the masses in any country. The most important advantage with it is its informal nature, vast reach of each and every strata of the society at any given point of time, enormous amount of space both in terms of airtime and paper space, debates and discussions on virtually any issue on the earth which are of significance to the masses and the world as a whole. Though there have been some amount of efforts in trying to utilize media as an alternative delivery mechanism of education for the masses it is yet to be taken that seriously by the parties concerned – those engaged in pedagogy and the media on the other hand. However, it is high time we did take up real efforts if we wanted to utilize it for educational purposes. From our side we are firmly convinced that if we need to achieve the target of expanding higher education to at least 20 % of the eligible population by the end of the XIIth Five Year Plan, this can be one of the highly feasible alternative delivery mechanisms for educational purposes.

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