

## Diversity and Plurality in Media Consumerism: An Explorative Study

**Bheemaiah Krishnan Ravi**

Professor & Chairman, Department of Communication,  
Bangalore University, Bangalore, Karnataka,  
INDIA.

[bkravibu@gmail.com](mailto:bkravibu@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*Consumerism as a practice about media acceptance is relatively a new concept for the Indian subcontinent. Before commercialisation and globalisation set in, the target audience of media were termed as honourable readers, listeners or viewers. Soon, due to the dictates of market forces on content and reach of media, the exposed community of media were termed as media consumers. For a multi-lingual, cultural and complex society such as that of India, plurality in media needs measurement in real sense. The Democratic India with its thriving media demands for social re-engineering. Issues of social hierarchy and social ills have to be addressed and media has a crucial role in it. Priority issues of change in social thinking, addressing dignity of labour and providing social justice should be on agenda about the functioning of media which should be the reflection of society. But a conflict of today's media in India that- 'Should media give what people want?' or, 'Should it also give what is good for the people?' has to be addressed. Consistent irrational content in every media has often mislead large sections of society members towards digress and futility. The marginalised groups are taken for a ride. In a diverse Indian society, fantasy concepts of cinema are projected as realities on TV among the intimate, home communities. Reaching a dark auditorium with heterogeneous audience is different from reaching a drawing room of a small family. There is no meaning in media sowing blind beliefs by keeping aside scientific temperament. Indian society has not stretched to media for betterment, nor has it been allowing the change-makers to stretch. With such societal limitations to consume media, there is need for its sensitisation and disciplining for positive usage of media. In this background, the study adopted critical approach as methodology under theoretical studies about the role of the decision making individuals and sections of society to work in tandem with media communicating for change towards better consumerism. This study checked for penetration of the media messages in a complex societal situation. It examined the aspects of plurality in the diverse functioning of media in terms of its economic priorities, reach, access and utility. The study is significant as it helps understand the fruitfulness of the communication process in the era of information pollution, explosion and globalisation. Here, the methodology adopted is of theoretical type with Critical Studies in its approach.*

**Keywords:** Plurality, scientific temperament, sensitisation, globalisation, consumer behaviour

### INTRODUCTION

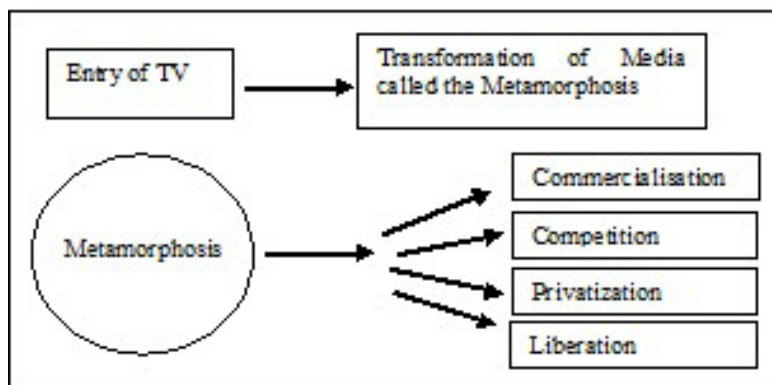
While the current trends and issues point to hectic competition among different media, the history of Indian media during its early growth and development was completely unsystematic with rampant growth. In the absence of communication policy, such a growth gave rise to a lot of negative developments in the media scene of India. Before Indian Independence, the role of media in reaching the opinion leaders and later moulding the public opinion for freedom struggle is remarkable. But the mega force of media in Independent

India amounted to imposition of the activity on a dark society resulting in an unsystematic growth of media. When we consider the basic approach of media functioning in India, it is observed that for most decades after independence, Indian information mechanism was based on the reliability of human resource. Even as mass media grew, it was the opinion leaders who passed the information to the grassroots that was disseminated by various media. Even film Censorship, which was only the agenda of the British in pre-independence times for their obvious reasons, was actually redundant after independence of India. Yet, the Board of Censors was constituted by Indian Government. So, none among the decision makers of the nation visualised the path of growth of media.

The Indian Constitution under its Article 19(1)a, bestowed to the citizens of India, the right to freedom of speech and expression. Hence, the Press functioning derived under it and practiced also gathered the sanctioned sanctity of sincerely participating in the Democratic process. Media after such sanctity was contributing to culture and societal development with reverence. However, all through those times, the electronic media, first the radio and later the TV, was under complete control of the government. There was no resistance about the control even as it was against the spirit of the constitution. However then, the sanctity of media including the sanctity of media houses, the studio and machinery was revered upon. Media was seen as a respectful service. In fact, the Press called a fourth estate was a conscientious exercise.

The entry of TV had raised lot of questions about the future of Print, Radio and Cinema. The entry was quite slow however soon with the parallel phenomenon of LPG, enormous drastic changes were brought about in the functioning, content and reach of media. The cognate media were forced to compete with TV. It was TV which brought about a lot of technical and qualitative changes in the functioning of every other coexisting media. Transformation, competition, commercialisation, privatization and finally the liberation of media on its own made it to what is called as the Metamorphosis of Media.

Diagram 1: Concept of Metamorphosis of Media



Soon after the ushering in of globalisation, the market forces converted media into a product and a commodity. While the TV media is gripped by the transnational media whose interests are purely business with any nation, the print media is slowly getting acceptance of the stretch of percentage of FDI among the nations. In today's phrase, marketability of media is only of the reach of the copy of print or the receiver sets and not of the registration of the message through the media contents. It is observable that today's editorial page of a daily newspaper is not received as sacred or with reverence as before. With such media today, even the receivers of media are being dubbed as consumers.

## **Consumer of Media**

The study of consumers of media has three pronged impact – the social impact, economic impact and political impact. While no media can survive without receivers in the form readers, viewers and listeners, it is equally important that there was an aesthetic approach in the functioning of media. Earlier, with the growth of media, the sentimental professionals had a cultural and social binding of the community. They use to address the reach, i.e., the receivers respectfully. Because of its capability of communicating, media was also respected in reciprocation. Media has proven track record as a very important instrument which can quicken the process of development.

Under these circumstances though the meagre economical viability, a lot of journalists and professionals work very hard for a meagre sum to develop media in India. They also very well knew that the receivers of media are their backbone, economically and morally to survive in the field. They also were committed to the society and used to discharge their duties sincerely and responsibly. The transformation of media and its liberation led to the expansion, competition and commercialisation which resulted in considering media as a commodity and the receivers as consumers, however putting the social commitment in the back seat.

It became a one-way, lopsided communication process where whatever media gave should be accepted by the people. On one hand, the community or society are the owners of the media and the patrons of media while on the other hand the media is trying to impose what it feels to the tip of the nose. Within the context of media there are very few media organisations in India which bear direct relevance with the society, not being participative in its welfare. Even investments towards media are exploited for political purposes. People pay for cables. It is not free distribution of signals. Media considers people as media consumers, taking a pay while propagating vested ideologies, own philosophy. Even in Print Media paid news, advertorials and sponsorships have defocused the essence of editorial functioning. This way, the safety of a media consumer is hijacked.

## **Indian Media: Trends and Issues**

Today's Indian media growth records an average CAGR of 10.1 percent. A glance at the Print Media in India shows that the country has the second largest newspaper market in the world after China. While globally the print industry is on a decline, the Indian print media is showing steady growth during 2010-11. The trends in the print media industry show that it was estimated to be INR 178.7 billion in 2010 showing a growth of 10.7 percent over 2009 numbers. It should be noted that the magazines continue to suffer from lack of measurement tools. Newsprint prices are a major concern for the industry and players will need to guard themselves against major price fluctuations. Newspaper publishers are expected to continue to increase their presence in the online format. However, print is likely to show steady growth for the next five years. New media is yet to pose a threat to print industry.

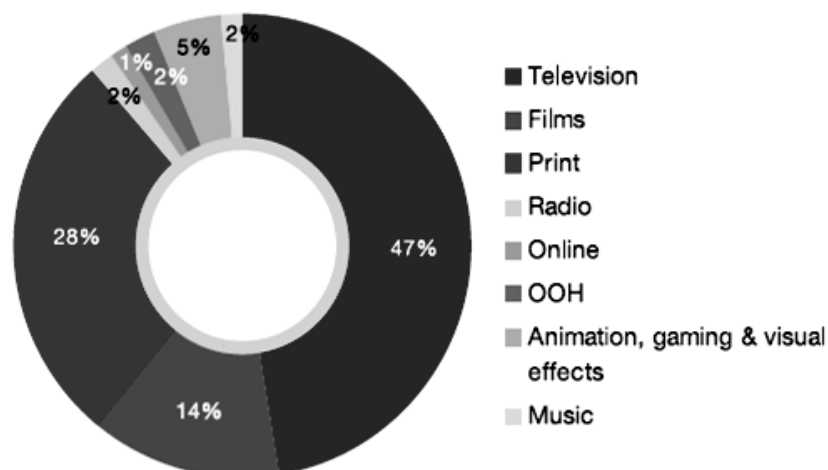
The trends and issues in the electronic media include the advertising revenue growth that propels the television industry and broadcasters are rebranding themselves to establish greater connect with younger audiences. While the issues include full-fledged digitisation being still a distant dream for stakeholders, there is high cost of content production. There is need to improve measurement tools for measuring viewership.

In the film industry, multiplexes look at alternate sources of revenue. Single-screen theatres showed poor performance and many of them shut shop. Even small-budget films with innovative content take on big-budget films and social networks are becoming a key to film marketing. However among the bugging issues of film industry are - shortage of

infrastructure, lack of quality content, lack of new releases during the cricket season, cannibalisation of theatrical revenues and last but not least being the issue of piracy. Another significant dimension of Indian Cinema is the 3D cinema driving the growth of digital screens in the country.

As a whole, different media are having their stakes and every other media seems to be playing a major role on its own showing diversity in structure and composition.

Diagram 2: Segment-wise break-up of Indian Media industry (2010)



Source: PwC Analysis and Industry Estimates-2011

The scientific report by the PwC Outlook India-2011 observes about the power of media and entertainment industry in India as follows –

“..... While India and China were not critically impacted by the downturn in 2008 and 2009, they demonstrated one of the highest growth rates in 2010 and continued to outperform their global peers. Consumer spending grew 2.2% while E&M spending as a whole grew at 4.6% in 2010. India recorded one of the highest growths in the world growing at 11.2% in 2010. ....”

The above observation is a very encouraging report for the Indian Media industry. However the tendency of monopoly market slant by the electronic media as against many other diversified media for a diverse society like India is a matter of concern as it cannot cater to the needs of large rural masses with needy intended messages. Though the media seems to cater to a broad range of information categories from agriculture through industry upto politics, the limitation to media diversity is evident from the following concern in the analysis of the PwC report further as follows:-

“.....The E&M industry continues to be dominated by TV, print and film. Significant revenues continue to be from the non-digital segment though there continues to be good growth in digital spending too. Infrastructure is the biggest challenge in the growth of digital spends.....”

With very less percentage of people being media literates in India, there is an increased promiscuity of an illicit relationship between the market forces and media. The facet of media is taking a u-turn due to the changed management strategies, as well as ever-changing technology while the earlier principles of media have been forgotten. This aspect is fast encroaching on the plurality of media behaviour in the nation.

Table 1: Projected growth of the Indian E &amp; M industry in 2010-15

INR billion	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	CAGR
Television	306.5	353.0	404.0	465.0	532.5	602.5	14.5%
% change		15.2	14.4	15.1	14.5	13.1	
Film	87.5	96.5	104.5	115.3	125.0	136.5	9.3%
% change		10.3	8.3	10.3	8.4	9.2	
Print	178.7	196.2	214.4	235.6	256.5	282.0	9.6%
% change		9.8	9.3	9.9	8.9	9.9	
Radio	10.8	13.5	16.5	19.0	22.0	26.0	19.2%
% change		25.0	22.2	15.2	15.8	18.2	
Internet advertising	7.7	10.0	12.5	15.5	19.5	24.0	25.5%
% change		29.9	25.0	24.0	25.8	23.1	
OOH	14.0	15.5	17.0	19.0	21.5	24.0	11.4%
% change		10.7	9.7	11.8	13.2	11.6	
Animation, gaming & VFX	31.3	38.6	47.8	57.7	69.4	82.6	21.4%
% change		23.4	23.8	20.6	20.3	19.0	
Music	9.5	11.9	13.9	16.1	18.4	21.4	17.6%
% change		25.0	17.5	15.6	14.2	16.0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>646.0</b>	<b>735.2</b>	<b>830.7</b>	<b>943.2</b>	<b>1064.8</b>	<b>1198.9</b>	<b>13.2%</b>
% change		13.8	13.0	13.5	12.9	12.6	

Source: PwC Analysis and Industry Estimates

### Product Consumerism vs. Media Consumerism

Consumerism is a social and economic order that is based on the systematic creation and fostering of a desire to purchase goods and services in ever greater amounts [source Wiki]. In case of consumerism of a product, a consumer expects his product should be of maximum benefit and he should get quality product in terms of size, ingredients, attractiveness and usefulness.

Whether media itself should play the role of a commodity or not is the basic question. With circulating of a copy of newspaper along with toothbrush, a CD, a pen drive, doubts arise if it could be product consumerism in the guise of media consumerism. Consumerism has gone to such an extent that once pickle packets are being circulated along with the copy of newspaper. Even a sample sachet of a soap or shaving cream is distributed along with a newspaper copy. Sanctity of media is of paramount importance. For example, an editorial page considered as a sanctum sanctorum of a newspaper because of its opinion without bias in spite of viewpoints which were tried to be balanced. So, by such pushing of products through services, it paves way for high degree of doubt for the media analysts whether it is media consumerism or we are talking of product consumerism.

If consumerism were to be taken as a growth index, then it comes as a shock that the ranking of UNDP index on human development in India stands at 134<sup>th</sup> position. Indian consumerism is fundamentally based on purchasing power of people, i.e. the human resource and while their development is so low, it appears that consumerism is only a hype. It is a popular buzz word in the traditional circles of India that if you ask a salary of a working man, age of a woman, circulation of a newspaper and the TRP rating of a TV channel, no right answer will be got.

**Ethical consumerism** is the intentional purchase of products and services that the customer considers to be made [ethically](#). Ethical consumerism is practiced through 'positive buying' in that ethical products are favoured. Teen anger, activism and attitude have become commodities that marketers co-opt, package and then sell back to teens. It is getting harder to tell what came first: youth culture, or the marketed version of youth culture. Do the media reflect today's teens, or are today's teens influenced by media portrayals of young people? It

is important that parents discuss these issues with their teens, and challenge the materialistic values promoted in the media. In this angle, the acceptance of media consumerism is highly debatable.

Under the subject of ethical consumerism, some people believe relationships with a product or brand name are substitutes for healthy human relationships lacking in [societies](#), and along with consumerism, create a cultural [hegemony](#), and are part of a general process of social control in modern society.

### **On Diversity and Plurality**

Diversity is a must in media of India due to the inherent factors like the diversity in living patterns, language, customs, traditions, culture, region, climate, lifestyle and so on.

Plurality is important for media functioning because the Indian Constitution tenderly binds the citizenry as one. India is a nation with composite culture, feeling of oneness, emotionally connected states and geography, peace loving people and harmonious communities.

A perspective about media plurality says, “The provision by a range of producers, broadcasters and distributors [of public service content], and the ability of people to choose between different broadcasters and distributors for any particular kind of content”. Yet plurality also has a broader resonance. A democratic society must reflect its diversity of voices and opinions back to it. Plurality among public service broadcasters has, in the public policy debate, become something of a touchstone by which the future health of broadcasting will be judged. It is ultimately how the professionals cultivate the media and practice for the welfare of the society. The diversity and plurality in Indian media consumerism as it exists today is giving rise to negative happenings.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The Scope of this study is to check for penetration of the media messages in a complex societal situation.

The Objectives here is to check for the aspect of plurality in the diverse functioning of media in terms of its economic priorities, reach, access and utility.

Significance of this study is that it helps understand the fruitfulness of the communication process in the era of information pollution, explosion and globalisation.

Here, the methodology being a theoretical type adopts Critical Studies in its approach supported by instances and case studies.

The limitations of the study are that it will not consider the social realities and it only confines to the functioning of media. The instances and case studies dealt in this study confine to Indian scenario and may not hold well outside India.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The Marketing Theory of Consumerism forms one of the bases of this study. The theory of Media Consumerism is another. Plurality and Diversity in Indian democracy being a complex subject, the underlying theories are based on the preamble of the Indian Constitution that vouches for safety and security of all sections of society and to achieve unity in diversity among its citizens. The above two theories are put into scrutiny under the Social Responsibility Theory of Dennis McQuail.



## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The term 'consumerism' was first used in 1915 to refer to 'advocacy of the rights and interests of consumers' (Oxford English Dictionary) but in this article the term 'consumerism' refers to the sense first used in 1960, 'emphasis on or preoccupation with the acquisition of consumer goods' (ibid.). If we observe the usages of the term of 1915 to that of 1960, the shift in right to consume by the consumer onto the market is evident. While the market forces were actually bothered about the aggressive product movement, the definition was not per se applicable to services like education or media. It is the vested interests of capitalistic tendencies which mixed the propositions.

The concept of consumerism is to safeguard the user about the use of a product. In a product research, the effect of it is recorded before suiting its quality further. But in media, the program format, likes and dislikes, wants and welfare of the listener and viewer are not taken stock. Their take away value due to buying of a media material is not put into test by most media houses. Lot of assumptions exist in programme making or news stories, thus not scientific. It is not a serious approach.

In media consumerism, can it be termed one-way consumerism? Because, without understanding what people want, merely throwing messages without working on feedback. It is not what is wanted by the media consumer, but merely attracting and grabbing attention of them only to attaining the goals of management of media houses. Communication research of media houses is not truly scientific– TRP ratings and scale of media reach is still questionable. Regarding audience researches, when they substantiate the sample size, attributing the result of research to such a huge population of ours, extrapolating it all is simply difficult.

Public Relations, Propaganda and Advertising are all instruments of distortions to the concept of media consumerism. The taste of a receiver is unilaterally decided by the media organisations. Grabbing attention of consumer is merely translated into TRP ratings. Thus, the advertisers and patrons are made to believe about the so called top programmes. The likings of a media consumer and the usefulness for a media consumer are the two aspects to be distinguished. One is about the useful information for a consumer eg:- train, hotel, travel, politics, govt., court orders, crime. The other is the likings of the tastes or entertainment which are to do with all the soft stories on any media.

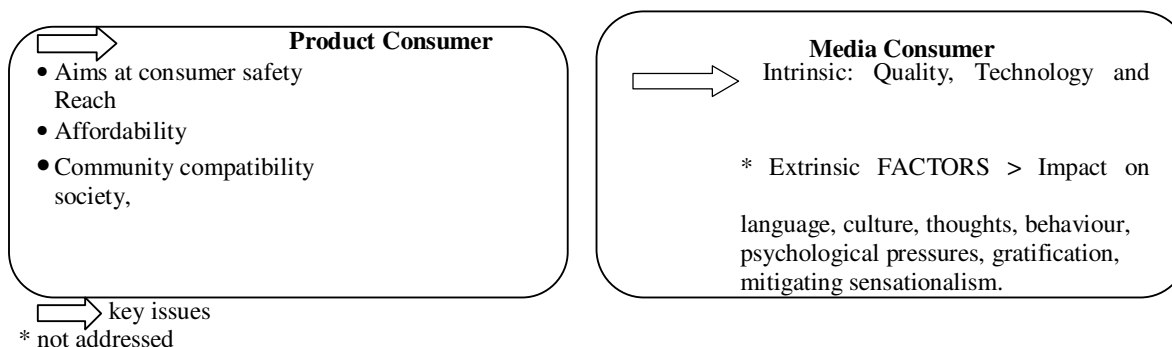
Glorification, sensationalism, exaggeration, etc. are not supportive of plurality as it does not take into confidence all sections of consumers. Media consumer doesn't understand the functioning of media, the potential of a message, not in a position to measure the reach. Without equipping the consumer or community to understand media has not been accomplished either by education, demonstration, training or other means. Hence the factor of diversity is far from consideration.

The domination of dialect of a language in media content eg:- Mysore Kannada, Chennai Tamil, Hyderabad Telugu, Hindi film dominated by Delhi Hindi and so on are area of concerns about tending towards monoculture, a blow to diversity of democracy itself. Dialects of Punjabi, Haryanwi, Bihari, etc. are some cases of gross neglect.

The attributions to unsystematic growth include- the lack of communication policy, no farsightedness of planning and gradual expansion of media, reckless allowance of commercialisation and privatisation into media, conversion of media into an industry without definition of media ethics from time to time is akin to business ethics and policies, absence of effective legal regulations, and last but not the least, the infancy of media education.

Consumer will expect whatever is paid for? If expectations are unethical, unhealthy in the larger interest, then it becomes the responsibility of the professionals to take care.

**Diagram 3: Product Consumer vs. Media Consumer**



Plurality of media consumerism can be classified into two parts - the short term package and the long term. Short term is akin to the story of a hen being chopped off for lot of golden eggs at once. The media uses too many short-cuts with sensational content to achieve high TRPs in too narrow a time. This will however be gradually rejected by consumers. It is to be noted that Indian media is still very much in a passing phase with an era of experimentation through western imitated programme genres like the reality shows, intellectual fights, etc. It is a revealed fact that in many reality shows, people are hired to the show and after competition, the losing artists are made to artificially cry using glycerine.

For instance, a losing pair of mother and the child made to act. More unfortunately, activists of political parties are literally made to fight. Using singular against each other in the fight will decrease the respect towards politicians among the voters and citizens. Creating such artificial situations inside the studios has become an extreme practice in TV, only for the temporary raise in the Television Rating Points.

However, the long term package to achieve plurality lies in the ethical, systematic 'media culture'. It is only culturally rich systems that would be able to contribute to society in a sustained manner. Diversity and plurality lasts long and serve a community. Media consumer should be respected and not insulted. The do's and dont's on the sets or on the page are some of the very important factors to be considered. Advertorials through sponsorships illustrated as news items make the consumer feel cheated at one time or the other. A toiletry sachet in the middle of an editorial page will simply annoy any serious reader. Diversity and plurality compromising on social responsibility will end in redundancy, diminishing returns and leads to a dead end. It will result in media losing its credibility among the population and the media will soon be discarded by the consumers.

### INFERENCE AND SUGGESTIONS

Media consumerism is a reality only when we include public responsibility over the media functioning. Only then diversity and plurality in it can be achieved.

Media already with so much power will become 'demonic' and detrimental to democracy. Unknowingly there are strong chances of accepting the propaganda oriented hidden agenda, coated messages which turn negative to social health. For instance, it is not just availability of a TV signal, but of the messages embedded in the signals that matter.

Commoditisation of media also endangers unity and integrity of any country. A country by definition is by borders. But international forces exploit the opportunity of media industry and psychological bankruptcy in planting the content of media, which in the guise of media



hype converts the population against the total healthy democratic setup. Even many welfare measures like Reservation, Women or Child Rights, Human Rights, protection of rights of bonded labourers and people below Poverty Line is made redundant under media as a commodity.

To achieve plurality, it is to win most of the receivers. For FM radio stations, the usages of catch lines should definitely be reconsidered. There could be emotionally bonded quality catchphrases like '*Jai Bharat*' [praising the motherland], '*Namaste Bangalore*' [saluting the local city] and so on that could be used instead of '*Sakka hot maga*' [extremely hot buddy], '*masthmaajaamaadi*' [enjoy maximum] which are titillating.

Since the media consumers in India inherently live in highly diverse communities, yet with plurality of nationality, currency, capital and the ethos of the land, even in consuming patterns the diversity and plurality is reflected in its own way. Thus, for Indian situation, when grossly viewed, Media and Consumerism are words that seem to be not going together. It seems like an oxymoron. In a precarious situation like India with lot of socio-lingual economic, political parameters to measure the livelihood of an individual, still media consumerism calls for a lot of research. Mere commercial gains are forcing us to use the phrase media consumers. Apart from functioning of media, the term should include functioning of it meaningfully. Safety, security and healthy growth of society are of priority. Consumerism is not yet an 'ism' in its letter and spirit.

If media is a commodity, it could be consumed. But once it is a commodity, media becomes a tool that appeals to the five senses. It amounts to a give and take between the consumer and the producer of media content. Then the haves demand what should not be given to society at large. It amounts to virtual colonialism. Media's functioning of public opinion, community participation and aesthetic appeal will all get a thorough beating. Credibility goes downslide. Media would lose its status of a fourth estate. No more mass media but a class media or a crass-media.

## **CONCLUSION**

A major lacuna in the understanding of media consumerism is that the academicians and researchers are not throwing light on the developments regarding it. Unless aggressive scientific researches in large quantum provide clues to the practitioners and decision makers, the market mongers continue to rule the roost. To this end, media education should also be strengthened. If media education takes the track of commercialisation, again the concept of consumerism gets blurred. Students in media classes should be taught the technique of consuming media keeping in mind the welfare of the society and not merely making career for their livelihood, because it is the community which ultimately contributes to the survival and economics of the media.

Time is not yet ripe to achieve diversity and plurality in media sector, let alone media consumerism. First, the marginalised, downtrodden sections of society have to be addressed, supported and empowered through media content and portrayals. Under media activity, considering all communities in an egalitarian manner will continue the existing deprivation among the neglected sections of society in India.

Hence media should remain in the service sector and should not be seen as a product. Respective Governments in India have their guilt in ignoring Public Service Media gradually destabilising it. This is by encouraging private media steadily. Private media systems are inherently profit oriented and cannot provide the service required or needed by the society.

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