MediaWatch-India

Campaigning for decency and accountability in the media

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'MediaWatch-India'- *The Background*:

The present-day Media is influencing the society as never before. Today, Television, Cinema, Radio, Print and visual media etc. are playing a truly ubiquitous role in our daily lives. Media, apart from disseminating news and information, is also 'enlightening' and 'empowering' the citizenry. In the Indian context, the historic role played by the media during the independence movement is well-known. After independence, with the ushering in of democracy, the media started playing its role with greater vigour by way of independent news-reporting, voicing peoples' concerns, moulding public opinion etc.. In the recent times, with the advent of globalization, liberalization and the advances in Information and Communication Technologies, the role and reach of media has undergone tremendous transformation. And today, we find the print and electronic media has become an integral part of our everyday lifestyle, with hundreds of news and entertainment channels beaming into homes, sophisticated films hitting the screens, a 'new generation' print media and finally, the info-explosion by the Internet.

'MediaWatch-India'- *The Need*:

As the fourth estate in democracy, media is now playing a proactive role in exposing corruption in public life, increasing accountability in administration, reflecting peoples' problems & influencing public policy, bringing into focus several socio-economic issues and giving succour to ongoing social movements etc. Also, the Media's vital role is seen in taking contemporary art forms and other entertainment to people, identifying and giving expression to the untapped talent among the common masses etc. In these respects, media's role should not only be acknowledged but must be appreciated and encouraged from the side of society.

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On the flip side, media's increasing negative role in the society is also too evident to ignore. In the last two decades, in the wake of globalization, liberalization and the technology boom, the media has become highly diversified and commercialized. Apart from the increase in the number of players in the media arena, one can see stiff competition amongst them for increasing TRP's, readership etc. The vast array of media content is bewildering and increasingly beyond effective regulation. The excessive show of violence and vulgarity in the print and electronic media, sensationalism, fake sting operations, telecasts posing threat for national security and inciting violence etc. are some of the undesirable and disturbing consequences which call for genuine regulation of media by an independent and impartial authority.

Concern is now being expressed by numerous social scientists, academics, media analysts etc. about the possible adverse impact of the media on the society. The growing obscenity and vulgarity in media, apart from denigrating the dignity of women, is corrupting the impressionable minds of youth and children. It is notable in this context that, in an opinion poll conducted by a leading daily some time back, about 62% of people opined that Cinema and media are largely to be blamed for the increasing instances of eve-teasing, ragging etc. among youth. Many other surveys conducted at international level have revealed that in case of many youngsters, viewing violence and pornography was a prelude to their crime of killing, rape etc. Empirical studies justify the proposition that lessening the level of violence & vulgarity in media goes a long way in reducing levels of aggressiveness, sexual crime, sexual disease (e.g., AIDS) and marital breakdown etc.. Thus, it would contribute to a much healthier and responsible approach to human sexuality and proper and respectful relationships.

The portrayal and glorification of violence, aggressiveness and anti-social behaviour by Films, TV etc. contributes to and validates the general rise of social violence and disorder. As Mary Whitehouse, the founder of 'MediaWatch-UK' remarked: '*If you constantly portray violence as normal on the television screen it will help to create a violent society*'. Today, we see many news channels indulge in the detailed and repeated telecast of gory scenes of bloodshed and violence, many movies pass the 'message' to the youth that revenge and violent behavior are desirable qualities. By watching today's so-called 'youth' movies, the impression the young generation gets is that 'smoking is glamour', 'drinking is fun', 'eve-teasing is heroism' and 'teachers are jokers'.   And today's TV serials are in for severe criticism for their disturbing influence on the minds of viewers, especially the female members of the family.

Also, the sensationalisation and dramatization of original crime stories by news channels spread those criminal ideas to viewers and even affects the actual legal process. The Law Commission has expressed concern over the growing instances of 'trial by the media' and recommended the Centre 'to enact a law to prevent the media from reporting anything prejudicial to the rights of the accused in criminal cases'. The irresponsibility of some sections of media went to the extent of conducting 'fake sting operations' for various commercial reasons. In the recent past, the judiciary had to intervene in various instances to restrain media e.g., from intruding into the privacy of peoples' lives etc.

'MediaWatch-India'- *The Genesis:*

It is in this context that 'MediaWatch-India', an independent voluntary organisation has been formed on October 2nd, 2007 (Coinciding with 138th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi) with the avowed aim of promoting 'decency' and 'accountability' in the present-day media. (Organisations of this kind are working in many countries like UK, US, Taiwan etc.) The focus is on mainstream media i.e., Television, Cinema, Print and Visual media and the organization strives towards a 'socially responsible' media, sensitive to the public opinion, decency and good taste. It is the major aim of 'MediaWatch-India' to appreciate media and those media units on behalf of civil society, when they make positive contribution and making a constructive criticism in case of media's negative role in the society. Intelligentsia, media persons, artists, social scientists, legal experts, representatives from government and political parties, etc. will be part of 'MediaWatch-India' and will be sharing their experience and opinions on various media-related issues. Thus, the praise or criticism on media is made more broad-based and representative.

'MediaWatch-India' has the highest regard for 'freedom of expression' and firmly believes in a 'free and independent' media. However, given the present context of fierce competition and commercialization, it only strives to make media exercise its freedom with a sense of 'social responsibility' so that the public are not always at the receiving end. Thus, 'MediaWatch-India' endeavours to establish a reputation for itself that it stands for principled protest, informed comment and reliable research on various Media-related issues.

'MediaWatch-India' - *Aims and Activities:*

1. Campaigning for 'decency' and 'accountability' in the media and to strive towards a socially responsible media, sensitive to public opinion, decency and good taste.

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2. Acting as a platform and interface for the viewers, readers and general public to voice their complements/complaints about the 'content' and 'quality' of media. 3. To acknowledge, appreciate and encourage the positive contribution of media on various fronts.   4. Ensuring wide public participation in various media-related matters that have a direct bearing on the people at large.   5. To work towards effective implementation of relevant national and regional laws to ensure decency and accountability in media.   6. Evolving consensus on various media-related issues by involving social scientists, media representatives, Legislators, government, intelligentsia etc. and thus making praise or criticism on media broad based and representative.   7. To watch and to act as to the freedom of expression guaranteed by the Constitution is not abused or misused by the media and whether the content and presentation in the media is in line with the accepted norms of journalistic ethics. 8. Networking similar and like-minded organizations at home and abroad.   9. To undertake and promote studies and research on the impact of media on society.   10. To organize seminars, discussions, legal awareness camps etc. to sensitise the citizenry on various media issues.

'MediaWatch-India' is a peoples' organization, funded by subscriptions and donations from its members and supporters. It is a voluntary social effort with no political or religious affiliations and anyone or any organization who/which wants to support the cause of promoting 'decency' and 'accountability' in media is welcome to join.

'MediaWatch-India' - *You can make a difference:*

As part of 'MediaWatch-India', one can contribute in a variety of ways:

1. You can be proactive in the implementation of various laws such as **The Cable Network Regulation Act, 1995 (For Television Channels), Cinematograph Act, 1952 (For Films), Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 and IPC 292 (for decency in media, in general), The Press Council of India Act, 1978 (For Print media, i.e, News Papers and Magazines etc.), Prohibition of Unauthorized and Objectionable Posters and Advertisements Acts of various states etc. (<u>For a quick look at important provisions of Media Law, see our publication 'Decency and Accountability in Media - A Legal Checklist'</u>)**
2. You can send your complements or criticism on media content to the respective media units as well as to 'MediaWatch-India'.
3. You can lodge complaints on any offensive or objectionable content in the media with respective authorities on your own or through the organization.
4. You can campaign for 'decency' and 'accountability' in media by popularising the aims and activities of 'MediaWatch-India' and joining more and more members.
5. You can provide monetary contribution in the form of subscriptions, donations etc.