

Delhi Union of Journalists response to the TRAI Consultation Paper on Issues relating to Media Ownership

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Issues and policy decisions relating to media ownership have profound consequences for democracy, debate, diversity and plurality in multi-cultural India. As a 64-year-old organization of journalists we, the Delhi Union of Journalists, have been witness to massive changes in the media as a consequence of policy decisions of the Government of India, changes in economic policies and of course technological leaps. Our members have both benefited from some of these developments and suffered from them. The nature of our work and our working conditions has changed rapidly. Our life experience of working within the media tells us that there is a great deal of unknown, unvoiced censorship within the media that stems from patterns of ownership and employment.

Plurality and diversity of opinion in the media can only follow from genuine freedom of the press which first and foremost must mean genuine freedom of press persons to voice their opinions. It must mean democracy within the media. This definitely requires diversity of ownership of media. Too many of our members have suffered the stifling of their voices and the censoring of their beliefs simply because these conflict with the unwritten policies of their employers. Some have been victimized, some demoted, some transferred and others simply fired for standing by their beliefs. Some have been victimized for filing news stories or exposes that are inconvenient to those in authority. Others have been victimized for their editorial opinions. Many resort daily to self-censorship of their writings and opinions solely to retain their jobs in an insecure work environment.

It is in this context that we feel impelled to respond to the TRAI "Consultation Paper on Issues relating to Media Ownership".

We have watched [redacted] while some dominant newspaper groups have grown by leaps and bounds, making super profits while simultaneously retrenching their workforce and forcing employees, including journalists, to sign short-term contracts in place of the previous form of permanent employment. They have circumvented laws such as the Working Journalists' Act in the process and are currently denying the few employees

left in permanent employment the benefits of a tripartite wage board award. Contract employment was started by one large newspaper group and the evil has spread to the entire industry. The contract journalist is an insecure journalist who is afraid to take an independent stand or voice an unpopular opinion. One false move, one story attacking a politician or exposing a scam or critiquing certain government policies could mean risking re-employment once the contract is over. What happens then to diversity of opinion in the media?

Cross-media holdings are enabling employers to enlarge and extend their domains, bringing them ever greater political clout and financial might. In recent years the media, particularly the rapidly growing business press, has been a dominant voice in the clamour for economic 'reform' that will benefit business interests but not necessarily other sections of society. The needs of rural India are largely neglected in an advertisement-driven media targeted at urban consumers. The media aggressively promotes the 'growth' agenda over the 'development' agenda. These are opinion choices made by media employers (motivated by their revenue models) that do not reflect the opinions of large numbers of Indians.

It is vital for democracy to have more plurality of opinion in media. This requires the dismantling of existing monopolies and cross-media empires and a check on the growing concentration of media ownership.

The Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ) welcomes this initiative by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), to initiate a public debate on media ownership issues, with a special focus on dealing with the potential threat of monopoly growth in the information domain, which could have adverse implications for the public right to know.

The DUJ appreciates the figures presented in the TRAI report on the growth of the media in recent years. Firm and reliable statistics are a vital necessity in promoting an informed public debate on the media. Unfortunately, the figures in respect of India's media industry have been rather difficult to obtain. At the same time, public interest in the management of the media is at an unprecedented high, since this has been one of the fastest growing sectors of the Indian economy in the last two decades of liberalisation and globalisation.

The DUJ as a body representing print media journalists in the main, would like to focus on this sector, before going on to a consideration of others.

The factors propelling growth in the print media sector have been correctly identified in the TRAI report as: (a) advertising growth; (b) progress in literacy.

Advertising spending in the economy has grown ahead of the curve of overall economic growth and indeed, of the growth in literacy too. This is to be expected since advertising caters to the higher income groups which invariably do better in situations of economic growth, than the general population.

The DUJ appreciates the figures presented by TRAI in its report, but from its own sources, has gathered the following figures on the overall size of the media industry (in its various sectors) and the contribution made by advertising revenue (all figures here pertain to calendar year 2011 and are roughly comparable to TRAI's own estimations):

Industry	Total annual revenue (Rs crore)	Advertising revenue (Rs crore + plus contribution to total revenue in brackets)
Television	32,900	11,600 (35.3%)
Print	20,900	13,900 (66.5%)
Radio	1,200	1,200 (100%)

The DUJ, is concerned at the extreme dependence of the print media on advertising expenditure and also worried that in the bid to earn the patronage of powerful corporate and political players who deploy large monies of advertising, the print media may be losing sight of its basic ethos of speaking truth to power and informing the general public.

The DUJ also would like to record here that the anti-competition conduct of certain large print media groups, which have subsequently diversified into the TV and radio spaces, have actively militated against the right of the public to know and be informed. As example, we could cite the "price-wars" launched between the major English-language newspaper groups in the 1990s, which cut newspaper prices but made the publishers dependent ever more, on advertising spending. Effectively, this meant sacrificing the interests of the newspaper readers for the advertisers.

Staying with the print media and looking at the manner in which the advertising expenditure in the economy is allocated, we have from most recently published figures, the following information about the share earned by three large English language publishers, in total advertising spending:

Print media group	Total revenue (Rs crore)	Advertising revenue (Rs crore + contribution to total revenue in brackets)
Times of India (Bennett Coleman and Co Ltd)	4749.3	3985.2 (83.9%)
The Hindustan Times (HT Media)	1815.7	1394.8 (76.8%)
The Hindu (Kasturi and Sons Ltd)	945.5	815.3 (86.2%)

Viewed another way these three print media groups account for a total of over Rs 7,500 crore in terms of turnover and Rs 6,195 crore in advertising revenue. In terms of total newspaper industry revenue, these three groups alone account for over 39%. In terms of share in total advertising spending in the print media, they have a share of 44%

The readership of these three papers is not more than 40 million, in total Indian newspaper readership of roughly 600 million. Newspaper groups that have around 6% of readership, in other words, account for over 39% of revenue and 44% of advertising spending in the print media.

Concentration in the media industry is an ever growing reality. We are probably heading towards a situation of media monopoly. This has to be viewed from a broad public interest point of view. And the contribution made by the persistent default in policy, which has resulted in an absolute vacuum of media regulatory systems, is to be noted.

Media growth has been averaging about 15% since 2003: more than overall economic growth rate. Increasing competition for advertising revenue has damaged media standards and led to a loss of public credibility. Public scepticism about the media is now at an unprecedented high. Recent revelations about news content that is directly paid for – the “paid news” or “cash for coverage” scandal – have added to the crisis of credibility.

Incidents such as the “Radia tapes” where senior media professionals were found to be engaged in conversations with an industry lobbyist to “fix” political appointments, have contributed to the growing public scepticism.

The DUJ, as a representative body of media professionals believes that it is important for the public to be engaged in the domain of media policy.

The advertisement driven media model is seen increasingly to be adverse to public interest. Growing monopoly tendencies threaten a further exclusion of the socially and economically disadvantaged. “Paid news” and other such abuses add to the possibility of a gross abuse of the public interest.

Methods of enforcing public accountability on the media industry need to be explored, which are not coercive and which do not threaten article 19 guarantees of the Constitution on freedom of expression.

Media regulation needs to target greater inclusion and the possibility of giving voice to the socially and economically disadvantaged as a priority.