



## Redefining Journalism by Exploring Strategies for Navigating Bias and Promoting Transparency

**Vishal Sinha,**  
Director, Svran Apeejay Journalism Foundation (SAJF)

### Insights into Strengthening the Role of Media in Shaping the Society Amidst Digital and Other Disruptions

**Intro:** The world of media and journalism, where truth is both a pursuit and a responsibility, and the boundaries between information and influence are constantly being challenged owing to various factors. In a riveting exploration of the contemporary media landscape, media expert **Vishal Sinha, Director of Svran Apeejay Journalism Foundation (SAJF)** engages in an exclusive interaction with **Indiastat**. In conversation on **Socio-economic Voices** with senior journalist **Mahima Sharma**, what unfolds is a call-to-action interview that reverberates through the corridors of power and public discourse alike. Each question uncovers layers of insight, each response offers a glimpse into the ethos of journalistic integrity and civic responsibility. Take a read...

**MS: In light of the digital divide and unequal access to information, tightening clutches of the AI --- what initiatives do you advocate for to ensure that MASS MEDIA remains accessible to marginalised communities and serves as a catalyst for social change?**

**VS:** Today, we are living in an era, where information is everything, it naturally shapes that we are living in an information society, where the media is the strapping tool of communication and connectivity. Media has a huge responsibility to provide accurate, balanced and ethical reporting. Mass media plays a very important role in communicating with a large number of citizens in a short time. It is an agent of social change and can put a spotlight on critical developments that impact negatively and positively on people's lives, as well as highlight issues that are often ignored and voices that are neglected.

Radio Channels in various regional languages cater to more than 100 crore Indians. The 110th episode of Prime Ministers Mann ki Baat on 25th February 2024 was broadcasted in 22 Indian languages and 29 dialects. Broadcasting, particularly via radio and television, has the capability to extend its reach to remote regions, disseminating crucial news, updates on weather conditions, agricultural techniques, health and hygiene guidelines, details about government initiatives, market rates, and other indispensable information. These resources play a pivotal role in enhancing the daily lives and decision-making abilities of individuals residing in such areas.

**It is important to see that there is no communication gap within society, information is for everyone.** Some measures what I think will work can be like – to enhance accessibility, providing subsidy on newspaper or if required some free distribution of magazines & newspapers in underserved areas in their local language. We should encourage community-based journalism which will empower the local voices. Mass Media with help of Gram Panchayats and local government bodies will bridge the gap.

In the television domain, the ongoing challenge is providing access to rural areas. The average viewership of Doordarshan National is 91 million according to the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC). This can play an

important role to reach to maximum households. Prasar Bharti, that operates Doordarshan (DD) and All India Radio (AIR), is working to expand its reach to rural areas. DTH, Cable operators, Community Radio plays a crucial role when it comes to connecting communities in remote regions.

**Focused initiatives should be taken in the digital sphere** that help in improving the internet accessibility in remote & underserved areas and also providing literacy programs to empower the individuals to navigate online platforms. To an extent this gap was bridged during Covid years, but still there is lot to cover to promote diversity and amplify marginalised voices.

**Even the OTT platforms, there should be affordable subscription options and diverse.**

Content libraries are a must. These platforms will get more power by supporting independent filmmakers from excluded backgrounds to enrich the OTT landscape with their perspectives. It has still not reached all households.

**MS: With the proliferation of misinformation and propaganda, especially in the digital sphere, how do you envision news media adapting to uphold its role as a watchdog for democracy and provide accurate, impartial reporting on socio-economic matters?**

**VS:** Fake news existed since the dawn of the printing press. Now we are in the age of internet and social media – with a click of ONE button, it is very easy to spread rumours, motivated stories or morphed videos, to a large audience. Whatsapp platform is most vulnerable to fake news.

Journalism is one of the oldest professions and for good reasons is considered as “Fourth Pillar” in democratic countries along with Legislature, Executive, and Judiciary. The common Persons need a representation, that someone can ask questions on their behalf. This is the actual job of news reporters – they are directly connected with the Common Man.

In today's digital age journalists must stick to standards of accuracy, impartiality, and responsibility in their reporting is paramount to successfully overcome the challenges posed by the rapidly changing media landscape. **Qualities like Confidence and clear communication, in depth knowledge of the subject and empathy, make a complete journalist. No one wants to see a reporter who is fumbling.** On TV body language, self-confidence and facial expression will help connect with the audience. When News Media can understand and convey the human experience, the stories will become more relatable & impactful.

**Media should share opinions from different people and involve them to keep them informed.**

They should always stick to basic rules like being responsible and taking the ownership of the news report, being honest and telling the truth while staying independent, unbiased and treating everyone fairly.

It is vital for schools to provide students with a solid education on media and information literacy as part of their curriculum. Teachers need to be well-trained in the subject to empower students with the necessary competences to critically understand and assess information reported by all forms of media. **Italy, for example, has experimentally added 'recognising fake news' in school syllabus. India should also seriously emphasise cybersecurity, internet education, fake news education in the academic curriculum at all levels.**

**MS: Taking the above further on, how can media professionals critically analyse government economic policies and their implications for national & global markets, trade relations towards economic stability, without succumbing to partisan narratives or any other bias or pressure?**

**VS:** The role of the media is very important in analysing the government's economic policies. India has powerful media organisations with thousands of outlets in different languages.

To analyse the government's economic policies considering the implications on Indian and global markets, by staying unbiased and without any political pressure, a media professional should follow the fundamental rules of Journalism **i.e: stick to the facts, do lots of research, no speculations or room for personal biases.**

Government economic policies is a set of law, regulations and directives put in together to achieve public goals. It is prepared after many rounds of inputs, suggestions, various interests and options.

**Many stakeholders are involved in policy making, so while reporting, talking to all them will give a well-rounded picture. Question everything – the motives, assumptions, thought process as why there was need for a new policy or amending an existing policy,** is it the right time to bring such policies, uncover any potential flaws etc etc. Try to find out the hidden agendas.

Here comes another important part, that it is just not throwing numbers or statistical data, but to back it with a context. Double check the sources, the data and make sure its credible. Try to show the bigger picture to your viewers / readers, that how these policies will ripple the economy both our local market but also the global market. **Above all, we have to keep our independence intact, do not pick any sides,** there should be no push to any agendas – just serve the public interest, that's it.

**MS: With the growing influence of corporate interests and advertising revenues on media content, how can media professionals maintain editorial independence on economic issues without succumbing to biases or conflicts of interest?**

**VS:** Well, it's a yoker. See maintaining the editorial interest is very important without interference or influence from outside sources. It's all about setting your boundary which has our own policies and based on journalism ethics.

Journalists must maintain editorial independence despite various challenges like economic pressures, corporate ownership, political influence, and personal biases. **It's crucial for reporters to remain unbiased and objective in their reporting, avoiding any influence from corporate interests unless it's explicitly disclosed as an advertorial planned by the marketing team.**

But here is a catch - that in such scenario our revenue might go for a toss – as we are solely relying on advertisements. So to get rid of such pressures, we should work on alternates, like subscriptions or grants.

**Furthermore, media organisations can explore alternative revenue models to reduce reliance on advertising, thereby mitigating potential conflicts of interest.**

Collaborations with non-profit organisations, foundations, and audience-supported models offer avenues for sustaining editorial independence while delivering high-quality economic journalism.

**Renowned intellectual Noam Chomsky once remarked,** “The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum.”

This observation underscores the subtle ways in which corporate interests can influence media content and shape public discourse, highlighting the importance of safeguarding editorial independence in economic journalism.

**As an example of the influence of money on content quality and details, Disney's size and popularity provides a stark example.** Disney is known for its family-friendly entertainment, including movies and cartoons. However, as Disney grows larger and owns ABC News, criticism has grown. Some people argue that Disney's cartoons and movies contain subtle biases related to culture, race, gender, and class. Others are concerned about Disney's influence on news stories through its ownership of ABC. Disney has responded to these concerns with the following statement:

**“We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective,”** Michael Eisner, CEO, The Walt Disney Co., (Internal Memo).

Quoted from Mickey Mouse Monopoly - Disney, Childhood & Corporate Power.

Thus, maintaining editorial independence on economic issues will help us navigate any conflicts with our professionalism and integrity. Also not all corporates will stop their funds on advertisement at the same time, so things should be ok.

**MS: In light of geopolitical tensions and economic sanctions between nations, how can journalists sensitively navigate unbiased reporting on sensitive international issues while maintaining impartiality and ensuring factual accuracy?**

**VS:** In today's digital era, information flows freely, enabling discussions on a wide array of topics, including those that are sensitive and emotionally charged. When addressing such sensitive international issues, it's crucial to tread carefully, akin to walking a tightrope. **Accuracy, factual reporting, and impartiality are paramount, considering the potential impact on geopolitical dynamics and economic relations.**

To navigate this delicate balance, thorough research and engagement with multiple stakeholders are essential. This involves delving deep, verifying sources, and gaining a nuanced understanding of the subject matter, including historical context and various perspectives. However, it's important to recognise that sensitivity is equally crucial. **Merely presenting facts is insufficient;** empathy and a respectful approach are needed to convey the emotional weight of the story.

**For instance, consider the coverage of a conflict between two countries.** A journalist must strive to provide accurate information while also acknowledging the human impact and complexities involved. By contextualising the issue and amplifying marginalised voices, responsible journalism can foster understanding and drive positive societal change.

**MS: Looking ahead, what emerging trends and challenges do you anticipate for economic journalism in the context of evolving international policies, geopolitical dynamics, and technological disruptions, and how can media organisations adapt to meet these challenges while upholding journalistic standards and principles?**

**VS:** In today's global economy, we see increasing inequalities and varying growth rates among different regions. **The world economy is experiencing slow growth, projected at 2.4 per cent in 2023, meeting the criteria for a global recession.** This poses challenges for economic journalism amidst changing international policies, geopolitical dynamics, and technological advancements. In India and worldwide, the rise of digital platforms and social media has transformed how economic news is shared and consumed. While digital media offers constant connectivity between journalists and audiences, it also challenges traditional ethical standards.

- Factors like international policies, geopolitical dynamics, and technological disruptions significantly impact economic journalism.
- For instance, events like the Russia-Ukraine conflict can alter global oil sources, affecting India's economy.
- The emergence of technologies like AI and increased data availability also shape trends in economic journalism.

**As Amartya Sen, the noted Indian economist, emphasised,** "Information is valuable for learning, but only when organised, processed, and accessible to decision-makers." This highlights the role of media organisations in providing accurate and insightful economic reporting amidst today's complex information landscape.

To address these challenges, media organisations must prioritise transparency, accountability, and diversity in their reporting. **Investing in training for economic journalists, fostering collaborations with experts and institutions, and**

**utilising technology for data-driven storytelling are essential steps.**

By enhancing journalists' skills in data analysis and visualisation, media organisations can ensure that economic journalism remains a reliable source of information in a constantly changing world.

**MS: In modern times, we have seen that investigations, fact checking and other such critical aspects that form the base of information dissemination have taken a beating. How can that grounded, fact-based news culture be brought back?**

**VS:** Absolutely right - I totally agree on this. It is sad to see a decline in investigative journalism and fact checking. It's time to identify the elephant in the room – which is harassment and intimidation, it can be from Government officials, from individuals from vested interests or the criminal groups or it can be the financial pressure.

**Journalists struggle to fund investigations – they lack in something or the other, like financial crunch or getting a go-ahead from their media houses or for a freelancer their safety concerns, limited press freedom – it can be anything.**

Let me quote about Vimal Kumar Yadav from Dainik Jagran Newspaper, who was assassinated in Uttar Pradesh in 2023. According to his colleagues, Yadav was killed for his investigative reporting on local corruption that angered two influential landowners. Such incidents highlight the threats journalists face.

Now I doubt that our system can provide any kind of support that can ensure safety to journalists so that they can uncover the truth without any threats. And I think that is why there is a downfall in Investigative Reporting.

**Now how to bring back that rock solid fact based news culture? We as Media organisations, Police Force, Government bodies and as Society, need to create an environment where our reporters feel safe.**

We all together, need to set our priorities right as a large nation– Finding the Truth ensuring that ethics and principals are not compromised. Collaboration with different media outlets and working together with subject experts, independent fact-checkers, research institutes can strengthen the efforts to expose the scams and uncover the truth.

And finally it's about holding ourselves accountable – if there is a mistake own it, rectify it – this will bring back the trust of the audience and will give a push to reach to the root cause of the story.

**What would be your multi-step advice to University level students who step out in today's media scenario, on how to report and disseminate unbiased information?**

**VS:** We all have biases be it at personal or professional front, be it movies or politics. It's a long debate. But staying unbiased as a journalist is a challenging task.

Reporting unbiased, in the current era where Media plays a very important role, is super important. We all have learnt about ethics, integrity, fairness, impartiality and transparency with accuracy – we should stick to these rules. **To maintain Journalistic integrity and disseminating the correct information are basic principles.**

**As an example, during Hurricane Katrina:** Two sets of photographs captured individuals wading through water while carrying bags of food. One person was white, and the other was black. However, the reporting of their actions differed significantly. The black man was described as "looting" a grocery store, whereas the white individual was portrayed as "finding food for survival".

This discrepancy in reporting highlights the pervasive racial bias present in media portrayal and underscores the need for fair and unbiased reporting regardless of a person's race or ethnicity.

**Another important aspect is our reliable sources. We should cross-check with different sources to ensure authenticity.** Stay away from information easily available on Social Media and rumors. There should be a holistic perspective by checking both sides of the story. The information should be backed with quotes, statistics, and factually correct data.

These days everyone loves to do or read “Breaking News”, we should avoid sensationalism and be careful not to make things sound more interesting than they are. **Being mindful in our language will minimise the harm.** It's good to get advice from experienced folks and listen to what our Readers and colleagues say to get better at our jobs. Even critics can help us improve.

**Lastly, keep updating yourself with time.** Technological developments, professional developments, learning from best practices will broaden your understanding of various viewpoints. It's all about staying up-to-date and being open to new ideas.

**MS: What kind of regulations are required on OTT platforms, which to a large extent are showcasing things, which are otherwise illegal in other forms of media in India?**

**VS:** OTT platforms, unlike traditional television broadcasting, boast a vast and rapidly growing viewership, catering to audiences of all ages. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic confined people to their homes, prompting a surge in online programme consumption due to the closure of theatres. In the world of technology, OTT platforms have emerged as significant players in the entertainment sector, offering diverse content choices. India, in particular, has witnessed a remarkable rise, with 102 million active paid users and a total of over 481 million subscribers as of late November 2023 (a figure likely to have increased since then).

This burgeoning landscape presents a lucrative opportunity for content creators. However, alongside the proliferation of content on these platforms, concerns have arisen regarding the prevalence of objectionable material, including vulgarity, nudity, abuse, and obscenity.

**Unlike traditional theatrical content, OTT platforms lack a standardised framework for content censorship, with regulatory responsibilities often falling on self-regulating bodies—an approach deemed somewhat unfair.** While OTT platforms are expected to adhere to content classification, age ratings, and self-regulation guidelines, there remains a need for comprehensive oversight to safeguard public interests. Content creation must prioritise national integrity, uphold moral and ethical standards, and refrain from disparaging any community.

As societal norms evolve, policymakers must adapt regulatory frameworks to strike a balance between morality and artistic freedom.

**Drawing lessons from international practices, countries like Australia** have established content categorisation systems, with stringent actions against illegal content overseen by authorised bodies like the Australian Communication and Media Authority.

**Similarly, Singapore mandates content classification,** albeit with parental lock requirements for potentially sensitive material. It is hoped that the relevant Indian authorities are diligently working towards devising robust regulations that reflect Indian sentiments while fostering a conducive environment for creative expression.

#### **About Vishal Sinha**

*Vishal is the Director of Svrn Apeejay Journalism Foundation (SAJF) bringing experience from previous roles at Confederation of Indian Industry and R.E.Rogers India Pvt Ltd. Vishal Sinha holds a degree from the Delhi University. With a robust skill set Vishal Sinha contributes valuable insights to the industry.*

#### **About the Interviewer**

Mahima Sharma is an Independent Journalist based in Delhi NCR. She has been in the field of TV, Print & Online Journalism since 2005 and previously an additional three years in allied media. In her span of work she has been associated with CNN-News18, ANI - Asian News International (A collaboration with Reuters), Voice of India, Hindustan Times and various other top media brands of their times. In recent times, she has diversified her work as a Digital Media Marketing Consultant & Content Strategist as well. Starting March 2021, she is also a pan-India Entrepreneurship Education Mentor at Women Will - An Entrepreneurship Program by Google in Collaboration with SHEROES. Mahima can be reached at [media@indiastat.com](mailto:media@indiastat.com)

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