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Virendra Singh Rawat

Financial Journalist and Columnist, Lucknow, India

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PANDEMIC HAS RECAST MEDIA TEMPLATE

Virendra Singh Rawat*

Text: - In August 2021, nearly 200 million people globally were believed to have had Covid-19 since the first case was reported in China in late 2019. The reported global death toll topped 4.26 million even as the World Health Organisation (WHO) expressed grave concern over the coronavirus, its mutations and the ever growing list of symptoms.

The Covid-19 pandemic has rightly been regarded as the worst disaster befalling the global social and economic landscape in the last almost 100 years. Whilst previous natural or manmade disasters viz. earthquakes, floods, epidemics and World War I/II were largely confined to a continent or two, the magnitude of coronavirus contagion is still unfolding for mankind.

The pandemic, which quickly spread far and wide due to an interconnected world, faster travel modes and voluminous international trade, has impacted every facet of life and society, business being no exception.

During these troubled times, the conventional mass media of newspapers, periodicals and news channels were at the forefront of informing the public about the outbreak and the aftermath of the pandemic, which is believed to have originated from a discreet lab in Wuhan, China. The media has been tirelessly disseminating news about Covid-19, lockdown, restrictions on trade and movement, the development of vaccines, probe into its genesis, collaboration between nations, vaccination process et al.

Keywords: *Media, Pandemic, Business, News, Mass Media*

*** Financial Journalist and Columnist, Lucknow, e-mail- vsr.journalist@gmail.com.**

Virendra Singh Rawat is a financial and political journalist. The opinions expressed by the author are personal.

The media has dextrously been highlighting the radical shift in the pre-Covid norms of society as also business, trade and industry. The crystallisation of new normal taking shape in these domains has lucidly been narrated and presented by the mass media for the general public.

Ironically, while the media resiliently dispensed a yeoman's service to the community by informing and educating on the crisis, it also underwent an irreversible metamorphosis itself!

Beyond the noble purpose of serving as a vital pillar of democracy, a news organisation is intrinsically a business or a non-profit entity, as the case may be according to its constitution, for sustenance and growth. It also follows the standard principles that power the biggest of the global corporations to the more modest trading or industrial units locally.

With the entire value and supply chains of the industrial and commercial world getting disrupted, thus bringing about a sudden shift in the conventional processes and the work hierarchies, the media could no longer afford the luxury of a status quo.

LOCKDOWN

The countrywide lockdown 1.0 beginning March 2020 was a proverbial bolt out of blue for the media industry, especially the print segment comprising mainly newspapers and periodicals. The restrictions on movement of men and material, coupled with the concerns raised initially over the safety of a physical newspaper, led to an abrupt reduction in the number of pages even as the subscriptions also dwindled.

So much so that the media industry had to run collective campaigns to assuage the doubts of its patrons that the newspaper was a safe enough product, and not found to be spreading coronavirus. Some enterprising newspapers went to the extent of proclaiming that they were spraying hand sanitiser solution in its pages during the printing process to offer an even higher level of notional safety to readers.

Plus, there were several many hurdles in the delivery of the newspaper too, since there were restrictions on movement, and the hawkers and the agency staff faced impediments in the distribution of the paper.

On the employee front, the work-from-home (WFH) template was adopted quickly by the media companies to overcome movement restrictions and the closure of offices, although media, considered as an essential service, was largely exempted from the Covid-19 protocols. Even in the future, a hybrid format is likely to persist for the journalists and the media houses.

The scribes too faced untold difficulties in news collection and corroboration of facts to ensure objectivity and accuracy of their reports. A large number of journalists and non-editorial staff unfortunately have fallen victim to the coronavirus infection.

The electronic media persons, who report from the spot, had a greater degree of exposure to the menace at a time when precious little was known about Covid-19, its mutations and plausible line of treatment.

To put things in perspective, the UP government has so far acknowledged Covid-19 deaths of 55 journalists. The kin of these scribes were handed over an ex gratia of Rs 10 lakh each during a ceremony in Lucknow on July 31, 2021, which was presided over by chief minister Yogi Adityanath, who acknowledged the contribution of media at large during the pandemic.

RAPID DIGITALISATION

In light of these developments, the media witnessed an upsurge of digitalisation in its processes to keep alive. In fact, the Indian media industry has long adopted the information technology (IT) tools to

accelerate the work flow between team members across different verticals viz. editorial, marketing, circulation, HR etc. The pandemic further hastened up these digital initiatives albeit without any breathing space.

For example, the quintessential ‘morning editorial meeting’, which was hitherto held in person, was conducted virtually with the journalists connected to the editor and peer scribes over the internet through popular video conference platforms, including Zoom, Google Meet etc.

Moreover, the entry to offices was restricted to a select group of key members of each department to ensure adherence to Covid-19 protocols and avoid unnecessary exposure to the rogue virus.

The spirited atmosphere of the newsroom interspersed with discussions, debates as also light gossip over a cup of tea and coffee was replaced by IT driven framework, wherein the journalists were interlinked from the cosy comfort of their home.

However, the media industry, comprising both print and electronic, should be complemented for not letting, in the least, the hurdles created by the lockdown to compromise on the quality. News reports remained as crisp, informative, educative, absorbing as well as objective just like the pre-Covid era!

CONSUMPTION PATTERN OF MEDIA

It is well recognised that the digital media has invaded our daily lives and routines. It has transformed every single component of a modern society spanning mass media, profession, travel, politics, commerce, business, industry, leisure et al.

During the lockdown phase(s), especially in the first wave, when there were issues pertaining to the distribution of newspapers, there was a massive upsurge in the consumption of news digitally over smartphones, laptops, tablets etc.

The print and electronic media also fortified their digital newsrooms to increase the flow of news items and features over their website/portals. Suddenly, there was a deluge of podcasts and video clips produced by even the most puritan news organisations to retain their consumer base and expand to new territories.

The rapid surge in the flow of digital content and the variety it offered in turn altered the consumption pattern of consumers as well and incrementally expanded the basket of digitally savvy consumers for the media industry. This encouraged the media firms to allocate more resources to fortify their web division to cater the growing clientele base.

The media space, which had over the past few years, been diligently upping the ante in terms of metamorphosing into primarily digitally driven enterprises, witnessed faster traction owing to the pandemic. Now, it can be surmised that the pandemic simply accelerated the process.

Interestingly, the success of newspapers, which hitherto was weighed in subscription volumes, was now being evaluated on the basis of virtual ‘hits’ their portal logged in the course of the day.

According to GSMA Intelligence, there are more than 5 billion unique mobile phone users in the world today. It is no brainer that this number will continue to grow, expanding the pool of digitally connected individuals and altering their consumption pattern.

We know that a smartphone is an aggregate of a telephone, calculator, digital camera, scanner, audio player, video conferencing, browser, personal digital assistant, payment wallet etc. The list is exhaustive and relative to an individual user’s needs and preferences. A smartphone can be customised by downloading apps that serve the distinct requirement of the user.

Since a smartphone offers the facility of converting text into other languages too, it provided traction to the vernacular press. For instance, an English speaking person could get the latest news from the local media by simply leveraging a converter app. Similarly, a native user could consume news reports in other languages by using the same app. This actually led to the democratisation of the news media.

WEB EXCLUSIVE STORIES

Not in the distant past, the print newsroom was the mainstay of a newspaper brand with the web or the portal wing relegated to the periphery and playing a supplementary role in the news business. However, the pandemic and sudden shift to the digital framework has brought the web team of most of the leading players to the centre of the spectrum.

As the flow of news on digital platforms has jumped substantially, there is a growing trend of major news items marked as ‘web exclusive’, which are ‘pay walled’ (accessible only to those who subscribe to the digital publication) and are available only over websites with no corresponding print version. This was unthinkable a few years back, when most news was available for free on the web.

WORKFORCE AND SALARY MATRIX

Since the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns cast an adverse aftermath on the industrial and commercial activities, the salary cuts were reported across different segments, media being no exception. Most of the companies, including the most reputed ones, are known to have slashed the salaries/wages of their employees or at least restructured the remuneration component accordingly.

Even the top media organisations decided to close some of their non-metro editions, while some marquee brands in newspapers/periodicals were shut altogether during the pandemic onslaught. Retrenchments, relocations and restructuring characterised the norm rather than the exception for the range of businesses, including media, owing to a squeeze in revenues.

Nonetheless, the only saving grace was that a majority of the employees were allowed to work from home, which allowed them to save some money on the commutation costs. However, the uncertainty of the sector going forward with rapid digitalisation and optimisation of key processes remain a concern both for industry as also workforce.

REVENUES

With a substantial decline in the economic activities nationally and internationally, the media organisations suddenly saw their coffers shrinking following a massive dip in ads and subscriptions. Especially the ads of consumer durables, apparels, automobiles, luxury items etc nosedived to unprecedented levels.

In recent years, the newspapers have been trying to increase their digital revenue share but with little success. Ironically, while the digital readership has been growing incrementally across different verticals, yet the revenue has not kept pace with this increase. However, the media firms have been tirelessly investing in the digital space hoping to capture the virtual readership and to leverage it at some point in future.

This led to the media organisations to come out with combo ad offers, which provides publicity on the dual platform of the physical paper and the web. Moreover, the digital space selling has acquired a more serious tenor, although it is yet to gain volume and heft vis-à-vis print.

CONVERGENCE OF FORMATS

Far from the puritan approach of segregating print and electronic formats, a convergence of different

formats is being witnessed in the media world with the interplay of print, electronic and web presenting an entirely new bouquet to the readers.

Now every print edition has a dedicated and embellished web outlet, while the news channels too have an exclusive and loaded web presence to serve their dedicated patrons and to catch the eyeballs of a digitally hooked generation.

It has become a norm for the news publishers and broadcasters to launch their customised mobile apps for the convenience of readers. To further leverage the power of the internet, they have a robust presence on every mass social media outlets viz. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Koo etc to secure as well. The multiplier effect that social media offers with likes, sharing and re-sharing is tremendous for the media to ignore.

SOCIAL MEDIA/NEW MEDIA

There is a never ending debate among the netizens about the contribution of social media or new media in disseminating news in a much faster and cheaper manner than conventional or traditional media.

One would typically need to subscribe to a newspaper or a cable network to consume news, but a smartphone loaded with a data pack would easily allow you to unlock the power of social media as a veritable source of news and information. It also enables people to step into the shoes of a 'citizen journalist' by uploading news and developments in their immediate vicinity.

During the lockdown(s), social media had become imperative as a source for latest news, especially relating to the pandemic. Especially during those weeks when the delivery of the newspaper had become rather difficult following sudden restrictions on movements, the social media was the only respite for the info starved people to track the latest developments.

We can recall umpteenth instances when the newspapers or the news channels have followed up on news items purely on the basis of their appearance on popular social media outlets or after they went viral. The modern newsrooms have dedicated editorial member(s) to track the social media for the latest trend in news and to curate select items which could be developed as news.

WAY FORWARD

As the community of nations collectively and severally tackles the waves of Covid-19 and grapples with standard remedial measures of lockdowns, restrictions, curfews and by speeding up vaccinations, a new normal is still taking shape in the different spheres, including media. It is worth mentioning that media globally has always been resilient to the challenges of different time periods be it pandemics, wars, natural disasters, civil unrests etc.

It is evident that the pandemic has overwhelmed us and recast the existing order. However, the green shoots have started to appear on the horizon across domains. The stock markets are scoring new highs, the global trade is attaining the pre-Covid levels, the sale of automobiles as also the petroleum products are inching up, the consumer confidence is gaining in strength, while the different countries have loosened the purse strings to infuse capital to revive their socioeconomic matrices.

The nations are actively collaborating on the vaccine front and helping each other cope with the pandemic aftermaths.

In recent weeks, a trend of fresh recruitments in the Indian media industry, especially for the digital platforms, whether standalone or marquee firms, has been witnessed. This indicates that the media is gradually regaining a foothold and working out future growth strategies by incorporating the pandemic imperatives.

Even as the jury is still out, yet there is little doubt that media will soon reinvent itself and continue to perform its mandate of providing unbiased news to readers across different channels, formats and mediums. There is still no alternative to waking up fresh and starting the day with a crisp roll of newspaper while sipping a hot beverage!