

Indian Mass Media Commercialization: Determinants, Implications and Credibility

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Abstract

Indian mass media has a glorious history of its presence from the time of Indian freedom struggle against the British rule. It has a unique record of its growth and development journey in India. The fundamental objective of mass media is to inform, educate, and alert the citizens of a country, and further bridging the gap between the government and public by way of sharing their perspectives, moods and opinions with each other. People participation in governmental activity is very essential in a democratic country. Today's mass media has moved towards the path of commercialization against its original path of serving society by way of raising the voice of public to the policymakers and politicians so as to protect their right, respect, and recognition. Under the present study, it has been attempted to expose the underlying reality and implications of the rampant commercialization of Indian mass media on its credibility.

Key Words

Mass Media, Commercialization, Democratic System, & Credibility.

Introduction

The media is considered as the most esteemed institution because of its substantial role in the democracy. It offers a forum to public and society to ventilate the issues and concerns. Democratic system of country is based on the public participation in the governance of the state. The democracy is established exactly on the opposite principles of a socialist state, where the democracy rests upon the principle i.e. the government of the people by the people and for the people. If government exists and works for the people then it becomes inevitable for the government to know what people aspire. These aspirations and desires of the people or society are communicated to the government only through media. Therefore, the presence of free, fair and transparent media has become an essence for the effective functioning of the democracy.

Media plays an important role in imparting information and knowledge to diverse and widespread society. In the absence of free and fair media, we cannot predict the unprecedented prospective loss to the society caused by

the lack of information leading to ignorance. In such scenario public and society would be completely disconnected from the perspective, position and performance of the government. Hence, society would be in complete chaos leading to inability to take stand. Taking this supreme role of media into the consideration, media has been granted freedom of speech and expression so that information concerning almost all facets of human life could be freely circulated to the public at large. The term freedom of press implies that press has freedom to express its opinion, and to widely circulate the information. However, this freedom is not an absolute freedom as reasonable restrictions have been imposed over the freedom of media.

The current Indian media manifests certain defects that should be addressed and corrected in a democratic manner. However, if media proves incorrigible then some harsh measures may be introduced to control the deviation of media from its original objectives and operations. Now time has come when introspection by Indian media industry has become essential for maintaining its credibility and commendability further. Gradually, every person of the society has started sensing the reckless functional behaviour of Indian mass media industry. India has been passing through a transitional period in its history, moving from a feudal agricultural society to a modern industrial society. This phase is very challenging and troublesome where media support is highly desirable and worthy.

Time has come when mainstream media itself needs to go through the needs, aspirations, and media consumption habits of the society. As per Tim Lee, the basic challenge against media arises out of the dark depths of the internet itself. The fast consumption of sensationalized fake news seems real one by taking millions of people into the confidence proves the old adage absolutely right about bad money driving out the good money. Political parties with deep pocket all over the world have started employing and funding faceless sites for fake news to dupe and divide voters, tarnish their rivals and the professional players in the mainstream media. India is marketing internationally as the world's second most populous country. But we are still a nascent democracy learning how to stand on our two feet and protecting the freedoms given us by our Constitution. At present, our media is almost controlled and funded by the major corporate houses with multiple vested commercial interests. Moreover, most of the media houses are owned by the major corporate houses associated with elite and upper class people, working primarily for their own benefit.

Not only in India but all over the world also mass media credibility has been under doubt and debate for a long time. However, currently media credibility is under serious risk on account of ever-growing dominance of the capitalists and politicians in the media world. The foundation stone of commercialization of mass media in Indian has been laid down by the introduction of the liberalization, privatization, and globalization [LPG] policy in 1990s. The ever-growing commercialization in the mass media has led to the credibility crisis, which is quite against the future existence of mass media. Moreover, acute credibility crisis in mass media has led the consistent erosion in moral values, human values, democratic values, etc. Hence; both the corruption and crime are at its zenith. Mainstream mass media has been completely deviated from its original objectives of exposing real issues, questioning ruling parties and government, educating society, making society familiar with prevailing challenges, etc. to its current objectives of misleading and confusing society, branding and labeling the individuals questioning government; spreading government propaganda, rumours, and communalism; suppressing ground realities and issues; acting as agent of government, etc. so as to ensure its vested narrow interest rather than working for the protection of general interest of the society.

Method

Present research paper is descriptive cum exploratory by nature. It is based on secondary facts and figures available and accessible in different online and offline resources. Through this review paper, it has been attempted to explore the underlying reality and implications of the rampant commercialization of Indian mass media on its credibility. It also lays down recommendations for re-orienting the priorities of Indian Mass Media as envisioned by constitutional forefathers and Indian Freedom fighters as harbinger of people's voices and choices devoid of any favours or fears.

Results

Katju (2011) has been stated that at present not only media but the judiciary and bureaucracy have also become defective. Under this article, numerous prevailing defects of mass media like twisting of facts, paid news trend, making non-issue as real issues, branding tendency, etc. have been highlighted. Pande (2018) has observed that the challenges to free media have arisen out of the depth of internet with sensational fake news replacing the old-style media. The new media consumers' media preferences are driven by three main considerations like mobility, portability and personalization of news suiting their tastes. Information pollution has become a global phenomenon of the current mass media. Consistent assaults on investigative journalism have created a permanent crisis of trust and credibility between the media, the public and the government. Current media is more or less entirely controlled and funded by the major corporate houses with their vested business interests.

Indraneel (2016) has explicitly stated that media should confine itself within the jargons of ethical, neutral and objective standards apart from the legal limitations, so that the right to privacy of the individual is protected. The media's right of reporting and imparting information should prevail within the legal limits; however, the media should adhere to the minimum content of the morality in the form of ethical and unbiased reporting. The media has travelled from north pole to south pole as earlier where focus was on how to curtail restrictions on the media, and now entire focus is on how to control media or making the media more accountable. Bidwai (2011) has manifested that in the past two decades, the Indian mass media industry has clocked double-digit growth rate annually, which clearly outpaces India's GDP growth rate, which has itself risen from about 5 percent to almost 9 percent per annum. The Indian mass media industry has played a disproportionate role in shaping public perceptions to politics, electoral outcomes and the way power is exercised. Gradually, Indian mass media industry has lowered the quality of public discourse. Media expansion has led to a shrinking of the public sphere, and spread of elitist and socially retrograde values. The media no longer adequately performs the primary functions for which it is popular and credible, which give it public legitimacy, namely, informing the public, telling the truth, analyzing complex social, economic and political processes, providing a platform for public debate, and acting as the people's watchdog or conscience.

Martin (2016) has been overtly stated that still today advertizing is the major source of revenue generation for the mass media industry. Wardbring (2013) has observed that journalism has been consistently getting commercial than earlier. The journalists are not in favour of ever-growing commercialization in the field of journalism. Now it is under the observation of almost all journalists that journalism field has become more commercialized. The ideals of Swedish journalists are almost unanimous amongst journalist community i.e. each journalist supports professional autonomy, professional ethics, strong watchdog ideals i.e. free, fair and transparent journalism. Cassidy (2007) has disclosed that journalists have begun perceiving that online news are more credible than the past, and internet has been emerging as a prominent news source. Odunlami & Adaja (2015) have stated that the commercialization of media has become the irreversible aspect of the modern society, and the media are first and foremost social institution, and the social responsibility role of media is to empower the citizenry to actively participate in community and national affairs. The mass media are a national trust.

Bali, & Desai (2019) have figured out that media or news literacy has been one of the prominent measures to curtail the menace of fake news in the country. Social media is very potential tool of communication development due to its gradual increasing outreach, portability, popularity and instantaneity. Papathanassopoulos (1999) has stated that Media has moved from political orientation to commercialization. This does not mean that commercial journalism is politically inactive. Journalists are influenced by the owners of medium for which they work, and consequently, journalists have become mediators between media owners and political power.

Thakurta and Seabright (2011) have observed that the introduction of liberalization, privatization, and globalization [LPG] policy into the Indian economy has led to unprecedented and exponential expansion of media across the country. India is the world's leading country in terms of newspaper publications. However, drastic expansion in the number of newspaper publication has not led to improvement in the quality of newspapers. Intensification of competition in the media has led to downfall in the ethical standard of media. DayaKishanThussu, professor of international communication at the University of Westminster, has characterised the Murdochisation of the Indian media as a process which involves the shift of media power from the public to privately owned, transnational, multimedia corporations controlling both delivery systems and the content of global information networks. The concentration of media ownership in the hands of large corporate groups; the increasing reliance on advertising revenue leading to a frenzied quest for ever-higher ratings; an exaggerated focus on what is often dubiously defined as breaking news, so-called exclusive stories and the use of anything goes tactics; a restriction of topics to those that will interest the affluent middle class (the most profitable targets for advertisers); a sexing-up of news content and catering to the lowest common denominator; an increasingly uncomfortable closeness between marketing and editorial departments; and the transformation of news into a commodity. These are all facets of Murdochisation that can be seen across large sections of the media in India.

Oberiri (2016) has opined that the commercialization poses a huge threat to journalism practice. Introduction of commercialization of media proves to be a challenge against the fairness and objectivity of reporting. The commercialization of media is an unethical and unprofessional practice that intends to damage the image of both the journalism and media, which negates its responsibility to society. Bharali & Goswami (2018) have observed that fake news and its repercussions have become the worldwide issues of concern. Today's media has become a web of propaganda, and views have surpassed news. Media seems to be irresponsible in terms of portraying credibility, reliability and practicality. Outflow of fake news leads to news saturation for audience/readers, which results in news stagnation in the media industry. Singh & Singh (2016) have stated that majority of students believe on the information being provided the different news channels. Political parties, large corporate houses, and paid news are mainly responsible for diminishing credibility of news. Tandon (2020) has observed that phenomenal growth of media in India, including unregulated social media has led to substantial decline in the credibility and accountability of media. The establishment of new mass media commission may address this issue effectively. Ansari (2019) has manifested that media must be impartial and unprejudiced in the coverage of news and views concerning all segments of society in order to play its designated role in the society.

Discussion

The Indian media consists of several different types of communications of mass media: television, radio, cinema, newspapers, magazines, and Internet-based websites/portals. Mass media can be divided into four categories as Traditional Media [Folk Art], Print Media [News Papers & Magazines], Electronic Media [Television Channels], and New Media [Technology driven media or Internet operated media]. Indian media came into the active existence since the late 18th century. The print media started in India as early as 1780. Radio broadcasting began its operation in 1927. Indian media is among the oldest in the world. Many of the media are controlled by large, for-profit corporations, which reap revenue from advertising, subscriptions, and sale of copyrighted material. Indian media had been accused by many of spreading fake news, and many regards Indian media as fake media. Today there are 118239 media publications, 38933 weekly news papers and magazines, 17160 daily news papers, more than 880 satellite television channels, more than 380 news television channels, and over 550 non-news entertainment radio stations [Media Ownership Monitor India].

Commercialization of Mass Media: Indian Context

Commercialization of mass media across the world is not a new phenomenon. However, absolute commercialization of mass media is a new phenomenon, which is quite unfavourable and unacceptable for both the media and society as well. Commercialization led by liberalization has introduced a cut throat and unhealthy competition in the media. A serious concern is this that the private channels of the media are continuously engaged in combating with one another for the Television Rating Points (TRP). As a result of which the channels instead of imparting objective and fair news, they mould, twist and turn the news to make it more spicy and appealing to the public. So now the thrust of the channels is to project such news which is catching and appealing, rather than the real and factual news. The consequences of this are very grave because the main objective and the focus of the media are totally grounded and the financial considerations are allowed to play a major role in the function of imparting information. Today the media instead of only imparting the news, bombards the public with their views, opinions and comments to an extent that the public gets psyched by their comments, opinion and takes a decision which suits the interest of the media, rather than their own interest.

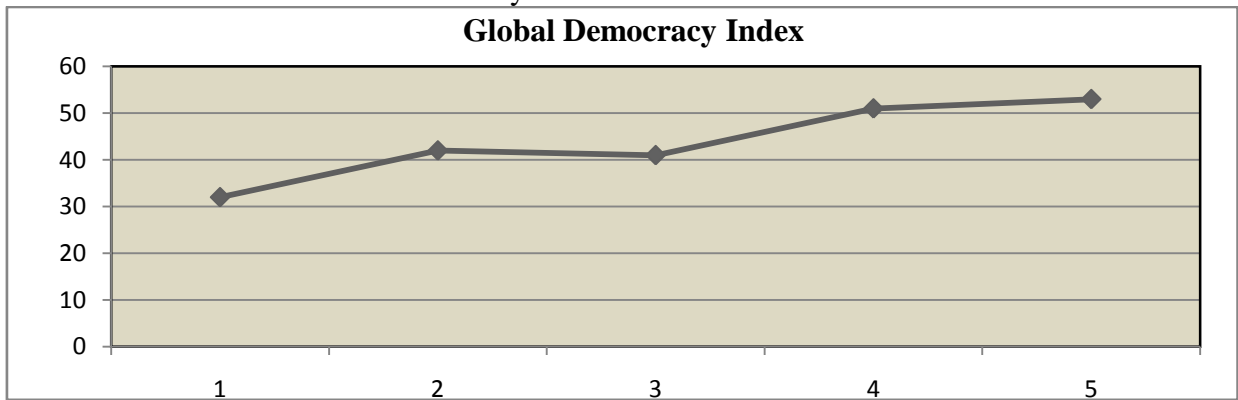
Indian Mass Media Credibility under Question

The Indian media now facing a serious crisis of credibility. If it does not reform itself, it will find its greatest asset getting rapidly devalued and eventually vanishing. Robbed of authenticity, reliability and credibility, the media will cease to matter to large numbers of people except as a source of cheap entertainment and titillation. Journalism will then cease to be all that makes it worthy and socially relevant: an honest, investigative, analytical, public-oriented and ethical pursuit. That would be a grave tragedy and a terrible disservice both to democracy and to the causes of enlightening and empowering the public. In the long term, this weakens a government's own vital need for objective and verified information from sources outside its own, and creates a permanent crisis of trust and credibility between the media, the public and the government.

Factors Influencing Commercialization and Damaging Credibility of Indian Mass Media

There are numerous factors which led the acute commercialization of mass media in India that need to be analyzed and diagnosed carefully so as to comprehend the prevailing scenario of India mass media altogether. The Indian media display certain defects. These should ideally be addressed and corrected in a democratic manner. But if the media prove incorrigible, harsh measures may be called for. The ongoing pathetic and deteriorating condition of mass media urgently demands self introspection by Indian media. Almost every section of the society, not only those in authority but even common men have started understanding the irresponsible attitude and behavior of media across country. A speedy consumption of sensationalized fake news masquerading as real news by unsuspecting millions proves the old adage correct about bad money ultimately driving out the good one. It is even more sinister that political parties, with deep pockets all over the world, are beginning to employ and fund faceless sites for fake news to dupe and divide the voters, tarnish their rivals and the professional players in the mainstream media. We may market India as the world's second biggest democracy but truth be told, we are still a nascent democracy learning how to stand on our two feet and guard the freedoms promised by our Constitution. Our media is now more or less entirely controlled and funded by major corporate houses with multiple business interests. And most corporate houses, with media properties, consist of and benefit the upper caste and upper classes.

Figure.01
Global Democracy Index of India from 2016 to 2020



Source: *Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU]*

Note: 1-2016, 2-2017, 3-2018, 4-2019, & 5-2020

The media is considered as the bedrock of the democracy. This is because it gives to the people requisite channel to ventilate their thoughts. The democracy is founded on the principle that the public has a say in the governance of the state, and the press gives them a forum to say what they want. A very different position prevails in the socialist's states which are based upon the Marxian concept, where the people are prohibited from expressing themselves against the government or the government policies. The democracy is founded exactly on the opposite principles of a socialist state, where the democracy rests upon the principle i.e. the government of the people by the people and for the people. So if the government is going to prevail for the people it is necessary for the government to know what the people desire or aspire. Such desires or aspirations of public or society are communicated to the government only and only by the media. That is why it is often said that the media plays a crucial role in the effective functioning of the democracy. The media plays an important role in imparting information to the public. In the absence of the media one cannot imagine the mess caused by lack of information leading to ignorance. In such a situation the public will be unable to know what the government is doing and what they are to do; in which case the society will be in a complete chaos. Realizing this situation the media is granted the freedom of speech and expression through which information regarding almost all the aspects of human life should be imparted to the public at large. Thus crony capitalism, capitalist hegemony in the economic system of the country, and monopoly of capitalists in the mass media industry cause the commercialization in mass media industry. As per the reports of DataLEADS and Reporters Without Borders, Indian is one of the biggest media markets in the world. Only a handful people control media ownership. The transparency in the inner structure of media organization is dwindling, and putting the credibility of media at stake. Most of the Indian media houses are owned and controlled by the politically affiliated people and industrialists.

Implications of Commercialization of Indian Mass Media over Its Credibility

Crony capitalism led by the liberal economic policy has paved the way for commercialization of mass media industry that has adversely affected the credibility of the Indian mass media industry in different ways. Some of the major defects observed as implications of the commercialization of mass media industry on its credibility as are as follows:

- **Twisting of Facts**

Today media has lost its capability and strength to put the facts as it is in the original form before public. It has been indulged in the manipulation of facts due to its vested interest and political pressure. Therefore, whatever news we are shown to the public by the mainstream media they are fabricated, not original. However, there is no consistency between fabricated and original versions of news. Thus, watching news does not matter for the purpose of having real understanding to different social issues.

▪ **Paid News Syndrome**

Commercialization has promoted and popularized the paid news culture in mass media industry that attempts to present the favourable story before the society in place of real story of the cases being discussed and debated by different media houses across the country. Thus, media takes to show that is paid, not which is unpaid, restricted and challenging. Thus, media is indulged in changing the perception and opinion of the society rather than putting the facts impartially before the society and giving them opportunity to think at their own. This practice is great shock to the credibility of media. Nowadays media is absolutely engaged in propagating government’s ideology, stands, decisions, and actions irrespective of their social, economic and political implications. It is very much spectacular during the State Assembly and Parliament elections.

Figure.02
Paid News Cases



Source: Election Commission India

▪ **Making Non-Issues as Real Issues**

The commercialized media industry has started distracting the society from the ground realities and diverting their mind towards the trivial or unimportant or insignificant issues that are nothing against the real and emerging issues. This seems like systematic efforts of mass media to distract from ground level issues like unemployment, deteriorating education system, electoral reform, police reform, judiciary independence, media independence, freedom of expression, right to dissent, right to privacy, right to education, right to employment, right to food, right to dignified life, communalism, casteism, communalization and criminalization of politics, politicization of academic institutions, politicization of judiciary and bureaucratic system, judicial activism, damaging credibility and deteriorating conditions of banking system, privatization of public sector undertaking, social versus economic basis of reservation, domestic violence, increasing crimes against women, child labour, bonded labour, environment conservation, pollutions, media activism, protection of independent journalists and journalism, political power abuse, declining economic system, poor healthcare system, poverty, starvation, farmer suicide, student suicide, political funding, monetization of politics, ever-growing custodial deaths, different ever-growing social evils, etc.

▪ **Branding Trend**

In today’s media it is very popular fashion among media to brand individuals whoever asks questions from government, expressing disagreement with government stands, decisions, and policies, or against government. Thus every such person is branded or labeled as anti-national or seditious, villain by the media so as suppress their voices and dissents. Muslims are symbolized as terrorist and people against the government’s ideology and policies are being labeled as anti-national.

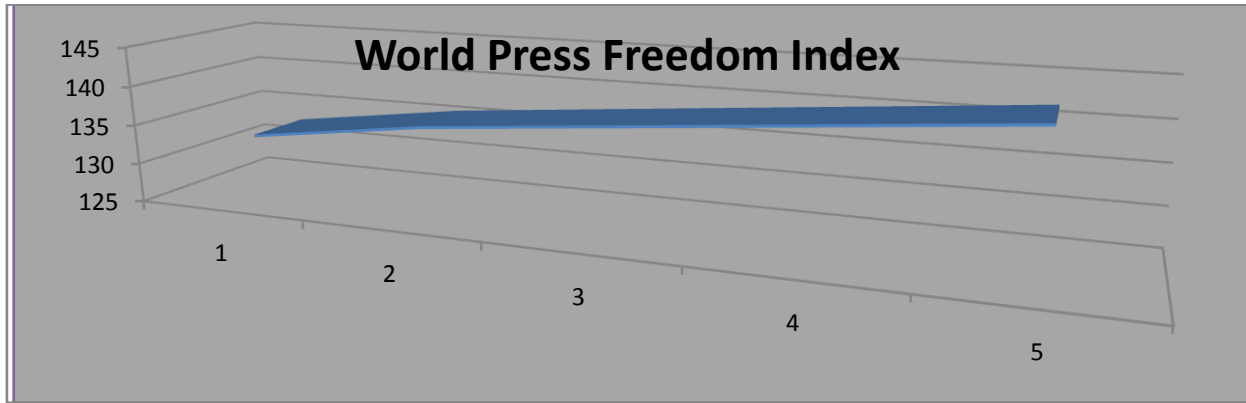
▪ **Increasing Attacks at and Assassinations of Impartial and Independent Media Persons**

At present, attacks at and assassinations of impartial and independent media persons including journalists and news reporters have become very common and acceptable. Currently, media persons who are playing their role

in media in free, fair, and transparent manner i.e. not working in the interest of government, their future is uncertain and full of risks. Thus, there is no space for the impartial journalism and reporting in the prevailing modern media world. As per Reporters Without Borders [RFS]'s Report, India's position in 2020 in Press Freedom Index is 142nd out of 180 countries i.e. India is one of the deadliest places for journalist in the world. India's position in this Press Freedom Index for last five years [2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020] is 133, 136, 138, 140, and 142 respectively. Thus, India's press freedom has been gradually coming down for last five years that can never be a good sign for the largest multicultural democracy.

Figure.03

World Press Freedom Index of India out of 180 countries of the world from 2016 to 2020



Source: Reporters Without Border [RSF]

Note: 1-2016, 2-2017, 3-2018, 4-2019, & 5-2020

Corporatization of Media

At the outset, media in our country was largely owned by middle class and upper middle class intellectuals, whose primary goal was never profit making from this profession. The news circulation was driven by social reforms. However, news circulated by the then media did not suffer from trivialism and sensationalism as widely and frequently observed in today's media. In current media world, most of the media houses are owned and controlled by large corporate entities, and hence currently media houses are operated like commercial enterprises. Therefore, news being circulated and covered by the media houses are primarily corporate vested interest driven rather than social interest driven.

Conclusion

Indian Mass Media has made a long journey from North Pole to South Pole. The introduction of new economic policy [LPG-Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization] laid the foundation stone of commercialization of media industry in twentieth century. At the outset where it was public driven whereas today it has been profit driven. The underlying story behind the rampant commercialization of Indian mass media is really very shocking, sensitive, and surprising one. Today media houses are almost dependent on advertisement revenue which comes from the corporate world and government itself whereas major client/customer of Indian mass media is government itself. Corporate world has vested interest in the stability of government as instability in government would lead to changes in policies that might be challenging and unfavorable to corporate world in maintaining their earning and comfort zone. Most of the media houses are owned by a few giant corporate houses. Thus, media consolidation is an important factor responsible to the commercialization of mass media. Government has strong command over media houses as a major customer of the media industry. Therefore, it is next to impossible for media to displease the ruling party or government by way of showing anything against the government's functioning, exposing the policy and execution flaws of the ruling party.

Indian Mass Media has lost its credibility in the society and now it has turned into a forum or system of misguiding, confusing or diverting the attention of public or common men from the real and ground level issues by way of creating information/news pollution. There is complete absence of worthy debate and discussion and

critical analysis of the facts being presented by the government or political leaders in the media. There has been a strong cut throat competition among the journalists or news anchors to become loyal and close to ruling party or government so as to ensure his future in the industry.

However, existence of free and fair media is essential for ensuring democracy, institutions, law and order, pluralistic society in the country. There is always some alternative to improve the system if the associated people are really interested and committed to bring improvement in the system, which can be manifested as where is will, there is way. Thus, deteriorating credibility of media led by acute commercialization and some other related factors could be checked further and media credibility could be resumed in a systematic manner with consistent and dedicated efforts of public. For this purpose following recommendations may be considered:

- Every person, especially common men should promote free and fair media only, not biased and partisan media.
- Government advertisement budget should be reduced significantly and only public sector media should be used for government advertisements [Door Darshan and All India Radio]. The private media should be kept away from the government advertisement campaign for any purpose be it election or government policy and programme related i.e. no government or public fund based advertisement should be made through private sector media houses.
- Every person, especially common man should not only promote but fund also the independent and emerging media of the country.
- Every person, especially common man should gradually switch to alternative media from mainstream media provided if mainstream media is not covering issues impartially.
- Media should be regulated by an autonomous and independent regulatory body. This regulatory body should not have of any political party affiliated person, bureaucrat, religious figure rather there should be free and fair undisputed veteran media persons as member. Moreover, government should not have any direct or indirect control over the constitution and regulation of such body i.e. it should be self-regulated body governed democratically by media persons.
- Legislation should be introduced for the autonomy and independence of media from government. There should not be any direct or indirect intervention of government in mass media, rather its functioning should be reviewed by the judiciary from time to time depending upon circumstances as it is the fourth pillar of the democracy whose free and fair existence is must for the social, economic and political justice of the citizens.

If aforesaid recommendations are taken into the consideration then media credibility could be resumed and commercialization of media could also be curbed to every possible extent.

Research Terminology

▪ **Mass Media**

Mass media refers to print media [news papers and magazines] and electronic media [radio and television channels]

▪ **Commercialization**

Commercialization refers to the working and operation of mass media driven by profit generation and wealth creation as well.

▪ **Credibility**

Credibility refers to the level of trust of society to the information being circulated by mass media.

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Conflict of Interest

There is nothing as such conflict interest associated with this research article.

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