

Sandeep Bhushan, *The Indian Newsroom: Studios, Stars and the Unmaking of Reporters*

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A terse line in the introduction to the book 'The Indian Newsroom', explains the purpose of the work in the following way – 'The central focus of the book is the dynamics of news creation'. Further, in the words of the author in the concluding lines of his introductory chapter 'This book is an enterprise that simultaneously intersects with market, technology, popular culture, state and democracy'. As media teachers, students and researchers come to see early in their careers, it is not so much the enumeration of headings or 'aspects' of the media that really counts. A standard textbook for media students would of course list all these aspects and deal with them in a somewhat segmented way that also underlies the course modules integral to a decent media syllabus. But this book is special for demonstrating how the technological-technical, political, sociological and market forces tangle with each other in no particular causal sequence to create a 'dynamics of news creation' on a given day. Once you enter the digital era, its inherently archiving impulse ends up with a very large stock of material for a short period, resulting in a 'lot of history' for what may otherwise seem a brief period of time to those accustomed to long temporal scales with scarce empirical material. Our historical sense is still unused to such plethora and the chaotic media histories can seem unmanageably disordered or even incoherent. Better used to scraping scarce empirical material to construct a historical narrative, imagine a plight where you have too much building material and the standard book format with 200 pages to have your say!

Remember, despite the appearance of historical density and layering, the media in question has a history of barely four decades, which only emphasizes how fast-changing the news media has been in recent times. In the 2020s, the 1990s already seem disproportionately remote,

like a screen requiring frequent refreshing to register the latest updates. A good example may be the way in which TV anchors change their tacks during vote counting after the elections, renewing their tales over and over again to cope with the twisting and turning statistic on the graphic displays! If the reception of news has been through a sea change since the 1980s, so have matters behind the screen, given the myriad ways of the merging and churning of the technical, political, social and personal aspects that give us the 24x7 cycles. It is rare for a volume on the media to give a sense of this flux despite the attempts to chase the rapid media dynamic down to its moments of thoughtful stillness or models and templates of daily professional practices.

Another important reason for which I would recommend this book is that it gives the reader an inside view into the profession and forces shaping the studio foreground. This is rare in the field of media and entertainment, although the world of entertainment makes up for it through tabloid gossip and titillating rumors. As far as I am aware, this is only the second book based on extensive ethnography by an insider, the first one being Somnath Batabyal's 'Making News in India, Star News and Star Ananda' (2012), based on his PhD thesis which I also reviewed several years ago. Apart from the theoretical and ethical difficulties in doing such surveys, except perhaps as a spy, the undertaking may trigger high levels of hostility among colleagues and seniors. Clearly, in both cases, the authors were willing to risk the inevitable unpopularity. Media personnel who see themselves as the ultimate voyeurs to society understandably do not want a pair of eyes watching them make their sly moves. The author presents a judicious mix of personal experience and anecdotal illustrations from colleagues that inform his analysis and

generalized observations. Although hard quantitative data on Indian media is equally difficult to collate and decipher, an ethnographic study helps a reader better in comprehending the news making process, going beyond the skeletal frame that one may be able to infer from cold data.

Before delving into the chapters of the volume, it is important to underline that though the subtitle of the book 'Studios, Stars and the Unmaking of the Reporters' (my emphasis), may sound innocuous to begin with, it turns out to be a heavily loaded rubric. This is because 'unmaking' also indicates the troubling dilemmas that seem to have impelled the author to write the book in the first place. In its seven chapters, the volume deals with the downright matter of the revenue models followed by privately-owned Indian news TV, its expansion from a virtual zero in the 1990s, as the media begins to seem coterminous with the liberalization datelines. The first three chapters, successively 'The Newsroom Melt Down', 'In the Service of Power: The TV Broadcast Industry in India', and 'Promoters in the Newsroom: Controlling the Discourse', focus on the economic and regulatory aspects of an evolving industry that have shaped the Indian TV news culture. The revenue models with their fatal flaws, the political regimentation in both insinuated and outright senses, and finally the proprietorial control over the content, these did not drop out of the sky and are rightly seen evolving through the racy narrative of the book. There is however a sense of the inevitable slide down a steep gradient of events and policy decisions that have finally landed us with the shouting matches of the TV studios in our own time. The fifth and sixth chapters on the new technologies and their affordances, as well as the TV studio as the news arena, will have you watch the forlorn figure of the professional reporter being eased out of his toeholds one after the other. The excuse may be technological but the reasons are driven by an economic logic indifferent to the value of news. The entire volume is thus about a systematic expulsion of hard news as well as the news reporter, leaving the rhetorical churning to form the bulk of the stuff of TV news in our time. It is easy to forget that news-gathering and presentation are no longer the focus. And the news-gathering protagonist is on his way out looking for alternate employment. It

is the TV star who takes over, turning the studio into a bogus microcosm of society and polity!

While the liberal minded audience and analysts are well aware of the rhetorical excesses and the vacuous-ness of the TV debates that have come to dominate our screens today, a very large population is perhaps content with the 'outrage industry' that succeeds in creating a sense of great significance around editorial tantrums and hysterics in the name of news. Hopefully, the Indian TV audience will soon see the emptiness behind the high passion on display on a daily basis. The earth-shaking rhetoric of 'the nation wants to know' seems seductive to an audience otherwise living dull, insignificant lives. None of these tricks are really helping the TV news industry sort out its revenue problems however, as it sinks deeper into the morass of political dependence and brazen partisanship. Even today, it is far from clear if the price of capitulation proves substantial enough to run a news channel and pay its staff well for their ever-renewing gimmicks of audience engagement. In fact, the real value of a TV channel may be measured more accurately through the intangibles – the political influence and dividends it may bring in.

Probably the most insightful as well as the gloomiest part of the book deals with the liberal segments (in the TV news industry) that continue to show signs of impartiality and to deliver at least a trickle of genuine news. The liberal circles are already so sclerotic, encrusted and smug in their political correctness in their elitist ivory towers that they leave very little margin for reflexivity and learning. This is a sad reflection on the left-liberal society in general that arrived at a tacit consensus prematurely and sticks to it with no hope for fresh inroads and inputs from the big bad world of daily political developments. The sections on NDTV as a case deserve a special focus despite the sadness it may generate. To see fresh and critical thinking harden into narcissistic, immovable political correctness is symptomatic not simply of the TV news industry, but perhaps society at large. Probably the only lack in the volume is the absence of a neater tapering off if not conclusions, suggestions, perspectives, future scenarios that would help a reader distance herself from the mess to seek some new beginnings. My reading of the book culminated in much sighing, none of it with relief!