

# Media monopoly and unacceptable media practices

After analysing the recent events in the West that led to the exposure of media monopoly and unacceptable practices forced on working journalists of the media empire of News Corporation leading to public disgust at the press and closure of mass circulated tabloid in Britain *News of the World*, this meeting of the National Executive of National Union of Journalists (India) held in Ujjain from July 30 and 31, draws attention to the grave danger to public interest if monopolies are allowed to grow in the media world. That the cross ownership of the Western media involving print, TV, publishing and cable was mainly responsible for the malpractices exposed in the last three months in leading media organisations in the Western democracies including the Prime Ministers eating out of the hand of a media mogul, is an object lesson to our government and public leaders about growing unhealthy trends in the media in our democracy too.

A significant revelation in this murky event was the competitive militancy forced on the journalists working in leading newspapers to go for exclusives and prurient items that violated all canons of good journalistic practices. Even reputed publications like *New York Times* fall a prey to such machinations in the competitive muck racking. That after getting the illusive benefits of these practices to build mass circulations and boost profits the owners of the News Corporation have distanced themselves from responsibility for these practices, itself exposes how irresponsible and cowardly are these owners who parade their so-called ability to turn round loss making

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newspapers. It is also significant that these corporate owners were able to push their despicable agenda over the protests of the working journalists mainly because they first destroyed the newspaper unions through enforcing individual contracts as against the long existing collective contracts through the Unions with political leaders helping in the process in return for critical support from these owner's publications.

The newspaper owners in India who are also seeking to weaken editorial responsibility and independence and destroy working journalists' unions therefore pose a grave danger in their aim to Indian democracy itself. There has to be a strong and rising public demand for legislative and other steps to prevent this devil of media monopolies from raising their heads in India too if a repeat of Murdoch and his unbecoming practices are not to take roots in our country.

We reiterate that working journalists' independence and collective action through their unions is a precondition for protecting the robustness and fairness of the Press and other media. This has now been amply demonstrated by the events around News Corporation. In this connection the NUJ (I) proudly recalls that it had adopted a code of ethics known as Agra Declaration as far back as 35 years ago. Implementation of such a code requires that working journalists are able to resist the attempts of narrow minded and only profit-oriented media owners who have never been known for upholding what really is

the public interest. In many cases they tend to mask corporate interest as public interest and seek to leverage the power of the Press to further their interest by manipulating political forces as has now been fully admitted in the UK example even by the current British Prime Minister as well as former holders of this august office.

Political parties in power and sometimes in opposition have managed to block critical content in news and current affairs channels in several states. This meeting of the National Executive of the NUJ (India) is of the considered opinion that any objection/complaint regarding programmes on TV channels/online media should be raised before courts of law/proposed Media Council and action if any should only be taken under the due process of the law. The proposals of several state governments to create state sponsored or mandated monopolies in channel distribution pose a grave danger to freedom of expression which is the bedrock of a vibrant democracy.

The NUJ (I), therefore, demands that the Government initiate a process for formulating legislative and other legal procedures to prevent media monopolies from arising through mergers, acquisitions and launches of new media events. Government must also strictly implement the half a century tested Working Journalists Act and extend it to all media concerns and employees as well as follow up the recommendations of the Press Council of India which must be expanded to become a truly effective Media Council as demanded for quite some time by the NUJ (I).