

## **Media Research: Let Us Think Indian**

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— Text of the keynote address delivered at a session of the National Conference on *Research Methodology in Journalism and Mass Communication: De-westernizing Media Studies*, organized at Tezpur, Assam, by Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University, November 26-28, 2010. Dr Kiran Thakur was a journalist for three decades before joining Department of Communication and Journalism, University of Pune, as Professor and Head. After retirement in 2007, he is an adjunct faculty with University of Mumbai and FLAME School of Communication in Pune. He is Principal Investigator of UGC-funded Major Research Project on **Language of English Newspapers in India**. He blogs at <http://mediasceneindia.blogspot.com> —

Let me begin by confessing. I am a misfit in such a conference of media research veterans who have spent decades contributing to the body of knowledge in communication studies. I am only a media professional-turned-teacher after spending over 30 years reporting for a news agency and some newspapers. My peers in newspaper industry view me with suspicion about my new role when I talk about need for media research. The veterans in research tend to treat me with contempt because I know very little about the communication theories and research methodologies. Yet, I ventured to be here at this conference because this gives me an opportunity to express my experiences and views. This I do with a sincere hope that the communication scholars here will respond to my queries and doubts and offer some suggestions. This, trust me, is not to question the existing approach, but to learn as an eager student of media research.

This, in that sense, is not a structured keynote address, but is a random expression of several points not articulated in an organised manner.

I have experienced that most media schools in the country do not have adequate number of teachers to teach subjects like news reporting, editing, PR, Advertising, Broadcast Journalism, or conversion of new media. Sound experience in relevant profession in these areas is crucial if the students are to join the industry as professionals. Criterion to be a full time teacher in any of these areas is, however, not professional experience. The UGC insists that aspirants need be only NET or SLET pass. Experienced professionals, on the other hand, are not very enthusiastic to be full time teachers because they draw better salaries in the industry. In addition, they do not get the glamour and job satisfaction they get in their professions. With the result, the media schools have to depend on guest faculty or visiting teachers drawn from the local industry, to teach these subjects. These visiting professionals do not have time and also inclination to provide the students with

perspectives of communication theories. Most of them find media research as an academic exercise with which the industry has nothing to do.

Teachers with NET or SLET qualifications, but without professional experience, may not be aware of the ground realities of the profession. They may have excellent understanding of communication theories and research methods, but several of them may not have exposure to the issues in the industry that need to be taken up for serious academic studies. More important than these facts is that most students plan to be professionals and have little interest in academic research. Most students want to be Rajdeep Sardesai and Barkha Dutts. Opportunities in research field are not known to them. Newspapers, television news channels, ad agencies and PR firms do not offer them lucrative jobs in research.

Most students, therefore, rarely produce quality communication research as can be seen from the lists of Master's dissertations. The dissertations for Master's, and even for MPhil or PhD degrees, are for just the degrees. Very few studies are useful to the profession. Fewer have rigour and quality required for international conferences and journals.

There is yet another painful fact. Many teachers, once they attain certain positions such as Professors or Readers, rarely find it worthwhile to carry out research if it is not going to further advance their careers. My saying so may offend my colleagues. But consider this: UGC has received only two proposals each for Major Research and Minor Research in Mass Communication this time. Compare this with other faculties in humanities and social sciences: Commerce has 105 proposals, History 63, and Management 42. <http://www.ugc.ac.in/notices/schedulehrp.pdf> (notices/schedulehrp.pdf, 2010).

It will, however, be unfair not to admit that Lecturers, Readers and Professors in media schools have a lot of teaching and administrative workload. It is not easy for them to find time for research.

Whatever be the reasons, it boils down to this: we do not have good research teachers who carry out media studies fit to be published in international journals and conferences, at the same time be of utility in the profession.

Prof CSHN Murthy, the organiser of this conference, echoed sentiments of several Indian scholars who are obliged to follow the style and methodologies of their counterparts in USA and UK. This cannot be avoided if the research is to be published in peer-reviewed international journals. The Indian research rarely gets published in international journals for several reasons. One of them is that the editors of these journals and peers/reviewers

are mostly, I believe, from the West. They fail to understand or appreciate the research topic, the methodology and sample size mentioned in the abstract or research proposal. This results in the rejection of the paper at this stage itself. If the abstract or proposal is approved, the paper is likely to be returned by the peers if they do not realise the importance of the Indian subject.

One reason cited for the rejection is lack of references from international literature. Then there could be the bias in favour of qualitative research. Without going into details of quantitative versus qualitative debate, I will only express the view that Indian scholars opt for the research mainly because of the presumption that the peers would prefer quantitative, and not the qualitative study. I do not have empirical data to substantiate this, but several colleagues have expressed their opinion when I spoke to them about this in recent times.

A word about sampling methods: I have my own doubts about the sampling methods of the Western scholars. The research papers available through web search quite often show purposive sample drawn from, say a class of students in a college or institute. Here is one example: It is from a paper published in journal Communication Research. The study involved 287 students in a German college. The summary of the outcome of the study, as published in <http://www.physorg.com/news163852240.html> , retrieved on November 17, 2010, concluded, and I quote:

“The last thing most people in a bad love affair want to do is to read informational articles about romance. But people facing financial difficulties often choose to read articles which may help them cope with their money problems.

“Those are some of the findings of a new study that aimed to discover whether people use the news media to escape from their problems or find information on how to cope with them. Abstract of the paper published by Communication Research, April 2009 is available at <http://crx.sagepub.com/content/36/2/207.abstract>.”

I draw your attention to the fact that the study involved only students in a small country, but its conclusions, at least in the news coverage offered by the researchers, make a categorical statement mentioning ‘people’ at large. It was a purposive sample drawn from college students. These students may have different family, economic, social or geographical backgrounds. My point is: Is it proper to generalize the conclusion in respect of ‘people’ who would include adults, men and women, in different background. I seek response to my query from Indian communication scholars mostly supervising doctoral theses or Master’s dissertations. This is because I have often come across such scholars who do not accept such generalisation if their junior researchers draw similar conclusions after their quantitative studies.

I believe that the western scholars are not exposed to the media issues in the Indian situation. We cannot blame them, therefore, if they reject any proposal for study on such media issues when 150-word abstracts are sent to them. Even in India, scholars trusting only the quantitative studies, frown upon quantitative data as I have experienced it recently. Here is one example:

A Master's final year student working under me submitted her graduation project on Paid News. Everyone in print and electronic journalism and in media schools knows that this phenomenon is prevalent for a long time in India. It does exist, but there is no concrete proof to substantiate because the owners stoutly opposed efforts to indict the guilty. The Press Council of India, the Editors Guild of India, the Election Commission, the Union government, and journalists who are keen to expose the malpractice, remained helpless in this matter. Nothing has come out of the debate in these august forums, beyond condemnation in blogs and websites. No serious academic research has been conducted by communication scholars. This is my conclusion after I made a concerted effort to inquire from peers in various places.

Against this background, I helped this student to meet the men in the print media who minted money through the paid news. She met politicians who made payments for laudatory contents in the news columns during the campaign of the last state assembly election in Maharashtra. Among the sources to provide the data for the study were former Corporate Editor of a very influential Marathi chain newspaper, and ex-general manager of its competitor. Both gave minute details of the operations to earn money for their masters, including 'tariff' (rate card as they called it) for paid news for front page, inside pages, with and without photographs, colour and black & white printing, and so on. They explained how the editorial staff was kept out of the operation. A separate section consisting of advertising department functionaries and retired 'writers' (ex-journalists) handled the content creation for the newspaper page. This page was not marked as 'Advertisement'.

She interviewed owner of a small time PR consultancy that served as a conduit between the poll managers and newspaper owners' representatives. The consultancy would write stories and organise photographs for such contents.

The researcher met six candidates to find how they exploited the paid news practice. These candidates belonged to different parties.

She interviewed journalists of two newspapers which did not indulge in any corrupt practice, as was vouched even by their rivals.

Her paper was not (and I repeat NOT) appreciated at all by the scholar who evaluated her performance. The reason he gave was that she did not have adequate data. He failed to appreciate that her sources were top executives, and have given details which were not

available to PCI, Editors' Guild, or others. I had no way to convince him.

Now, let us face it. The western media scholars would never come to know about the malpractice of paid news, because Indian academicians would not study it in absence of quantifiable data. There are scores of articles on this issue in magazines and websites all right, but these are not written within the framework and rigour of the media research methods and communication theories. There is no mention of paid news in international publications now. Any abstract/proposal or a paper from a young researcher is most likely to be ignored by peer-reviewers in absence of citation related to this issue in these publications.

Same is the case of the Times of India's business venture **Medianet** that created a major controversy after it was launched in 2003. As you are aware, a corporate house can enter into a contract with ToI for a period and buy space for favourable contents without making these appear as advertisement or PR stuff. Journalists vehemently protested in their columns, blogs, and websites as credibility of print journalism was at stake since Medianet came from the largest publication house. Sure enough, this concept was picked up unabashedly by smaller newspapers in English and regional languages.

Are there academic studies on the Medianet phenomenon? I am not aware, but I strongly feel media scholars should study this phenomenon with different approaches. It is not important if international conferences and journals would or would not accept such papers, but this is most certainly important for posterity. How else would future students and young journalists know what happened in this decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century?

My another point relates to journalistic research. I asked some senior scholars if journalistic research is considered a type/category of media/communication studies. The reply was unanimous and a categorical NO! Academicians and theoreticians would not waste time to discuss such a non-issue. In USA, UK or in India and other Asian countries, the scholars are unanimous that research of professional journalists does not deserve to be in the domain of media studies. It is probably because the journalist's research for a newspaper story does not follow the structure and discipline of the academic research. Media scholars have scant respect for the professionals; and the converse is equally true. It is not that professionals demand that their type of research deserves to be included in the academic research domain. It is also true that most media teachers in India have little time to document how a particularly important story was chased, and researched for references from libraries and sources.

Let me give you an example. We have a very important book, *Everyone Loves A Good Drought*, authored by P Sainath, who worked on the Times of India fellowship in the year

1992. He identified two poorest districts each in the five poorest states of the country — Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. It was not an outcome of a classical media research within conceptual frame of a communication theory. He used all his journalistic tools and skills to portray poverty in these places. The articles published by the ToI created controversy and generated debate among politicians and bureaucrats. The authorities were compelled to take action, proving the utility of his research. Was his research useful? It was indeed, but do the media scholars acknowledge that his was the research which needs to be acknowledged in the domain of media studies?

To me, his research methods deserve to be studied by young journalists and teachers so that they could try to use them in their career later. Similar studies were carried out by journalists like Sucheta Dalal, who exposed scams in the stock markets. Tehelka's methods to expose corruption in high places also need to be studied by students and teachers of journalism.

Then there were serious, detailed newspaper stories on grave situation that led to farmers' suicide. To me journalistic research for such stories on topical issues should find place in media and cultural studies. Some of these could have scope for interdisciplinary research. We notice that popular topics for research for PhD and Master's dissertations in India include comparative/content analysis, and impact/effect studies. These do have importance, but my poser is: Shouldn't we encourage studies on production, new trends in newspaper coverage, change in the approach of the publishers in providing fashion and lifestyle at the cost of stories on farming and rural economy? Do we have studies on readers' preferences vis-à-vis the contents offered by the editors at the behest of the publishers?

I often wonder what happens to the journalists and their publishers who are indicted by Press Council of India. Are they punished? Do they change their attitude and be more responsible while they write stories later on? Do the readers and advertisers notice the strictures passed by the Press Council of India? Does the credibility of such newspaper take a beating, and is reflected in terms of lower circulation and lower ad revenue?

Statistical data indicates that newspaper circulation is going up in India at a time when their counterparts in USA have been reporting massive loss of revenue, and even closure of reputed dailies. Do we have any study on the readers' perspective? This will be an important study given that the readers do not write to the publishers expressing unhappiness over the contents, errors and sloppy casual coverage in the newspapers. This should be considered against the backdrop of laments expressed by people during the informal conversations.

I will like to share my experience after I concluded a study on contents of website of political parties and their electoral candidates two years ago. It was conducted in a research institute, not belonging to a University. My colleague and I found that the political parties and the candidates hosted website with great fanfare during the campaign of the last Lok Sabha elections. But except a few, most of them were not aware about how to make the contents more effective and interactive to exploit this new medium for electoral gains. They did not provide even the basic contents, such as Contact Us in which they should have given their phone numbers and e-mail Ids. I thought we had done a good job that could educate the politicians, and even the website designers, so that there would be better contents and interactivity. I decided to write a feature for newspapers, but our boss in the research institute very categorically asked me not to bother. His argument was, and I quote, “Educating people through general newspapers is not our job. We should restrict ourselves to research publications.” I tried to reason with him. He relented to allow me to write for newspapers **only after, and only if**, a reputed international journal published our paper. I gave up the idea because I knew it could be one year or more for an international journal to publish.

A word on research on regional language press. I have failed to understand and appreciate approach of the media scholars on this matter. They insist that doctoral thesis would have to be in English. Regional language is forbidden in most universities. An exception is the University of Pune, where I worked as a teacher. It permits thesis written in Marathi, the language of the state. This is how it should be. I do not know how else a PhD student can study issues of Marathi newspapers in a doctoral thesis written in English. I am sure this argument holds true for newspapers in other Indian languages. Should these studies be in English because we care only for publication in international journals and conferences, and not bother about utility of such research for the journalists and publishers in the respective languages?

Finally, a word about the language of English thesis. I notice that the thesis, and the papers in international publications, are written in English which can be understood only by academicians. Why can these be not written in simple, plain English so that readers outside the field of communication studies can also easily understand the contents. I conclude by submitting once again that I have spoken today as a student anxious to understand issues that trouble me as a journalist who happens to be in academics now. I hope the scholars present here will discuss these and other points raised by Prof. Murthy and his team from the department of Journalism here. My compliments to him for organizing the conference with the theme of de-westernizing media studies in Indian context.

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