
We have to create an environment for inclusive thinking

In conversation with journalist, writer and filmmaker, Ramesh Menon

1. Please share your views on the theme of World Press Freedom Day 2017, "Critical Minds for Critical Times: Media's role in advancing peaceful, just, and inclusive societies." How can the media be instrumental in this?

We are living in disturbing times. Press freedom, which is crucial to the working of a healthy democracy, is under threat. Attacks on journalists have become commonplace. Good journalists who have a point of view or who dig to find the truth are intimidated and trolled. Writers with independent views that do not jell with the powers-that-be are attacked, defamed, and humiliated. We have seen enough of these cases to realise that danger is knocking on our door. If we do not stand up for the truth and for creating an environment for inclusive thinking, generations to come will pay a heavy price.

2. You wear multiple hats as an author, journalist, filmmaker, and corporate trainer. What inspires you to play these varied roles?

Doing multiple things is not only challenging, but great fun. My six books have all been in the nonfiction genre, and now, I am going to work on a novel. Journalism has been the best thing that has happened to me; I have not had a boring moment in forty years. It is almost as if I am getting paid to have fun. Journalism also taught me so much about India and its complicated sociology. This has been fascinating. From doing a lot of work in print, I moved into making documentary films on social and environmental issues. Telling a story using video showed me another powerful way to communicate. Corporate training in soft skills has nothing to do with journalism; that is why it interests me as I see how a little mental intervention can help people overcome fears, stress, and inhibitions, and help them see life through a different lens.

3. Journalism has undergone a lot of transformation in the 21st century. Sensational content is the name of the game today. Do you think this has been a setback to serious journalism in our country?

Absolutely. A lot of what is going on today in television and print is not even journalism! It is pure sensational, yellow journalism. I do not watch television more than thirty minutes a day—just to see how things are twisted and exaggerated and how pointless a debate can get. I find a better version by reading four newspapers the next day! Has it been a setback for journalism? Yes and No. Yes, because we could have done such fantastic, productive, and educative work that would help policymakers and parliamentarians. But there is hope; the Internet is the new playground for serious journalism. Nothing can stop it.

4. How has social media been a game changer in the news industry?

Social media offers more news than a television news bulletin can provide. Serious content is there if you are interested in mining it. Twitter breaks more stories than the conventional media. Excellent writing makes its rounds on social media. I like Facebook because I find interesting articles that I do not see in mainstream media. The news industry has a serious competitor.

5. What challenges do you foresee for journalism in the coming years?

The main challenges are social media and the Internet. Journalism only sparkles with solid reporting that is both investigative and interpretative. It must compete with visual media, which is not as easy when so many people love being couch potatoes, watching silly stuff. Tomorrow's writing and production values will have to be top class to get eyeballs.

6. Development journalism is mostly limited to what's not been done . . . so how do organisations doing serious and genuine work on the ground get coverage?

It is true that development journalism mostly delves into negative issues. But that is because we have read the definition wrongly. Development journalism is supposed to carry positive news as well. And there is plenty of it around. Many individuals and organisations are doing wonderful work that is not being covered. Organisations must learn how to showcase their work well, reach out to the media, and sell them stories that will be accepted. The pitching has to be right. NGOs are not trained to do this sort of marketing and so fall by the wayside. They need communication specialists to help them know how a pitch stories to different media outlets, as each has a different personality and bias.

7. How do you think community media like community radio can contribute to mainstream the grassroots' voices?

There is enough evidence that community radio has made waves among rural and disadvantaged communities. Community radio needs to be promoted but that is sadly not happening at the moment. Radio can empower grassroots' voices, especially to help women and children and the farming community. This area has been largely neglected and must be freed from government red tape and bureaucracy in order to flower.

(Interview by Pooja O. Murada, director, Communications, Sehgal Foundation)