

Readers are not dumb

Despite the packaging and publicity, if a bar of soap irritates the skin, the consumer will reject it. Similarly, a newspaper is judged by the reader by its content — the rest are just add-ons

NEWSPAPERS HAVE been called the 'first rough draft of history'. But it falls to the historian to polish the draft, to test it, to find ways to tell the story. I'm content to let them do that. Getting the first rough draft is an important job enough. The media is under attack today from nearly everyone because some powerful media houses and journalists think that readers, to put it bluntly, are dumb.

We deal in stereotypes. This leads some people to think there's a media conspiracy to paint India in unpleasant colours, to depict all businessmen as crooks, to portray all policemen as brutal, to describe religious bigotry and paint us all as communal. It is a result of arrogance, ignorance and hubris of the dominant media culture. This dumbing-down is a phenomenon that exists not only in India but in countries around the world wherever there is a healthy press operating.

The major factor that comes into play is celebrity and sleaze journalism. A lot of the owners of newspapers now are the people who don't really have any interest in newspapers as institutions. They have interest in them only as a way to make money.

There are some very disturbing trends that we see in some large papers in India. Some publishers came up with the idea of assigning their advertising and circulation staff to work with editors and journalists. In some institutions, journalists tend to be looked upon as mere cogs in a machine. It's the managers — without experience in journalism — who seem to be calling the shots. They try to convince owners and journalists that readers are not interested in serious topics and the readership of the editorial page is less than 10 per cent. My experience with dailies and weeklies confirms the contrary. In states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, more than 50 per cent readers read editorials, articles and serious magazines.

I have firmly believed that in the last 32 years of my experience with dailies and weeklies that readers do not want trash. They want to read quality material. The recent example is the great success of *Hindi Outlook* which crossed the circulation figure of 110,000 copies in just three months without diluting content.

In the past, several publications closed down because they were imposing their ideas on the readers. Now some newspapers and magazines are selling their editorial space and trying to fool the readers. Managers decide the placement of news coverage. In such newspapers, the newsroom is very tense and no one

knows exactly how that is going on. As editors and reporters, it is our responsibility to resist all kinds of pressures — whether they come from the government or internally.

The only thing a newspaper has to offer to its readers is its credibility. As long as readers believe that the newspaper is trying to lay out the facts — even though it might make occasional mistakes — it will have credibility. If the reader ever decides that the newspaper is trying to sell him a false set of goods, the newspaper's reputation is gone. Once the newspaper loses its reputation, it will never ever get it back.

Newspapers are scurrying to make themselves 'user-friendly'. The problem is not that 'garbage journalism' exists. It always has. What is worrisome is that mainstream journalism is adopting the standards of the tabloids. They want to position newspapers as

a commodity while forgetting that it has a social responsibility to its readers. Even if you think newspapers are like soap, you have to understand that if the soap irritates the skin, it will be rejected by the consumer. Similarly, what one gives the reader is the ultimate criterion of a newspaper or magazine.

I agree that the business aspect of a publication has to be taken into account. But it should not compromise with editorial policies and social values. I have seen some senior

editor and correspondents lobbying with politicians, government officials and corporate magnets for their owners. This tendency is very dangerous and harms the credibility of the media. If somebody wants to work as a lobbyist or a politician, first he should resign from journalism.

A journalist's or a publication's reputation is built over the years and one can destroy it with one or two slips. But some editors and publishers have started questioning the very value of this reputation? So what, they say, if my reputation is bad? As long as my sales are up, I'm happy. So it is very difficult to enforce a code of ethics — certainly by any external institution. The Editors Guild of India, however, has come out with a code of conduct for journalists. We are strictly against any code imposed from outside. But at the same time, journalists need to follow an internal code of conduct in order to present editorial content objectively and fairly.

The writer is Editor of Hindi Outlook Saptahik and Secretary General of the Editors Guild Of India



WORLDLY WISE: Newspaper readers in Kathmandu

T
g
Tuc
Pete
to t
end
Indi
Asia
Pro,
wri
Ku
ing
frot

h
you
folk
back
T
teri
por
rea
hor
wh
pec
est

I s
the
Li
I've
of
fri
ve
st

DI
vi
fr
h
b
ti
h
t
a
b
l
c
s