

#PERSPECTIVE

CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

Journalism in times of crisis

Reading a newspaper in the morning while sipping a steaming cup of tea is a habit most of us have said farewell to. Without even realising it, we have witnessed a shift in how news is being consumed. Just like a change in our preference for morning beverages, from tea to coffee, our primary sources of information have also gone digital, a shift from conventional print media to the World Wide Web!

We are no longer just reading the newspaper, but also consuming information in the form of videos and reels. If the Internet made the world small, the advent of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. has made it smaller still. They have made it convenient and more affordable to stay connected.

Journalism, too, has witnessed paradigm shifts. To adapt to the new model of news consumption, most traditional media outlets have focused on online content along with a print edition. News is now also being delivered through visual content published on YouTube and Facebook Live, along with the print edition of newspapers.

When all things are considered, social media included, it may seem, also comes as a boon to journalism, as it aids the dissemination of news to a wider audience. A single click on a Facebook post or video, and you are automatically taken to the dedicated website of the publisher.

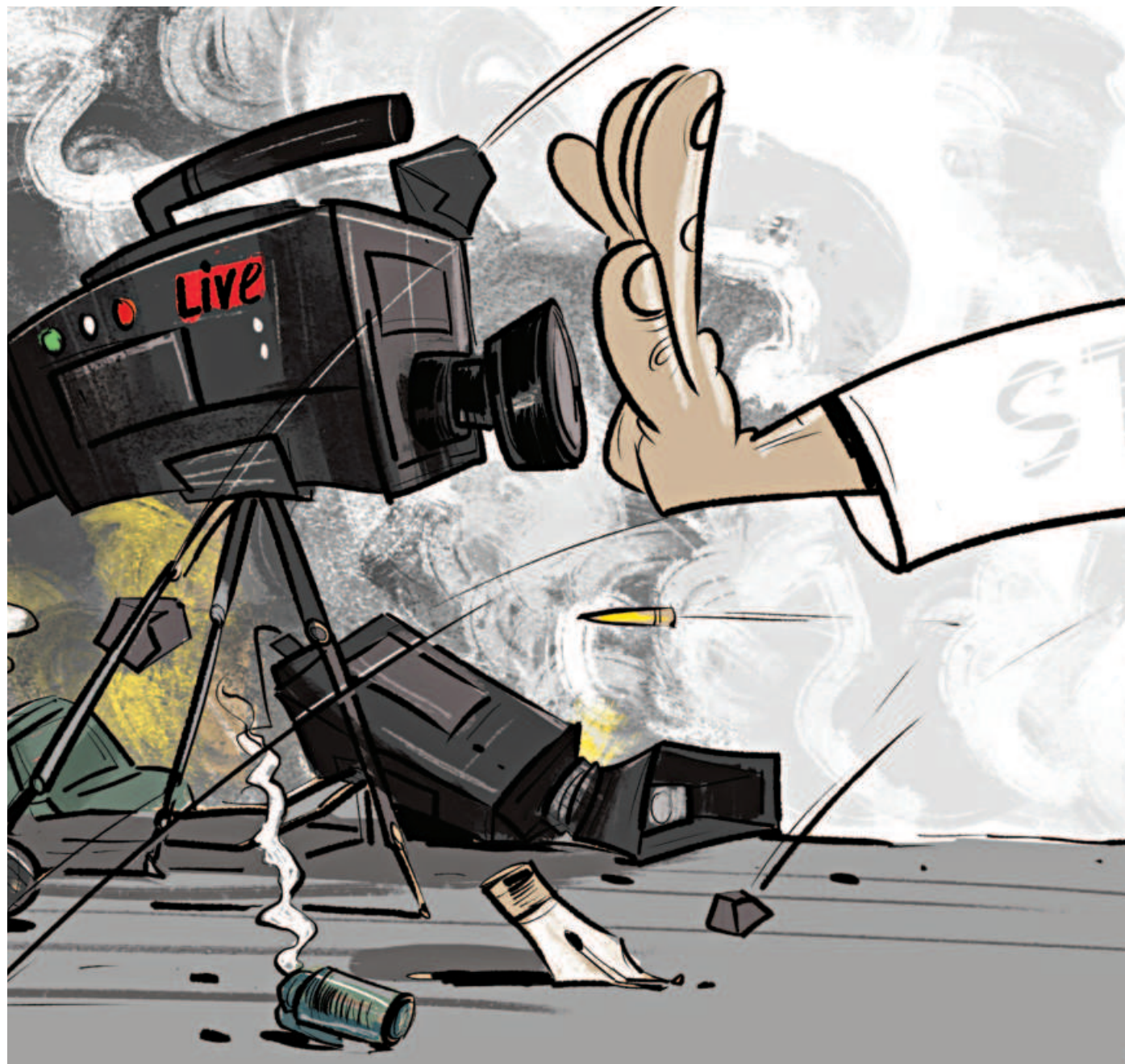
There is, however, a catch to this apparent win-win situation.

In a world where information can move freely like never before, and there are no apparent gatekeepers to separate the false from the real, countless versions of the same information now flood our social media profiles. And, as news-related posts garner reactions in the form of likes and shares, a set of algorithms come into play — some news and videos perform better than others; a few even go 'viral'!

Every bit of information relevant to readers can be considered "news." Of course, some information is more worthy of publishing than others. The role of the media in informing, educating, and empowering the public with correct information is critical, and any seasoned journalist will say that there is an added point to this — a piece of news becomes publishable only when it serves the public interest.

In this context, fake news stands as an oxymoron, one that does not hold any credibility or serve any benefit to the general public. Disinformation, on the other hand, is information spread with the intent of deliberately confusing and manipulating the public. There is no doubt that weak journalism is also a prevalent menace, and click-bait to hide sloppy work is also a sad reality.

In the new battleground that is the digital space, media houses now not only compete to provide authentic news, but also compete to provide it first. However, all this only solidifies the importance of (quality) journalism that promises information that has passed the acid test of verification and authentication.



During the COVID-19 pandemic and also during the recent political upheaval, locked in the confines of our homes, panic-stricken people reached out to the world the only way they knew — through social media platforms that connected them.

The recent crisis once again reiterated the importance of a free and independent media. While the streets witnessed utter chaos, journalists were at the front lines, often risking their own lives, to provide information to the people.

Independent media houses were our primary sources of information at the time when rumours flew. As the future seemed bleak, by providing correct information, fast, credible news outlets served as watchdogs and helped us separate fact from fiction. And by doing so, countless lives were saved.

Our media landscape is vibrant and diverse. The traditional form of the profession is now being challenged, and

increasingly, members of this fraternity have gone digital. During the recent student protests, the challenges for visual journalism were greater as they reported directly from the scene, while the mayhem was unleashed. There have been reports of journalists losing their lives while on duty; the number of injured newsmen is also high.

At a time when the general people have lost faith in institutions, it is expected that traditional media houses, which were once the vanguard of providing credible information, have also come under public scrutiny and widespread mistrust.

Laws, too, have been enacted to silence the voices of the free media. It is an open challenge, which journalists have wholeheartedly accepted and manoeuvring through the legal loopholes is now a part and parcel of the job.

This, however, cannot be done without public support. To reap the

benefits of free media, consumers, too, have responsibilities. Rather than being impulsive, one must show restraint while using their social media profiles and handles.

Not everything you see on Facebook is true, so make sure that before you react to a post, like it, or share it, you have the information verified. Countless news media outlets will not publish information, in print or the form of videos, that is not credible and will do the work for you. By supporting such institutions, you are not only well-informed but also doing a public service!

In every society, free media is a watchdog. It scrutinises the actions of the powers that be. This is more important in moments of crisis; it is the time when the media ensures that the response to the crisis is fair, transparent, and effective.

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