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Print warriors on the corona frontlines: Why print media enjoys distinct advantages over purely web based content providers

FROM TOI PRINT EDITION

Print warriors on the corona frontlines: Why print media enjoys distinct advantages over purely web based content providers

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As the entire planet is engulfed in a life-and-death struggle against the menacing coronavirus pandemic, paeans are being sung to 'warriors' who are tirelessly working to protect people and halt the contagion. High up in that hall of fame is the print news media, which is braving

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sudden drops in circulation and losses in advertising revenues to keep on educating and awakening societies and governments at a critical time.

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Often derided as 'dead tree media' and a dying species which cannot compete in the digital era, it is print daily newspapers and established media houses publishing them which are critical to beating back the virus.

Old media is proving to be gold in the context of what the World Health Organization (WHO) terms an 'infodemic' – the overabundance of information about coronavirus which makes it hard to find "trustworthy sources" and "reliable guidance".

Newspapers are safe: Govt says uninterrupted supply of newspapers is vital

With lockdowns and confinement orders affecting distribution and sales of physical copies of newspapers, all sorts of dubious online sources and forwarded messages have flooded people's phones and minds, magnifying fears through inauthentic, uncorroborated and malicious rumours.

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From quack cures and vaccines for coronavirus and hearsay about restrictive policies of governments to alleged transmissibility of the virus through touching physical newspapers, plenty of damage is being done to the general interest by vested interest groups.

'Information warfare', which used to be associated with intelligence agencies of countries engaged in geopolitical rivalry, has now been mainstreamed with a surge of social media junk propagated by commercially motivated actors looking to make a fast buck by exploiting worried and anxious people cooped up in their homes.

In richer countries, the trend of readers getting their news from social media apps and sites rather than the newspaper of record had preceded the current pandemic crisis. Just imagine how much the unverified fake news passing around in the online sphere would have gained ground and how badly this process will hamper the collective need to roll back the virus.

The traditional print media offers two distinct advantages over purely web based content providers in the present head spinning moment. First, the former have long pedigrees and solid reputations for fact checking, cautious and responsible dissemination. In the current



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crisis, it is the print media and their online editions which have refrained from sensational tactics because they are not treating the corona pandemic as an opportunity to crassly grab more market share or redirect advertisements to themselves.

Public service orientation plus financially secure bases, as opposed to cheap 'clickbait' behaviour of desperate web exclusive content providers, makes the print media stand on a higher moral pedestal.

Second, reputed newspapers must be the main reference points in the corona emergency because they give readers the analytical depth that fleeting and momentary snippets, 'shares' and 'likes' cannot deliver. Psychologically, people under lockdown have even lesser patience and attention spans than in normal times. Online sources and forwards capitalise on this human condition where the mind is racing and try to satiate it with instant and extremely short screaming 'Breaking News' and views.

Half-baked knowledge is more dangerous than ignorance and it is only traditional print media, which carefully carries opinion of well-trained journalists, qualified experts and policymakers, that should matter at this delicate juncture.



Luckily, unlike Western countries where leaders like President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Boris Johnson have declared war on their own print newspapers as “lamestream media” and “enemies of the people”, we in India do not have the perverse problem of what the American scholar Tom Nichols calls “anti-expertise and anti-intellectual sentiment”.

The bulk of readers in India have not become cynical about the print media under the influence of populist politicians or greedy online entrepreneurs.

Unlike American or British newspapers, good Indian print media outlets do not openly endorse particular political parties and shill on their behalf. India’s big print media houses are part of the ‘establishment’, but in a relatively independent manner.

Given these strong underlying fundamentals, one can expect India’s print media to survive the coronavirus induced drops in sales and commercials and come roaring back as the public health crisis subsides.

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