**Journalism and the internet**

BY U S A M A K H I L J I 2021-03-01

IT is undeniable that the internet and social media have fundamentally changed the media landscape in the world in more ways than one. And as governments get eager to regulate the internet, media groups are lobbying for laws that can help them get a share of the profits internet companies make through adverts on the traffic that they generate, of which news forms an integral part.

This is what happened in Australia recently, as governments in Canada, US and the EU mull over similar proposals. The logic is that news sites are providing a large part of content that is driving traffic on the internet where people share news and click on it.

This in turn provides added advertisement revenue to internet companies that are able to profit off the ads they target users with.

News companies are said to have been making lesser profit, resultantly laying off journalists and shrinking their presence in several locations, which inadvertently means people have less information available to them, and the quality of it has also been impacted. Getting more revenue from internet companies will help revive that.

Internet companies on the other hand are saying that they did not have a role in the loss of revenue of media groups, and have used arm-twisting techniques with the Australian government that are otherwise typical of oppressive governments, threatening pull out. Facebook blanked out not only all news pages, but also several non-profit pages including many that were sharing critical information related to the pandemic.

Google threatened to leave the Australian market completely, but quickly moved to negotiate with the government once its fierce competitor Microsoft stepped in and not only supported the Australian proposal but also offered its search engine Bing for the Australian market, with commitments to share revenue with news agencies based on referrals from the search engine. Google`s settlement with the government now includes an agreement with Newscorp the group owned by media tycoon Rupert Murdoch to have all their channels include d in Google news showcase, a new app with curated news.

Facebook has also entered into agreements with news groups, and the two giants seem to have convinced the Australian government not to force them to have agreements with news groups by virtue of existing deals they voluntarily entered into. Thechanges in the media code also include easing the mandatory arbitration requirement in case of no deals between tech giants and media groups.

So big tech and big news corporations have, under government pressure, negotiated an agreement of profit-sharing related to news and the internet. But where does this leave citizens? Citizens benefit from independent and high-quality journalism that is investigative, critical, and diverse. This includes smaller community media initiatives that may not be as well funded as large media corporations. But what these deals show us is that large media conglomerates are going to be able to strike deals, and big tech platforms with high profitmargins are going to be able to share profits with media corporations.

But such pressure from governments on platforms to enter revenue-sharing arrangements is an added barrier to entry for smaller tech platforms to be able to disrupt the monopoly of big tech companies. This is also a barrier for smaller media start-ups that do not have the same bargaining power as large media conglomerates, and are likely to be left out.

It is also time for governments to do some introspecting around the role they have played in the decline of news media. Instead of respecting the detailed work by journalists who dig into issues and asl( tough questions something that is their constitutional right and professional responsibility governments across the world have been given to discrediting the press. Trump`s notorious `fake news` calls, disinformation campaigns against journalists critical of him and the withholding of government adverts from media groups seen as critical of the power elite in Pakistan, and sedition charges for those not toeing the government`s line in India arejust a few instances of how the press has been systemically discredited.

This has had real world consequences in the shape of not only security threats that discourage critical journalism, but also a decline in the subscriber base, which has been further fuelled by sensationalist blurts on social media that have become the go-to resource for news consumption. That, of course, is a dangerous trend where in-depth news has been replaced by click-baiting sensationalist headlines to encourage web traffic which has become the main source of revenue for media houses.

Social media platforms also privilege those who are able to invest money through credit cards in social media promotions on their account to reach a wider audience. That is a major barrier of entry for small media start-ups especially in the developing world where lack of financial resources and lack of credit cards means a lot of the ad-money-hungry algorithms of social media platforms are effectively useless despite a large following. This is because, for example, Facebook pages cannot even reach their subscribers without boosting a post through paid promotions. This is a major freedom of expression disadvantage that social media platforms like Facebool( must work to address.

And then there is the fact of how the internet was envisaged: an open source free medium for the exchange of information. Though ads complicate this model, the conversation that must be had instead is around the monopolistic behaviour of big tech companies that tend to buy out any competitors.

Government intervention must not translate into mediation between big money groups for profit-sharing, but models that benefit the end-users of the internet.

Access to information must remain free and open on the internet. And if there is to be profit-sharing of ad revenue, it must be equitable, sensitive to the needs of all sizes of businesses and non-profits, and centred on the right to access to information, right to privacy, and freedom of expression of citizens. This includes governments recognising the fundamental role of independent journalism in upholding democracy and information integrity. The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.

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