

Right Angle: Let's switch off I&B

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MoS for Parliamentary Affairs Prakash Javadekar (Photo: AP)

It is a sign of the times that there is as much news generated by a casual perusal of Twitter as by reporters braving the Indian summer to gather “human interest” tales from ordinary citizens. There is a place for both “high” politics and stories of ordinary folk and it is reassuring that social media has at least broken the editorial guilds that determined the collection and dissemination of political news. It is, in theory at least, possible for a social media fanatic with lots of time on his/her hands to be as informed or uninformed in real time as a media person flashing the much-cherished Press Information Bureau accreditation card.

The growing importance of the social media in making news dissemination more democratic — not to be confused with accurate — is reason enough to begin this column with a tweet from Congress MP Shashi Tharoor, certainly a pioneer in this field. In a tweet on June 10 morning, Mr Tharoor wrote disbelievingly of the new information and broadcasting minister, the affable Prakash Javadekar: “Javadekar wants to abolish Information & Broadcasting Ministry. We heard the same thing from his predecessor L.K. Advani — in 1977!”

A 140-character message may be way too brief for Mr Tharoor to spell out whether he thought Mr Javadekar was bluffing or whether he believed that the commitment Mr Advani made in 1977 when the Janata Party came to power in a similar mood of optimism and expectancy was past its sell-by date. Needless to say Mr Tharoor will elaborate in due course, unless what he really believes is potentially too unpalatable to the Praetorian guards of the Congress.

There is, needless to say, a huge difference between 1977 and 2014. In 1977, the media was a relatively small industry made up of two parts: a state-controlled electronic media and a private sector-owned press. In reality, the control of the state on the private sector media was formidable. The newspapers and magazines had to depend on the State Trading Corporation (or its approved dalals) for imported newsprint; the public sector and the government were the biggest advertisers and the rates were set by a body called Directorate of Audio-Visual Publicity (DAVP); and even the pay of those employed in the media was determined by a government-appointed Pay Commission. In theory, Nehru's India had a free press but in practice its soul was mortgaged to the government. Yes, there were the stray voices of dissent — promptly de-bunked as the “jute press” by the socialist ministers — but in the main, as Mr Advani expressed it evocatively, “when asked to bend, they crawled”.

In such an oppressive climate — now the subject of undeserved nostalgia from a handful of old-timers who were beneficiaries of the system — the I&B ministry was the all-powerful ministry of propaganda. Although old-timers in Nehru's government obsessed more about the quality of Hindi and the use of the harmonium, I&B acquired a sinister reputation after Indira Gandhi split the Congress in 1969. With Communist fellow-travellers running the show, All India Radio began to be derisively referred to as All Indira Radio in the early-1970s, when I.K. Gujral was I&B minister. By the time V.C. Shukla became minister during the Emergency, I&B ministry became a Soviet-style bureau of propaganda and censorship.

It was in this context that Mr Advani bravely suggested that a separate corporation — loosely modelled on the BBC — be established to insulate AIR and Doordarshan from intrusive government control.

It was an idea that was well ahead of its time. Thanks to the monopoly over TV channels, a situation that prevailed until 1997, governments (and particularly I&B ministers) were loath to relinquish control over what they erroneously imagined was the sole avenue of unpaid information and entertainment for the masses. Initially Rajiv Gandhi wanted an enlightened public broadcasting service but as the Bofors controversy ate into his political credibility, he fell back on crude propaganda and entrusted a buffoon to head the ministry.

I do not know what has happened in either DD or AIR over the past 17 years: the last occasion I was invited on a DD panel was in 2002! What can safely be said is that despite the pretence of autonomy Prasar Bharati is becoming increasingly irrelevant and will become even more so if the Modi government goes ahead with its plans to deregulate news and public affairs on radio. Apart from a few stations in the border states and outlying areas, the rationale for Prasar Bharati's existence to-day is to serve its own employees.

Prasar Bharati's control over state-run broadcasters has been further compromised by the arrival of television channels run by the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. There is a case for the live telecast of Parliament but these channels have developed ambitions of their own. Lok Sabha television hasn't got over the mindset of Doordarshan of the 1980s and is a misfit in the contemporary world; and RSTV seems to be a ready-made platform for every Left-leaning individual and dreary academic in the National Capital Region.

There is a compelling case for Parliament to debate whether live telecast of proceedings of Parliament must be accompanied by an income-accretion scheme for a section of the ideologically inclined. Mr Javadekar is absolutely right to begin a viability assessment of his own ministry. If the mandate of Prasar Bharati is increased to include all state-run broadcasting organisations and it is made answerable to a committee of Parliament, there is no earthly reason why the I&B ministry should be anything more than a bad memory.

Technology and the government's commitment to transparency should ensure that tender notices are put online, thereby dispensing with DAVP.

The routine tasks of public information can be handled by the existing PIB that now has the additional help of a subscription-free but popularity-driven social media. It is right that Mr Tharoor has reminded people of Mr Advani's 1977 observation. The time is right for Mr Javadekar to prepare for the day when

he can shut down the I&B shop in Shastri Bhavan and concentrate his energies on the real responsibility given to him: the task of rescuing environment protection from the Luddites.

India could do with a vibrant Prasar Bharati, not a moribund I&B ministry.

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