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In the channels of mistrust...

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The Hindu MAKING A POINT: Filmmaker Umesh Agarwal in New Delhi. Photo: Rajeev Bhatt

As Umesh Agarwal turns his lens on paid news, Anuj Kumar speaks to the intrepid filmmaker

Umesh Agarwal belongs to a breed that is increasingly becoming endangered. He retains his right to question. One would say the media has been doing this job pretty fervently these days but the documentary filmmaker is asking who will bell this cat, through a biting documentary named “Brokering News”. It looks into the charges of paid news that sent shivers down the fourth pillar of democracy but it seldom becomes a headline as a large section of the media doesn't seem eager to look within.

Fact of the matter

Produced by Public Service Broadcast Trust (PSBT), the film will be showcased during the PSBT's Open Frame festival, which started this Friday. It takes off from the Murdoch-gate, which provided an opportunity to the Indian media houses to introspect but they largely let it pass. “In one TV discussion when one of the panellists raised the issue, she was almost shouted out by the anchor as if she was speaking something out of context,” says Umesh adding that the idea is not to point fingers but to state the facts. “I have tried to look at the issue from the consumer's point of view, who takes news on face value but can no longer afford to do it. During Maharashtra elections when three rival newspapers carried the same article on Ashok Chavan, (former Chief Minister of the state) under different bylines without caring to clarify that it was an advertorial, it was clear that something was wrong. Similarly when stories of a big corporate house tying-up with three different multinational companies appear within a short span of time with the prospective partners denying it, it raises questions of authenticity and integrity. When we put the question to a senior business journalist, she said it was to help raise the share prices of the company.”

The film questions the ownership of the media where many news channels are owned by political parties and political families. “Manu Sharma's father launched India News at a time when his son was finding the going tough in Jessica Lal murder case,” says Umesh, adding it was difficult to convince people to talk about the subject. “We tried to present the other side of the story by speaking to representatives of media organisations, which have institutionalised the idea of paid news but they were not forthcoming.” Documentary filmmakers always face the problem of what to include and what to edit and Umesh is no different. “I prefer to cut down the number of issues I try to raise in a film. Like here I had to edit out the TRP factor.”

The news channels depend on the same TRPs, which decide the fate of general entertainment channels. “This has led to more entertainment news-centric programming on news channels. One can't have problem with tie-ups but that doesn't mean that you make Amitabh Bachchan read news and don't even make it clear that it is part of a promotion of the film. If Aamir Khan goes incognito for the promotion of the film, it should not become prime time news.” Umesh has similar issues with the sports coverage particularly the IPL, where for three years media organisations didn't find

anything wrong.

But how do they retain the licence? “Exactly, if the MOU that they sign with the I&B Ministry is followed in letter and spirit, half of the news channels have to shut down.” The film goes beyond highlighting the issue of selling space on Page 3 to celebrities to question the increasing programming on gadgets and cars where criticism is the last thing on the mind of the anchor/ reviewer. As seasoned journalist Vinod Mehta says in the film, “Nobody finds a newly launched car a dud!”

Umesh says that unquestionable faith that we used to have in the media some years back is waning. “There is a deficit of trust. And it is not the case only with educated and the articulate. Even the rickshaw-wallah says bahut drama karte hain. And the cosmetic self-regulation won't help.” In fact, the report of the sub-committee of the Press Council of India form an important basis of the film but Umesh points out that the report has been scuttled from 36000 words to 3600 words allegedly because of the pressure from proprietors. “The original version is resting in the PCI library!” Even as the Parliamentary Committee on IT is pondering over the issues, the hope lies in the Election Commission's recommendations to tackle paid news. “The Commission is coming up with newer methods to find a way through these webs. For instance a DMK politician doesn't necessarily have to buy space on Sun TV. In such cases the Commission proposes to calculate the notional value according to the prevalent market rates.”

ZOOMING IN ON UMESH

The Delhi boy got hooked to theatre and cinema early but those were the days when Delhi was the centre of facts and Bombay was considered the land of fiction. So this Political Science graduate from Kirorimal College got hooked to news when it carried its pristine charm. “I was fortunate to have been associated with India's first current affairs programme ‘Newslines’, where Vinod Dua was the director and M.J. Akbar was the anchor.” It was followed by ‘The Prithvi Nandi Show’, where Umesh was the man in-charge of production. He says it was this kind of rigorous grooming that helped him develop an eye for detail and a penchant for facts. Having seen the production side, Umesh was clear that the hustle bustle of news channels doesn't provide a chance to look back at one's work and the slant of news is dictated by somebody, who is signing your cheque.

So from 1994, he is on his own with a dedicated team. The bread and butter come from corporate films and in between he goes out to create some stirring documentaries to keep the fire in the belly burning. “This way I can go to sleep in peace with values intact,” he says. Be it his film on pesticides in soft drinks or his take on caste-based reservation policy, Umesh has been able to debate controversial issues without sensationalising them. That, however, doesn't mean that his documentaries are boring.

The National Award winner is always conscious about the visual narrative. “There is no point in speaking to seven people and making it a sort of round-table discussion.” So he went to Kurukshetra and Ujjain to capture the struggle of journalists, who didn't bow to management's pressure to sell news. “As he is based in Kurukshetra, I called journalist Rakesh Sharma's battle against his erstwhile bosses as his Mahabharat against his own kith and kin. In the same way I had the copy of a Powerpoint presentation that a leading newspaper made to politicians before the elections. On its basis we recreated a scene in one of my friend's home theatre.”

Umesh is also concerned about the declining standards of the profession despite so many journalism schools cropping up. He shares an amusing instance when a journalism student was asked about the JP movement, he started talking about the rise of the Jaypee Group. “Journalists were expected to have a certain knowledge base but today it seems Google is the answer to even common sense!”