Media Regulation - The starting point for self-regulation

What is the issue?

- The Mumbai Police recently filed a supplementary chargesheet containing WhatsApp messages between Republic TV Editor Arnab Goswami and former Broadcast Audience Research Council CEO Partho Dasgupta.
- The incident has brought to light the shortfalls in media regulation.

What are some of the concerns?

- Since the above event, the discussions in the media have been about –
  - ethical transgressions
  - manipulating institutional arrangements to show increased audience reach
  - breaching the line meant to protect the autonomy and efficacy of regulating bodies and external research entities
- For a news ombudsman, the main issue is that an effective institution of self-regulation for the Indian media does not exist.

How does media regulation work in India?

- There are four bodies in India for media regulation.
- The first is the **Press Council of India**, created through an act of Parliament.
- It is headed by a former Supreme Court judge.
- Its mandate is to preserve the freedom of the press and to maintain and improve the standards of newspapers and news agencies in India.
- It has 28 members including editors, senior journalists, media managers, representative from a news agency.
- Besides it also has one nominee each from the Bar Council of India, the UGC, and the Sahitya Akademi as well as members of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha.
- To note, the regulatory tilt is towards the executive writ.
- The second is the **News Broadcasting Standards Authority** created by the News Broadcasters Association (NBA), an industry body.
- The broadcast industry has a third body, the **Broadcasting Content Complaints Council**.
- This is to deal with complaints against entertainment and general segment

television programmes.
- A fourth body was created by those who left the NBA, called the **News Broadcasters Federation**. This is promoted by Mr. Goswami's Republic TV.
- A close examination of the functioning of these bodies reveals their inability to implement their primary mandate of ensuring freedom while adhering to agreed ethical and professional standards.

How will in-house mechanisms work?

- Self-regulation would ensure freedom not only from the government, but also from other vested interests.
- If media organisations are serious about effective self-regulation, the need of the hour is to actively build in-house mechanisms.
- For instance, the Readers' Editor (RE) of The Hindu is an independent, full-time internal ombudsman.
    - Readers and other complainants have a designated pointsperson to reach out to.
    - The RE not only examines all the complaints that are received, but also effects course correction if the paper errs.
- The Organization of News Ombudsmen and Standards Editors has spelled out the responsibility in this regard in clear terms:
    - promote the values of accuracy, fairness and balance in news reporting for the public good
    - assist media organizations to provide mechanisms to ensure they remain accountable to consumers of their news
- Many studies reveal that having an internal mechanism often helps news media organisations to improve transparency.
- It also helps in developing trust with the audience.

What is the way forward?

- The legal route rarely addresses the importance of a toxic-free information ecology.
- Unless the news-consuming public demands for an independent, internal ombudsman, the ethical conundrum will continue to haunt us.
    - E.g. A programme, 'Bindas Bol-UPSC Jihad', by Sudarshan TV was found offensive by almost everyone from the Information and Broadcasting Ministry to the apex Court.
    - But that did not prevent the spread of venom and wrath in the public sphere.

Source: The Hindu

