

“My greetings to all the media friends on the occasion of National Press Day!

The Press in India has always been in the vanguard of protecting and strengthening the foundations of democracy. A robust, free and vibrant media is as important as an independent judiciary in consolidating democracy and strengthening constitutional rule of law.

I must compliment the Press Council of India for choosing the most appropriate topic for addressing all of you through this webinar- ‘Role of media during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on media’.

Unmindful of the grave risks associated with a pandemic situation, the print and electronic media journalists have turned into frontline warriors and have been ensuring non-stop coverage of all the happenings that are taking place in the country and abroad.

During the course of news gathering, many journalists have unfortunately succumbed to COVID-19 infection while thousands of others contracted the Novel Coronavirus. My deepest condolences to the families of the journalists, who died of COVID-19 infection!

When the country came to a standstill in the wake of the lockdown, it was the TV channels which provided the latest updates on the pandemic front. More importantly, both print and TV channels have played an invaluable role in educating the masses and creating awareness on the precautions to be taken to combat COVID-19.

Conveying the right information at the right time is critical in such a situation, especially when there is a plethora of fake news. People need to guard against unverified and unsubstantiated claims. Media has a huge role in educating the masses in this regard.

I would like to convey my deepest appreciation to each and every journalist, cameramen and others, who have been striving constantly to disseminate news and information.

But it is also true that the media industry is among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis. Social distancing norms have led to cancellations of live events nationwide and badly hit sectors like travel and hospitality. The media industry too was adversely affected.

As a result, some newspapers have curtailed the number of their editions and preferred to go digital. There have been unfortunate instances of employees being laid off in both print and electronic media.

We have to utilise our collective strength to address this challenge. Journalists should not be left high and dry in these difficult times. I appeal to all stakeholders to come together and find innovative solutions to the extraordinary situation created by the Coronavirus.

The pandemic has caused changes in consumer behavior. More and more people are shifting to digital platforms leading to fall in newspapers’ subscriptions. I understand that the newspaper industry is responding to this change by producing more digital content. But regional papers that did not have a significant digital presence are the worst hit and they require handholding in this transition towards online platforms.

Dear sisters and brothers,

This pandemic has underscored the need for adopting flexible and resilient business models by media organizations. While the media industry is severely impacted, the COVID-19 crisis has opened up several opportunities too. More and more people are staying at home and are increasingly relying on the media and the entertainment industry for the latest information and to fight the isolation caused by the lack of social interactions. The huge popularity of the re-telecast of Ramayana and Mahabharata serials is a clear example. The media industry

should tap into this increased audience base and explore alternative ways to improve its financial health.

Dear friends,

I always say that journalism is not a mere profession but a pious mission. Press has always played an outstanding role in empowering the people and furthering national interest. Democracy cannot survive without a free and fearless press. Therefore, any attack on the freedom of the press is detrimental to national interests and should be opposed by one and all.

On its part, media also needs to be fair, objective and accurate in its reporting. Sensationalism should be avoided and the tendency to mix news with views needs to be curbed. Also, there should be greater space for development news in our reporting.

In the end, I once again congratulate all friends from the media for serving the nation with dedication and commitment.

Thank you.

Jai Hind!"