# The Role of Media in Fostering Constructive Public Discourse

*Concept Note*

The vibrancy and constructiveness of public discourse can be taken as a vital measure of the democratic health of a society. It provides the space for rich dialogue where through the exchange of different opinions citizens reach a consensus on their collective vision for a better society and they renew their commitment to the moral principles underlying this vision. It is through the vibrant interchange of ideas that innovation and creativity are nourished and the horizons of thought are constantly expanded. Within the spaces where such discourse happens, members of society and its institutions deliberate on and give direction to public policies on a range of issues. Not only does the healthy back and forth among citizens and between them and the institutions of society ensure that decisions and policies affecting the common weal benefit from the most thorough and thoughtful consideration, this process also builds bridges of mutual understanding between citizens, institutions and communities which is vital for strengthening the trust and good faith needed to collaborate on common goals.

The institutions of the mass media have a central role to play in the quality and richness of public discourse in a society. They provide citizens with reliable information on matters of concern to the public good, they help frame issues in ways that highlight their relevance for the citizen and the implications of normative frameworks to the issues at hand. They play a crucial role in placing before the public the issues that should be prioritized. Further, they provide a dialectical space where policy makers and experts can communicate and deliberate on crucial issues with citizens and where the voices of citizens, their concerns and priorities, especially those who are economically or socially marginalized can be heard and acknowledged in decision making processes. While the mass media is not the only public institution responsible for the quality and integrity of public discourse, it plays a consequential role in shaping discourse by the way it presents the facts, frames them in ways that are compelling and meaningful for the citizen, prioritizes what matters the most, and ensures the representation of diverse voices and perspectives in deliberations on a subject pertaining to the common good.

The past decade has witnessed a grave deterioration of the quality of public discourse in India and across the world. The possibility of engaging with fellow citizens and other stakeholders in society in constructive discourse based on good faith and mutual respect has become increasingly difficult in an atmosphere of extreme polarization and partisanship. The rampant spread of disinformation and the emphasis on distracting agendas unrelated to the real issues that pertain to collective well-being have dissipated, divided and dispersed the collective focus needed to address and find meaningful solutions to the challenges facing society.

In the effort to revive, rehabilitate and restore trust, civility and constructiveness to public discourse in India, the mass media has a vital role to play. Now, more than ever, society needs the mainstream media to perform its functions as a just and unbiased reporter of the facts, as a trustworthy guide to public opinion towards the issues that pertain to the common good, and as an enabler of constructive and consultative dialogue between the various stakeholders in the well-being of society.

In performing its responsibilities to the public, the media faces immense obstacles today including political and economic interests that curtail its freedom and compromise its integrity and the pressures of functioning within the force field of disinformation, polarization and trivialization created by social media. How are media organizations and professionals to resist these influences and forces in seeking to perform their vital responsibilities to society? How does the media not only truthfully reflect the conditions of society but also foster constructive and harmonious yet critical dialogue on these conditions that would provide a foundation for public policy while strengthening good faith and trust between citizens, institutions and communities? How would it foster an environment where in the process of consensus building around vital issues and principles, diversity of opinion is valued and fostered? How can it help strengthen the relationships between citizens, institutions and communities based on the values of commitment to the truth, rationality, justice, collaboration, mutual respect and trust that are the essential pillars of collective life?

These are some of the questions that will be explored in the symposium being organized by the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India in collaboration with Ramanujan College, University of Delhi titled 'The Role of the Media in Fostering a Constructive Public Discourse'.