Fake News Case against The Wire News Portal

Why in news?

The Delhi Police conducted searches at the residences of editors of The Wire for defaming BJP IT cell Chief Amit Malviya through a series of now-retracted stories on Meta, the parent company of Facebook.

What is the issue?

- The Wire has published a series of reports claiming that Malviya (Head of the BJP IT Cell) had certain privileges to take down Instagram posts without getting technical evidence verified by independent experts.
- The privileges has been enjoyed as a purported beneficiary of social media giant **Meta's 'XCheck list' or 'Cross Check' programme,** which included the right to report any post and have it taken down with no questions asked.
- An FIR has been registered against the news portal on allegations raised by Amit Malviya for cheating, forgery, and publishing fake stories, against Meta, Instagram and Mr. Malviya himself.
- The Wire too filed a complaint against its consultant Devesh Kumar who allegedly supplied the fabricated details for the story.
- The Delhi Police conducted searches at the residences of editors of the news portal in connection with a FIR lodged against the organisation.

> *"The editor of a newspaper shall be responsible in any civil or criminal case filed against it for publishing offensive news reports. As per the scheme of the Press and Registration of Books Act, it is the editor who controls the selection of the matter that is published in a newspaper."*
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> *- Supreme Court Judgement (2013)*

How has The Wire responded?

- The Wire has voluntarily withdrawn its reportage on Meta and Amit Malviya and issued a public apology.
- It has announced that it is conducting an internal review of them.
- It also said that the cloned copies of seized devices were not provided.

What is the response of media organisations?

- For the police to carry out an immediate and arbitrary search of the media houses's office and its editor's homes, based entirely on a private complaint of defamation is seen to be of mala fide intent.
- Some have criticised that criminal prosecution and harassment by the police have intimidated and prevented journalists from doing their jobs.
- The Press Club of India (PCI) said that the media has a responsibility to report and has to be responsible in reporting at all times but the issue is with the manner in which the Delhi police has acted.
- The Committee to Protect Journalists' Asia program has said that the raids on the homes of The Wire editors is an excessive reaction.
- The International Press Institute condemned the searches and called the extensive seizure of journalists' equipment a serious violation of press freedom.

India ranks 150 out of 180 countries, with a global score of 41 in the Press Freedom Index 2022. Reason for India's poor rank include violence against journalists, politically partisan media, and concentration of media ownership.

What does this incident signify?

- A journalist or a media organisation that publishes a false report ought to be held accountable by its peers and civil society.
- Journalistic writing and reporting has to be done with utmost responsibility and accountability.
- Yet, there are ways and means of addressing errors in news reporting.
- Earlier, the news channel, MediaOne, has had its security clearance denied by the Central government that has attracted the attention of the Supreme Court.
- The targeted punishment even after the media entity owned up to an error and retracted a story affects the press freedom.
- The searches and seizure do not augur well for the freedom of the press and for the Fourth Estate performing its role in a democracy.

References

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2. The Indian Express | Editor to be held responsible in cases of false reporting
3. The Wire | Several Journalists' Bodies, Others Speak Out on Searches
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