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Summary Report

By

Victor T Valbuena
Summary Report

SEMINAR ON THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN A NATIONAL CRISIS
Colombo, Sri Lanka 15 - 17 May 1991

The media should be aware that their credibility is often in question during crisis situations and should take all steps to ensure it. Various social and political groups may use the media as sources of information, as indicators of public reaction to events, and as a device for creating awareness and defining problems. Media performance in times of crisis may tend to become part of the controversy. Media need to be vigilant and sensitive to these developments in the interest of the public. In times of national crisis where there is plurality and diversity in social power, news media need to reflect the viewpoints of all segments of society.

These were the main conclusions and recommendations of participants to the Seminar on the Role of the Media in a National Crisis, held in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 15-17 May.

The seminar was co-organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) and the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA), with support from the Swedish International Development Authority, The Asia Foundation, and the World Bank. Twenty five journalists, broadcasters, academicians and other media practitioners participated in the seminar. They represented media and media-related institutions from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Singapore.

The list of participants is found in Appendix A.

The objectives of the seminar were to define the role of the media in a national crisis and to formulate some guidelines for media practitioners in covering and reporting on crisis events.

OPENING CEREMONIES

The Hon. D.B. Wijetunga, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, inaugurated the seminar. The Prime Minister noted that the media usually set the agenda of public discourse. "Thus, they become key players in both the aggravation and resolution of national conflict." Mr. Wijetunga cited the role of the media in reporting on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. He said that the politicians thought they had highlighted the issues of the conflict, but he thought the media did so. He added that "that was how it should be." However, he also cited the need for a critical appraisal of the media. He said: "Just as other institutions in society are scrutinised by the media, the public has a right to inquire and be critical of the way the media conducts itself."
Prof. G.L. Peiris, Vice Chancellor of the University of Colombo, also spoke at the inaugural, and said that in each aspect of the national crisis confronting Sri Lanka, the media has the greatest relevance. He said that perception and sensitivity on the part of the media could have a directly beneficial impact on the formulation and implementation of remedial measures. Prof. Peiris said that the media has an inherently leadership role. "The media must not always follow public opinion. There cannot at the same time be a yawning chasm between public opinion and the media. But if the media is timid and does not express an opinion, it is failing in its fundamental obligation. Striking a balance then is the role of the media in a national crisis."

Mr. Bradman Weerakoon, Adviser to the President on Foreign Affairs and Chairman of the Information Policy and Planning Committee, Sri Lanka opened the first working session of the seminar with a keynote address. In his address, Mr. Weerakoon stressed the responsibility of the media to inform clearly and accurately, and if possible to educate as well, the public, the Government, and the Opposition so that they may be assisted to think and to make up their mind on the issues raised through media reporting.

Mr. Vijay Menon, AMIC Secretary General and Mr. H.L.D. Mahindapala, Editor of the Observer and SLWJA President also delivered opening speeches on behalf of the organizing institutions.

Texts of the inaugural speeches are found in Appendix B.

RESOURCE PERSONS

Four media experts from South Asia served as resource persons during the seminar.

Mr. Javed Jabbar, Former Federal Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan discussed the issue of "Reporting a Crisis: Government Policies and Media Practice". In his presentation, Mr. Jabbar cited examples of press repression as well as press irresponsibility in Pakistan. He noted that while the power of the State was being fragmented and its power to control the lives of people being gradually eroded, the power of the media was increasing significantly.

Mr. Jabbar said that except for the State-controlled media, the media in general was not held accountable to the people in a real sense. He said that the popularity of the media is no guaranty of its veracity. He cited the coverage of the Gulf War by the Western press as an example of irresponsible crisis reporting.

Mr. S.M.A. Choudhuri, former Editor, The Bangladesh Times talked on "The Print Media in a National Crisis: Freedom and Responsibility". Mr. Choudhuri maintained that the role of the
media and the journalist is to discover the truth without emotion or passion. This was the commitment of the journalist, he said. To illustrate his point, Mr. Choudhuri cited cases from the press coverage of the fall of the Ershad regime in Bangladesh.

Dr. Sarath Amunugama, former Secretary, Ministry of State for Information and Broadcasting, Government of Sri Lanka, expounded on the topic "Radio and TV in a National Crisis: Credibility and Government Management". Dr. Amunugama said that in a national crisis, it is difficult to maintain complete honesty in media reporting, for certain reasons of national interest. He cited the example of the much-vaunted BBC also succumbing to "managing information" in relation to the Falklands War. He also admitted that during his term as Sri Lanka’s "competent authority" reviewing media performance, the print and broadcast media were co-opted as partners of the government in the attempt to contain the ethnic conflict that continues to trouble the country. He concluded that this was not a good model to follow, though.

Mr. S. Nihal Singh, internationally renowned newspaper editor/book author and now a columnist of The International Herald Tribune, explored the parameters for "Defining the Role of the Media in a National Crisis". He illustrated his paper with three examples from India: the partition of the sub-continent on religious grounds and the continuing religious strife in India; the crisis following reservation of jobs according to caste; and the coverage of the Gulf crisis.

Copies of the papers of resource persons are in Appendix C.

PARTICIPANT PAPERS / DISCUSSIONS

The rest of the participants presented highlights of their papers on the role of the print and broadcast media in a national crisis, as well as local researches on reportage of various crises in national and regional media. The papers touched on the political crisis in Bangladesh, the religious strife in India, the democratization movement in Nepal, the Gulf War and Pakistan, and the ethnic conflict in various parts of the region.

The participants’ papers are found in Appendix D.

The presentations by both resource persons and participants were followed by open forums cum discussions. The discussions focused on such issues as the following: the need to examine the definition of truth in the light of various socio-cultural and socio-political contexts and developments; the need to provide coverage not only to political crises, but also to other serious crises as poverty and environmental destruction; the need to differentiate the types and stereotypes of news as produced by the different media; the need to professionalize the media; and the need to upgrade the education and training programme for journalists to respond to the changing concepts of news and information in the world.
On the last two points, Mr. Javed Jabbar said that for a sacred profession, entrance was too easy. He said that journalists become "the priests of the community, they decide what the truth is, what the people hear. Is writing ability alone enough? Their integrity must be tested and their persons filtered before they enter the sacred hall of journalism."

DISCUSSION WITH FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS

Representatives of foreign news agencies based in Sri Lanka also participated in a panel discussion on the role of international news agencies in a national crisis. These journalists discussed such issues as subjective bias in reporting a particular country or region; angling the news to suit the requirements of the international news agency; disinformation from government sources; and the question of patriotism in reporting one's own country for the foreign press. As one correspondent put it: "All journalists work in the same way from wherever they come. (The bottom line) is not realizing your sources of information but realizing your sources of income."

WORKSHOP SESSIONS

Towards the end of the seminar, the participants were divided into two workshop groups: one to explore further the topic "the role of the media in a conflict", the other to discuss "media strategies in covering international crises".

Workshop summary reports are found in Appendix E.

SOUTH ASIAN MEDIA ASSOCIATION

At the end of the seminar, the participants also passed a resolution calling for the formation of a regional organization of journalists and allied media practitioners. The participants unanimously agreed to form SAMA, or South Asian Media Association, for the purpose of promoting regional cooperation and understanding, and fostering professional ties and exchange of information and experience among media practitioners in the region. The group voted to have Mr. H.L.D. Mahindapala of The Observer, Sri Lanka as Convenor of the association.

SEMINAR EVALUATION

Participants were asked to evaluate the seminar in terms of 13 indicators, using a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 is the highest. The seminar rated highest -- an average of 4.5 -- in the following areas: quality of programme, seminar organization, seminar facilities, hotel accommodation, participant contribution to the seminar, discussions, relevance of seminar to work, and over-all value of seminar to participant.

The programme received an average rating of 4 for presentations by resource persons, opportunities for exchanging ideas with fellow participants, opportunities for exchanges with re-
source persons, and cooperation within (discussion) groups. An average rating of 3 was given to time allocation for presentation by participants.

The participants also gave specific comments on the seminar. They felt that the number of participants was just right, and that in general, their selection was good. They said, however, that some of the participants completely disregarded the guidelines for paper presentations; they read their papers instead of just giving highlighted summaries, and went over their allocated time even with repeated reminders from the session chairmen to wind up their presentations. Some said that the session chairmen should have exercised more firmness in cutting short participants who insisted on taking more time, either for their papers or during the open discussions.

In general, the participants found the seminar fruitful.