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The Role Of The Media In A National Crisis

By

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1. For Pakistan, the Gulf crisis of 1990 and 1991 represented an extra-ordinary combination of conflicts, contradictions and challenges.

2. The Gulf crisis had a multi-faceted impact on Pakistan both on the external level and within the country itself.

3. The origins of the crisis touched the raw nerve of Pakistan's ideological roots in Islam because the crisis concerned in the initial instance, two fellow Muslim states such as Kuwait and Iraq and almost immediately Saudi Arabia as well with which every Muslim state has the special relationship of Saudi Arabia also being the land of the holy places of Islam. Subsequently, of course the Gulf crisis concerned the entire membership of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference which includes over 42 nation states.

4. While presenting Pakistan with the dilemma of taking sides with one Muslim state against the other, a country like Pakistan which is recognized as a part of South Asia, also had to deal with its other and equally valid identity as a West Asian nation, in particular being an immediate neighbour of Iran.

5. The Iran factor in Pakistan's external relations posed yet one more foreign policy question because Iran is a Muslim yet non-Arab state with a vital interest in the Gulf
region. Pakistan had faced a similar situation in the earlier Iran-Iraq war but had handled the problem equidistantly.

6. Despite Pakistan's clear and categorical endorsement of the principle of national sovereignty and territorial integrity and its consequent explicit opposition to the invasion and annexation of Kuwait by Iraq, the common Muslim bondage with Iraq nevertheless remained a factor which became particularly potent after 16 January 1991. The fact that Iraq is also the land of many important holy places of Islam reinforced the empathetic Muslim linkage between Iraq and Pakistan.

7. The avowed secular posture of Iraq as contrasted with the relatively religious approach of Pakistan and other Muslim states was sought to be used as a factor by Muslim Governments, including that of Pakistan, to further justify Pakistan's opposition to Iraq's aggressive actions.

8. Yet the basic Muslim linkage was felt so deeply by the people of Pakistan that it over-rode any possible secular considerations.

9. In any case, in an ironically apt expression of how media images can, at one and the same time, mobilize
people's emotions as well as mislead them, a particular photograph of President Saddam Hussain prostrated in prayer to Almighty Allah was by itself a sufficiently powerful rebuttal to attempts to portray Iraq and President Saddam Hussain as un-Muslim secular elements.

10. Pakistan's complex relationship with the United States of America, a relationship of dependence as well as defiance came under severe stress as a result of the Gulf crisis.

11. While the people of Pakistan at large showed eminent good sense in refusing to endorse or validate the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq through abstention from large-scale expression of opinion between August and December 1990, there were signs beginning to be noted in the last quarter of 1990 which indicated that the people of Pakistan were uneasy and suspicious at the rapid build-up of American and Western forces in Saudi Arabia to counter the aggression by Iraq.

12. A contrast between Government policy and public opinion was already beginning to be evident in Pakistan in the last quarter of 1990, in particular with regard to the Government's acceptance of American leadership in the Gulf crisis as compared to popular disquiet over an increasing American role in a Muslim region.
13. When the aerial bombardment of Iraq commenced on 16 January 1991, the disquiet of the people of Pakistan was transformed, overnight, into a remarkable outpouring of people onto the streets, in villages, towns and cities throughout the country to express solidarity with a fellow Muslim people who were being bombarded to a savage and excessive degree, disproportionate in their opinion, to the nature of the offence committed by Iraq against Kuwait.

14. Even through certain political leaders and parties in Pakistan belatedly sought to catch up with public opinion on this issue and to exploit the people's sentiments for their own purposes in pursuit of objectives to weaken the Federal Government, the sincerity and the scale of popular opinion was unmistakably spontaneous.

15. Claims by the Government that certain foreign sources had financed and organized the mass protests in a clandestine fashion may have been partially correct. But so sudden and so widespread and so intense were the manifestations of popular empathy with the people of Iraq that no clandestine operation could possibly have been so well-organized in secret in advance of the eruption when, as events later proved, the Government of Iraq itself had been unable to organize its own armed forces to be able to put up even a nominal and token resistance against the land attack by the American led forces.
16. Thus, on a purely political level, the Gulf crisis brought-forth into the arena of public scrutiny of Pakistan, a vividly contrasting collection of historic bonds, of evolving ties, of abiding doubts and discord, of cool, well-considered official policies, of warm-hearted, hot-headed instinctive outbursts of public opinion, of geo-political elements, of global power relationships with individual countries, governments and people.

17. In short, a miasmic political event such as the Gulf crisis became, in the media context, an equally vital and volatile event reflecting all the clarity as well as the confusion inherent in the crisis itself.

18. The media situation in Pakistan has to be outlined with reference to the parameters of population, literacy level and purchasing power.

19. In this perspective, we are looking at a population now estimated to be about 110 million growing at a rate of over 3 per cent per annum with about half of that population under the age of 21.

20. An optimistic literacy estimate places the figure at 26 per cent but the definition of literacy is limited to the ability to read and write one's own name and some allowance
has to be made for distortive enumeration as well. Female literacy is estimated to be about half that of the total literacy figure. Urban literacy is higher, at over 35 per cent but 70 per cent of the population still lives in the rural areas comprising small towns and villages.

21. The electrical grid system covers about 40 percent of the population thus preventing about 60 per cent from instant and convenient access to an electricity-dependent medium such as TV.

22. With a per capita income estimated to be about US$ 400, Pakistan ranks high amongst South Asian nations but still low by global standards and the quality of life indicators reveal that 70 per cent of the people do not have access to safe, piped drinking water supply.

23. In terms of media data, the total circulation of newspapers and magazines does not exceed 1 million copies thus reaching a readership of less than 10 million people or less than 10 per cent of the population.

24. Radio is estimated to be able to cover 90 per cent of the population, thanks largely to the transistor with listenership of BBC, VOA and others quite high in addition to conventional listenership of Radio Pakistan.
25. With about 1.5 million licensed TV sets and an estimated 1 million unlicensed sets, the TV medium reaches an audience estimated to be a maximum of 20 million people or less than 20 per cent of the population.

26. With less than 500 cinema theaters, the cinema medium in recent years, with the advent of video, has become a mass medium for the lower and the lowest income groups, ceasing to be a major news or current affairs medium.

27. From 1988 onwards, a new expansionist vigor has come to characterize the media in Pakistan. For a country with a low literacy level, there is a remarkably large number of new daily newspapers and magazines being added to the already large list. For example, in Karachi alone, there are now 4 major English daily morning newspapers and 6 English evening newspapers while the expansion in Urdu language newspaper continues. Even though the single largest newspaper in the country, i.e. Jang is estimated to still have a circulation i.e. over 450,000 copies daily from four centres, which is more than the combined circulation of all newspapers put together.

28. The new trends of growth in the print media are possibly due to the restoration of party-based democracy in 1988 which was preceded by the repeal of the Press and Publication Ordinance, a black law which has been enforced since 1962 and which placed a number of obstacles and curbs.
in the way of a free press. This Ordinance was replaced in September 1988 by a much-milder law known as the Registration of Printing Presses and Publications Ordinance.

29. In the TV sector, in August 1990 a second TV channel operating with localized TV transmitters without a microwave link, owned 100 per cent by a government-controlled corporation but giving advertising and programming rights to a private sector group was initiated, leading to the direct telecast to households in Pakistan for 8 hours every day of the US-based news network known as CNN. This particular aspect of a new second TV channel, though limited to only 2 cities during the Gulf crisis, i.e. Islamabad and Karachi, had its own ironic implications because, at the height of pro-Iraq or pro-Muslim and anti-US sentiments between 16 January and end February, 1991 at least 1 million households in Pakistan were exposed to an American version of the war without any equivalent balancing coverage originating from a fellow Muslim nation.

30. In summary, it can be said that, despite limiting factors with respect to literacy, the population - poverty pattern, the media factor in Pakistan is a notable and crucial part of public life and was certainly a distinct feature of the Gulf crisis and its ramifications for Pakistan.
31. On the internal political level, there was a curious coincidence between the advent of the Gulf crisis on 02 August 1990 and the dissolution of the National Assembly of Pakistan on 6 August 1990 and the consequent removal of the Government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, a Government of which this writer was a member.

32. While it is better left to another occasion to discuss on whether there were any deliberate or accidental, obvious or subliminal connections between the invasion of Kuwait and the dismissal of the Government of Pakistan, the political situation that developed in the country between August 1990 and February 1991 certainly had a bearing on how the people and the media in Pakistan related to the Gulf crisis.

33. The Pakistan People’s Party Government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was replaced by a caretaker Government that was patently hostile to the outgoing Government and whose conduct, by general agreement, did influence the results of the October 1990 elections in favour of the political allies of the caretaker Government and against the PPP.

34. Be that as it may, specifically in the context of the Gulf crisis, the caretaker Government of Pakistan which came to office on 7 August 1990 took the decision to despatch
troops of the Pakistan Army to Saudi Arabia in order to "defend the holy places of Islam in Saudi Arabia" from possible threats arising out of the Iraq-Kuwait conflict.

35. While this decision was initially seen as an inevitably affirmative response by Pakistan to a request from a country with a strong and special relationship with Pakistan, popular as well as media opinion in later months began to question the wisdom of this decision.

36. As a matter of record, when the decision was actually taken in August 1990 and the Senate of Pakistan was briefed on this decision by the then-Foreign Minister, this writer along with one other opposition member were the only two members of the Senate to oppose the decision on the grounds that it had been taken without ascertaining the opinion of the sole surviving legislature in the country and without due regard to the long-term possible negative aspects of the decision.

37. It was paradoxical that as the session of the Senate in which this discussion took place was the first ever "in-camera" session of the Senate, the debate on this subject could not be reported by the media at large and it took some time before the people were able to learn of what had transpired at that time, thus providing an apt example of
how a Government (in this case an un-elected, unaccountable caretaker Government) can ensure that the opinion of elected representatives on a vital issue is simply not made available to the media through the act of making a sitting of a parliamentary house an "in-camera" sitting.

38. When the IJI Federal Government took office in November 1990, and the PPP went into opposition, the new Government endorsed the decision of the caretaker Government to send troops to Saudi Arabia and, going further, decided to add more troops.

39. At this stage, the media began to reflect more noticeably the dissenting segments of public opinion which questioned the wisdom of adding Pakistani troops to a volatile situation.

40. With the commencement of the aerial bombardment of Iraq on 16 January 1991, the conflicting views of the members of the ruling IJI coalition in the Federal Government came to the forefront very quickly through the media.

41. Whereas the Muslim League-led Government stood firm in its commitment to the UN Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force, other members of the ruling coalition, particularly the religious parties immediately
became extremely hostile to the US-led armed attack against Iraq, describing this as an attempt to significantly damage Islamic military power.

42. It is relevant to note in passing that this policy posture by the religious parties represented a major shift in their international alignment because the same religious parties had worked in harmony with US foreign policy up to very recently in respect of supporting the Mujahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul.

43. The political opposition to the IJI Federal Government in Pakistan also became critical of the intensity and the scale of the aerial bombardment in Iraq. Even though in at least one major instance, there was a contrast between what the top leadership of the PPP had to say on the subject in the course of an interview given in the U.S.A. and the mainstream of opinion within the party at home.

44. In this phase, the Government-controlled print media which has a relatively small circulation and the radio and TV networks which have a very large coverage, virtually parrotted Government policy and refused to reflect and acknowledge the depth and scale of mass dissent that was evident throughout the country.
45. It took the Government a few days to comprehend the magnitude of the problem and to decide that the Prime Minister should conduct a peace mission to some capitals of the Muslim world thus helping to partially defuse the intensity of popular dissent.

46. However, even then the officially controlled media did not reflect the original popular outpouring on to the streets. Indeed, the official media's distance from the people in turn, reflected the Government's distance from the people on this issue.

47. So acute was the contrast, so sharp the pressure from the Opposition and the people that the ruling party's own legislators also called for a review and amendment to Government policy.

48. These compulsions made the Government launch a peace initiative and modify its earlier rigid pro-UN Security Council Resolution posture with the qualification that Israel's entry into the conflict would bring about a review of Pakistan's own position. The Government also eventually condemned use of excessive force against Iraq.

49. In bringing about this modest change, the independent print media made a useful contribution that balanced the "black-out" of the official media.
50. The unique media phenomenon which occurred approximately between mid-January and end-February 1991 was the proliferation throughout the country, from villages to cities, like an uncontrollable epidemic, of photographs of President Saddam Hussain which appeared on buses, trucks, cars, motorcycles as well as on shirts and T-Shirts, on houses, roof-tops et al.

51. This mass proliferation of a photographic image owed nothing or little to the TV and radio networks of Pakistan which projected only the official anti-Saddam view of the conflict.

52. Indeed, soon after the photographs became akin to a popular media "flag" throughout the country, the Government reacted with a strange degree of nervousness by placing a ban on the display of such photographs and by prescribing punishments for those who printed and sold the photographs. This measure was received with derision and disdain by the people and even though this helped curb some of the commerce around the picture, the basic availability and visibility of this stark media image, in popular defiance of Government policy was profusely evident in literally every nook and corner of the land.
53. The official media policy had, at one stroke, been utterly rejected by the people who had made up their own minds about the issue irrespective of what Pakistan radio, TV said, irrespective even of what the BBC, VOA, CNN said.

54. For some weeks, the people even rejected their deep affinity with Saudi Arabia and identified instead, with "under-dog" Iraq which was defying the bully that was Uncle Sam.

55. The real "rights" and "wrongs" of the conflict were smashed, for some time, by the blast of the smart bombs.

56. In its own simple, crude way the photograph of President Saddam Hussain, the official policy of displeasure about it and the popular usage of the photograph are the best possible symbols of all the traditional blind spots and distortions that characterize official policy with regard to media in developing countries in general.

57. The independent print media in Pakistan rendered an admirable role in seeking to accurately reflect all the different facets of the Gulf crisis in the Pakistan context, covering the Government policy towards the crisis, popular dissent with official policy including distinctions in the types of dissent and providing continuous representation to views from overseas sources.
58. In particular, the English press in Pakistan played a balanced and moderating role, attempting to offer an accurate range of opinion both from within the country and from the media and newspapers of other nations.

59. But both Government-controlled media and the independent print media in Pakistan, in the course of the Gulf crisis, revealed their heavy, if not exclusive reliance on global, and specially western news sources such as wire services, CNN and Western radio services instead of being able to provide their own perspectives on the situation.

60. In fact, one of the most remarkable features of the media in Pakistan and the Gulf crisis is the fact that, despite Pakistan's close, congenital and almost catalysmic connection with the Gulf crisis, not a single media unit or individual from Pakistan was despatched to any of the relevant capitals or locations of the Gulf crisis in the entire period from August 1990 up to the liberation of Kuwait at the end of February 1991. The only occasions when media units ventured into the area of the crisis was when media representatives accompanied the Prime Minister of Pakistan to some of the capitals on his official peace missions but this was obviously not at the initiative of the media themselves.
61. In this respect therefore, in contrast to the media’s generally active and vital role in reporting the Gulf crisis, the media definitely failed to provide their own Pakistani perspective from the scene of the crisis.

62. During a crisis that is overseas and yet in a geopolitical region of vital interest to the country concerned, the media of a country should ensure that they are represented in the reporting dimension on the scene of the crisis as close to the action as is permissible, or safely possible.

63. The globalization of news sources such as wireless services, CNN, radio broadcasts and other means do not justify the absence from the scene of the crisis, of the media reporting representatives of a country close to the crisis.

64. In a situation where hundreds and thousands of citizens of a country are residing in locations close to the scene of the action, (as are overseas Pakistanis in the Middle East) the total absence of any media reporting representative whatsoever from the region becomes so glaringly obvious that the credibility of media themselves is adversely affected.
65. In a crisis, the high cost of despatching correspondents to a zone of conflict or even the physical risks become devalued as factors. A minimal imperative is for a country's media to have at least one or two "pool" representatives sending home specific national perceptions on an international crisis.

66. While appreciating the role of independent print media, it is necessary to say that in a crisis where the policy of a country's government is quite contrary to popular opinion the independent media have to become more cautious than in normal times with regard to the need for a fair and balanced representation of both government and public opinion.

67. During times when demonstrations have erupted in villages, in towns and in cities, suddenly and spontaneously without any visible prior co-ordination or manipulation, when the government of a country is all at once jolted and shaken by the vivid contrast between its own policy and popular opinion, then at each stage of the media operations in the collection, selection and presentation of news and opinion, the media should introduce an additional filter of restraint, a factor that prevents a notable event from becoming a sensational phenomenon, whereby the long-term and evolving process takes precedence over the immediacy of an event.
68. In normal times, the media thrive on incidents, accidents, events and happenings. These are their due daily fodder. But in a crisis, the principle of self-censorship must be invigorated with abundant caution.

69. Too easily as we have seen in the first few weeks of 1991, reports in the independent print media of speeches, demonstrations and protests against government policy had a snow-balling effect, squashing underneath many vital facts, realities and truths.

70. We have also noticed the phenomenon of a single, simple photograph depicting a leader supplicating himself in prayer becoming both a windshield sticker and a direction-finder, leading people up the garden path to illusions and misplaced faith.

71. A single such photograph projected in the independent media not once but frequently during a crisis can even help to obliterate a leader's secular past and instead project an entirely misleading posture of a man of religion.

72. So fast and furious were the pace and the passion of events that the very same media and the very same people who responded to the potent power of that photograph never could recall any similar image of the same man from any earlier
time in which he had supplicated himself in prayer in a similar posture. In war, it seems all is forgiven and forgotten.

73. But that is not a moral to be emulated by the independent media. Even though the media are operated by mortal human beings, more than any other institution, the media should not repeat the mistakes of their own history.

74. Whereas TV viewers in Pakistan's 2 major cities, Islamabad-Rawalpindi and Karachi were able to view both the military and the human interest dimension of American troops in Saudi Arabia, through the CNN reports on the PTN TV channel, media audiences in Pakistan were not provided a single glimpse of Pakistan troops stationed in Saudi Arabia.

75. The people, while going through a serious political crisis remember that their country's media often despatch media correspondents to continents and countries far away to cover events as comparatively innocuous as cricket matches.

76. Yet, when close to home, an apocalypse occurs the same media are entirely dependent on global sources with no indigenous perception of actual events on the ground reported for the benefit of the people in a country close to the crisis.
77. Indeed when the majority of the people in the country concerned have sympathies opposite to those countries from which the global news sources operate, then the virtually total dependence of a country’s media on relatively “alien” news sources stands in stark contrast to the sentiments and the perceptions of the people.

78. In a region like South Asia where the electronic media are state-owned and government-controlled TV and Radio need not always remain the parrots in the cage of Cabinet policy.

79. Here was the situation as in Pakistan where, between the nervous rigidity of Government policy and the volatile passions of the people sympathizing with a fellow Muslim country on the other, there was scope for the electronic official media to do a degree of justice to both extremes without surrendering to the irrationality of either.

80. Instead of adopting a self-righteous attitude in such a situation, or willfully ignoring the fury on the streets even officially controlled electronic media can, in a crisis, formulate an editorial policy that does not offend the hyper-sensibilities of government, that may not satisfy the raw passion of the people but which nevertheless attempts a fair portrayal of the varying segments of opinion within the country.
81. Too often and at too many levels far too many individuals working in government-controlled media give in without even a fight, surrender even before the first shot is fired by their governmental superiors.

82. They need to remember that even one inch forward represents a major step ahead, that even as governmental ownership and control continue over TV and Radio in the South Asian region, there is small but substantial ground to be gained by the exercise of courage and the application of conviction.

83. In a country where the people have access to electronic media sources other than local electronic media -- as in the case of Pakistan where CNN was available to viewers in 2 large metropolitan areas for at least 8 hours every day during the crisis -- it is now a moral imperative for media personnel to begin to shake the shackles of the past by at least clinking and clanking the chains ever so often and certainly during a crisis.

84. In a crisis that engages the international community and is of deep concern to the entire country, the existing conventional arrangement by which the Government inter-acts with the media, for purposes of briefing as well as in other respects, becomes inadequate.
85. In a crisis, a government should establish a Special Media Relations Unit similar to a 24 hour round-the-clock "communications and command control room" akin to the kind used for military operations in order to maintain an instant and convenient reference point for the media, receiving, processing and disseminating information about an unfolding crisis while also, where necessary, for security reasons, filtering the data.

86. In general, the normally operative points of contact and information flow between a government and the media are only partially in action and not continuously active for 24 hours, are separate and scattered and are inherently capable of discordance.

87. A singular special "crisis" media relations unit in the capital city of a country and, where feasible, in one or two other major cities as well, becomes the communications equivalent of the "one window" facility always sought by investors and industrialists who abhor bureaucratic red tape.

88. A unit such as this does not prevent the media from seeking access to news, confirmations, clarifications, contradictions et al from the myriad departments and agencies of a government but it certainly encourages, if not
impels, government itself to become more co-herent and co-ordinated in its perceptions about, and reactions to, a crisis.

89. A Special Crisis Media Relations Cell should comprise of more than a spokesman behind a desk, fielding questions from news hounds. Such a Cell should be a media briefing cell as well as a unit that has on its premises, facilities such as an electronic news gathering TV camera unit, audio tape recorder, still cameras and other similar equipment.

90. In the absence of such a special Cell specifically created to handle a crisis in the context of media, the personnel and pattern of the existing system neither fully rise to the intense pressures of a crisis nor are able to break out of the set modes of their operations.

91. Due to conventionally restrictive policies of Government-controlled media and due to lack of adequate initiative on the part of independent media, some valuable learning opportunities were missed by which reporters, correspondents and media technicians including photographers and others could have gained valuable field experience by working from, or close to, the scene of the action during the Gulf crisis.