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The Role Of The Media In A National Crisis

By

Syed Wahboob Alam Chowdhuri
Role of the media in a national crisis

— Syed Mahboob Alam Chowdhuri

I shall first of all take the privilege of thanking the sponsors of this seminar, AMIC (Singapore) and Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association who are the co-sponsors of this assembly for providing a forum for an exchange of views and experiences of the representative mediamen of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The need for assessing the role of the media is being increasingly felt now with the fast growth and development of the media since the end of the World War II. During the time the media have put up a brilliant record of promoting the cause of peace and development and welfare of the people. In doing so the media have made great sacrifices by suffering great hardships, intimidation, harassment, imprisonment and even death in the fearless pursuit of presenting truth which is news, analysing news and giving views and opinions on news so that the well-being of the society can be furthered.

The traditional role of the media has been to provide information, education and entertainment to the readers. Print media or, in other words, newspapers and all kinds of publications devoted to presentation of news, views and comments have got priority in this paper. Radio, TV, documentaries, cinema, theatre and so on which fall into the category of media have been included here insofar as their role in the context of our situation deserve mention. They have largely remained sources
of entertainment in Bangladesh. The documentaries which are mostly government-produced material are yet to play an effective role in the dissemination of information. There are of course exceptions which are of recent origin.

An analysis of the role of newspapers shows, broadly speaking, that the functions of newspapers may be described as informing, educating, entertaining, motivating, persuading, inspiring, guiding and increasing awareness of the people in order to promote truth and justice in the society.

After all, media are purveyors of news which needs to be accurate, objective and adequate and meet reader's interest. At the same time the media fulfil the important function of presenting to the readers opinions and views on issues of importance in the society which it serves in order of priority of reader's interest.

The point is stressed here that the media go beyond providing news, the staple of the media. And the scope of news is wider today than before since the evaluation and development of newer format of news presentation. Side by side with straightjacket news accounts, there are interpretative reports, investigative dispatches and there are featurised news stories. That is not all. Greater importance is being put on opinions and views which are subjective in form and content; nevertheless they are no less important material for the readers. Opinions and views are expressed in leaders or editorials, and readers' letters to the Editor. The comments and opinions focus naturally
on issues of importance.

All in all, through the times the newspapers published by intellectuals like authors, poets and various kinds of literary talents fought valiantly for vindication of truth and justice in their writings with the avowed objective of social welfare. Historically, in the execution of the noble mission, they suffered repression at the hands of the authorities of the day. Through formidable odds, they earned the recognition of the Fourth Estate. In the early years of printing British poet John Milton who is widely celebrated for his uncompromising fight against press censorship, wrote Areopagitica in 1644 to argue the need of upholding freedom of the press and defending freedom of speech.

There was repression in those days for writing in defence of truth. The repression is still prevalent in many areas of the world and the fight against repression continues in the tradition of Areopagitica. That was the nascent age of publications, the forerunner of modern newspaper.

Seen against the background, media perform that task of presenting truth -- objective, factual information about social, political, economic, cultural and moral issues that affect the lives of the people in a polity. Through various forums the media project truth about what touches the lives of people, examine the issues and problems in depth, guide the authority representing the people to deal with the issues and problems in order to promote the welfare of people.

The question arises: What then would be the role of the media in a national crisis which may be political, social or
economic in nature or which may be posed by natural calamities like earthquake, cyclone, tidal surge, forest fire, nuclear catastrophe like Chernobyl and so on. Whatever the issue, the basic role of the media is to project truth as it was in the early days of the development of the media.

In a national crisis, regardless of its nature, the challenge the media have to address is doubtless of an extraordinary dimension which is vastly different and wider than in normal times. In a situation like that the nation looks to the media for information, for guidance, for inspiration, for motivation and for persuasion in order that the nation be provided with the fullest possible knowledge of the issues and problems involved including, no less important, the views about the soundness or otherwise of the policies and measures taken to tackle the issues as well as counsel on the direction of the efforts which are imperative for overcoming the crisis. Put to such a rigorous test, when the media can meet the demands of the people in a traumatic situation, it can justify its existence as the Fourth Estate which may be rightly rated as more equal than the other three estates: the church, the nobility and the legislature in the olden times.

Well, the nature of the role of the media in normal times or in a crisis fundamentally remains the same. Of course, in times of national crisis, the media mobilises extraordinary efforts in the performance of its professional duties of providing news and opinions which point to measures well suited to crisis management. For instance, in a disaster the media
are subjected to great hazards in respect of gathering news from affected areas which may become too difficult of access as in the case of the recent cyclone in Bangladesh. Again, the disaster area may present the mediamen with formidable challenges of performing duties. They are handicapped by problems of drinking water, food and shelter which is the case in the post-cyclone times. More than that, the mediamen may be vulnerable to epidemics, repeat strike of the calamity like earthquake, or cyclone, or tidal surge and so forth, let alone restrictions on news flow crisis-induced or man-made.

Let us imagine political crisis. The mediamen in that situation is faced with challenges of a different kind in the task of gathering news and presenting it. They might run up against the danger of penal action like detention, imprisonment or even execution which might follow from press censorship in many countries. Hostage taking in recent times renders the role of the media hazardous. Besides, there may be more than normal difficulty in procuring news from various sources at different levels. The source of news may be exposed to danger by the media, which raises the question of ethics. Again, take the case of media coverage of hot war on mafia or insurrection and so on. The media expose its members to formidable dangers because it is dedicated to the ideals of disseminating knowledge. Knowledge is power. This is the kind of power which helps overcome challenges, no matter their shape, size and dimension -- natural disaster, political crisis, economic crash, social upheaval, environmental pollution or anything.
A point may be raised whether or not the media would take it upon itself the job of transcending its traditional role of presenting news and projecting opinions and views in crisis situation. The mediamen as members of the society may volunteer to do what they deem morally right. But the first and foremost duty of the mediamen is to put up the best performance as professionals without diluting their charge by transcending their role as purveyors of news and views. Any deviation from the traditional, recognised role of the media will destroy the moorings of the profession.

Well, here are interesting instances of how the media may respond to the stimuli in a crisis. It will be relevant to background media reaction in such cases with reference to ownership of the media. In Bangladesh context media ownership may be classified into two broad kinds: Privately-owned media and media owned by individuals and groups who are government aligned. Of course there is a couple of newspapers which are controlled by trust constituted by the government. No matter the kind of ownership, the owners and mediamen may not take the same stand in a crisis.

During the language movement in the Fifties, while the media were divided clearly on the issue, one avowedly pro-government newspaper in a surprise move came out in a vigorous support to the movement. Its Editor representing the owner on the one hand as well as the whole body of mediamen in that daily threw their weight behind the movement, its unchanged policy on other national issues notwithstanding. There were times when the
owners and the mediamen did not see eye to eye on issues and
the mediamen steered the policy of the news coverage in support
of a cause in a crisis. The owners found it discreet to let
mediamen take the blame if the newspaper would be subjected to
repression by the government for such news and editorial policy
on the crisis. Such owners share the praise if the cause for
which the fight was waged stand vindicated. Phenomena of this
kind were observed on defence pact issue, autonomy question
and so on before 1971. The media aligned itself with the
people's cause in a non-partisan way through an active news
policy.

During the liberation war in 1971 the media were unanimous
in support of the movement for independence. Of course, the
nature of the crisis presented no alternative to survival
through movement for attaining freedom. The media found itself
precariously caught between the options of fight to survive
or die.

Incidentally, the electronic media like the radio and TV
are controlled by the government. There was no private sector
electronic media in the country before 1971, nor is there any
although there is thinking in this direction now. The desperate
situation of the crisis caused an unbelievable upsurge in the
radio which unequivocally expressed its support to the
movement by broadcasting a call to fight for independence.

It has been the experience of Bangladeshis in pre-1971 days
that the government would habitually underplay deaths and
devastation in natural calamities like floods, cyclone, earthquake and so forth. This was done obviously to absolve the government of the responsibility for making big commitment and fulfilling them in order to alleviate people's suffering. I am reminded of the British colonial days when the government-owned East Indian Railway covering what is Bangladesh today would suppress facts about deaths in major train accidents. It was a tactic to protect railway from the legal liability of compensation payment to the victims of the rail mishaps.

Anyway, while the government in pre-1971 days would be insensitive to the needs of the people in distress, the media largely would make all efforts to provide all facts about the crisis to help efficient and smooth handling of the crisis. In such situations the media would be badly handicapped by constraints of press restriction not to spread what is described as 'panic'. The real motive behind the restrictions was to limit government responsibility for relieving the misery of the distressed masses. In such cases in our context the issue had an ethnic aspect which complicated the problem further.

The media and the government would in such circumstances fight on how much truth about the crisis like the natural calamities could be projected. The media here were harassed, intimidated and persecuted. But the media were undeterred. Mediamen are dedicated to the task of revealing truth. That is their profession, that is their social commitment.

The discussion will remain incomplete without dealing with the role of international media like foreign mediamen covering
crisis of national nature. Foreign mediamen are vulnerable to national restriction in many instances, particularly of political origin. But the role of mediamen, be it national or international, remains the same: discovering the truth without emotion or passion, steadfast in objectivity like the national media.

As the world is becoming smaller and smaller and more and more interdependent, media have taken in many countries an international character. While the role of the media is presenting news and views, many news multinationals in the form of mainly wire services present news from a partisan angle facilitating their government's policy of domination. Truth becomes a casualty in their hands in situations of crisis in other countries. Of course, contrasted with this phenomenon, several foreign media have earned great credibility in news presentation. Their objective news coverage of news of things, issues and events in other countries across the world earn them admiration.

As for hazards and restriction in news coverage, foreign media share identical experiences. In many instances, because of their identity as foreign media they are faced with typical hindrances to their operation. But in this age of communication revolution marked by the emergence of computers, TV satellites, fax, telex and telephones restrictions or censorship are becoming more and more difficult. News is enjoying a faster, bigger flow. And that has raised newer questions. The situation calls for a sound appraisal of the whole range of question and issues for developing new standards of ethics of news gathering and presentation in the fast changing world. This seminar may play a pioneering role in this regard.
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Name : Syed Mahboob Alam Chowdhuri
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Address : 32, Lalbagh Road, Dhaka
Age : 58 years
Educational Qualification : B.A.(Hons.) M.A. (Political Science)

Professional experience : 1) Joined the Bangladesh Times as Editor in June 1989 and left that assignment for personal reasons in December 1990.
2) Director-General of Family Planning Association of Bangladesh from 1987 to May 1989.
3) Joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Director-General (External Publicity) in May 1984 and served the Government until March, 1986.
4) Associate Editor of the Daily Life (Bureau Office in Dhaka) from 1981 to 1984.
5) Copy Editor of the Khaleej Times, Dubai, UAE, from July 1979 to April 1981.
6) Counsellor (Press & Information) at the Bangladesh High Commission, New Delhi, from May 1973 to July 1976 and again from November 1976 to December 1978.
7) Press Secretary to the President of Bangladesh from July to November in 1976 on special assignment.
9) Worked in the then Pakistan Observer (now Bangladesh Observer) from 1954 to 1971. Variously worked way up to Assistant Editor.
10) Assignment of teaching at the Department of Journalism, University of Dhaka, from 1965 until now.

Travels abroad : Visited Britain, West Germany, USSR, East Germany, Sri Lanka, India, UAE, Japan, South Korea, Thailand and China.

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