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Role Of The Media In A National Crisis

By

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Role of media in a national crisis

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The role of media in a national crisis is crucial. It can play a key role in defusing tension during the crisis and in creating awareness among the people about the nature of the problems, its origin and way to resolve or face it.

Media is expected to play a role which may help resolve the crisis without causing much damage to the nation. This is the natural expectation from the media. But media often plays a role which seems quite opposite either due to administrative control or policy decision by the media practitioners.

In Third World countries electronic media is controlled by the government. Although the radio and television can play a very important role in giving information to the people about a crisis, it plays insignificant or sometimes negative role due to limitations. The government in Third World countries mostly use these two powerful media for the personal image building. Hence the credibility of radio and television remains a very low. Any media having poor credibility can hardly play an effective role during a national crisis or, for that matter, in normal times.

The role of the newspapers is little bit different in Third World countries. The newspapers often venture to give accurate coverage of an incident and provide an objective analysis. But the newspapers too face innumerable hurdles in writing freely in the countries like ours. The obstacles are: a) government censorship, b) owners dictate the policy to safeguard their interest, c) pressure groups’ threat to the media practitioners to refrain from objective journalism and, d) The professionals often decide to deviate from the principle of objective journalism to defuse tension in certain cases or to safeguard the interest of a particular group.

The journalists face dilemma in certain national crisis. Although the newspapers are expected to give accurate information to the people, it happens otherwise due to reasons stated above. Besides, there are no set guidelines for dealing with all the crisis in an identical manner. The media practitioners follow different policies in covering crisis—both national and international. The media’s role differ from country to country and crisis to crisis. The media normally follows an unified policy in case of foreign aggression, but in case of a political crisis the media can take a divisive role representing respective interests. Similarly in case of communal and ethnic trouble the same thing may happen. The media may at times give up objectivity for the sake of reducing loss of human lives. Some of the case studies may help us to see the varied role played by the newspapers in different crisis.

In a crisis touched off by aggression on any country by a big power or by a big neighbour, the national media, including newspapers, normally follow the
unified policy of opposing the aggressor. The media is expected to play the pioneering role in exposing the evil design of the aggressor and imbued the people with patriotic zeal to rise against the aggressors.

Exactly this happened during the Gulf crisis. The controlled media in the Gulf region spoke in one voice against Saddam Hussain and condemned him for conquering the small neighbour, Kuwait. In a situation like this no professionals can support an aggressor. But the pre-condition of playing a vital role during the crisis like war is freedom of the press. The controlled media in Gulf region could not rise to the occasion in time. The newspapers and electronic media in Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates broke the news two days after the invasion of Kuwait. The media kept the people in darkness as the news had to be cleared by the Monarchs. One vital question is — can the journalists or media practitioners always follow the policy of objective journalism in times of war? A probably can not. During the Gulf crisis, the newsmen had to follow the Pentagon groundrules. I was in Dhahran in the last week of August, four weeks after the invasion of Kuwait. The Pentagon people distributed the groundrules for media men which barred us to ask any question about the number of troops and types of weapons they were carrying. Later when the war started allied partners and also Iraq imposed censorship on war news. Even during Folkland war British government imposed censorship on news which created political furore in United Kingdom. But British Government stuck to its decision to curb the freedom of press. But again if we look at a war which is of the nature of civil war, the role of national media may obviously be different. The warring groups within the country would influence the media to side with them. Bangladesh press face the same situation in 1971— during the liberation war. From the above analysis of war situation it is almost clear that the journalists can not play an objective role during a crisis like war, civil war etc. Even the journalists often deviate from the principle of objectivity for various reasons.

In a national political crisis media faces lot of hurdles. The politically interested quarters may exert influence to dictate the policy of the newspapers through the owners and the newsmen. The journalists, if over politicised, will also take side with the concept of their likings. The basic principle of objectivity is then lost and the media may play a divisive role during the political crisis.

I want to mention here some of the events in Bangladesh during the political crisis where newspapers could not play unified role. These case studies may help us to examine the possibility of suggesting a guidelines for the journalists in times of crisis.

Bangladesh passed through political crisis during nearly nine years' rule of deposed president H.M Ershad. During the regime the democratic institutions including the institution of elections were destroyed by massive rigging. The newspapers were by and large united in backing the demand for a free and fair polls to restore people's confidence in elections. But the print media was divided on whether the elections should have been held under Ershad or
under a neutral government. The lack of unanimity in approach to this problem lingered the crisis for nearly nine years.

In another case, Bangladesh newspapers played a unique role during the mass upsurge which ousted president Ershad from power. But the role of the newspapers and newsmen were of two different nature. One was in objectively writing against the autocrats and backing the popular movement and other was closure of the newspapers. On November 27 last year when the Ershad regime imposed pre-censorship the journalists decided not to publish the filtered news which could serve the autocrat better. The closure of the newspapers for eight days caused the greatest national and international embarrassment for Ershad regime. The role of the journalists in this case was different from the traditional role of the media to write, analyse and pass on the information to the people. But the journalists' role in a different way was appreciated and the people say in our country that the newspapers served more by not writing at the dictates of the rulers.

Now that a democratic government has been installed in Bangladesh through a free and fair elections, the media is expected to play a decisive role in resolving the crisis centering round the form of government and transfer of power. It's a new situation in Bangladesh politics now. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party led by Begum Khaleda Zia got the mandate of the people to rule the country. But as the country's system of government is presidential, constitutionally the real power lies with the Acting President who is neutral. But he has asked Khaleda Zia to form a cabinet which is constitutionally a President's cabinet. But in reality it is the cabinet of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The Prime Minister Khaleda Zia presides over most of the cabinet meetings. The scenario looks like a de facto parliamentary form of government. But the country's political parties are sharply divided on the system of government.

After a free and fair elections the expectation of the people was a stable government. But now that the transfer of power is delayed due to a constitutional problem as the form of government has not yet been decided, the confidence of the people has been badly affected.

The natural expectation of the people is that the newspapers play a pivotal role in such a situation. The newspapers could highlight the crisis of national confidence which has been affecting the investment, business and new initiative by the people. All are following the policy of wait and see. But unfortunately, the newspapers seem to have no guidelines in a situation like this. The role of our newspapers is not at all assertive in resolving the crisis as soon as possible to restore the confidence of the people. But press seems divided on the issue as in other political crisis. Newspapers are divided and the politicised journalists are serving the interest they represent.

From the above case studies, it emerges that there are no set guidelines for the media and the newspapers to follow during a political crisis. The role of the press mostly decided, in case of a controlled media, by the government, in case of newspapers by the owners, and the journalists. But again the national media policy may be upset by the international media coverage.
On economic issues Bangladesh press was very vocal immediately after the liberation in 1971. The then government adopted the policy of a wholesale nationalisation of industries. The newspapers played a very vital role by highlighting the disincentives created for further investments. But again when the country was facing a famine in 1974, the press was in dilemma, the objective coverage of food crisis in certain areas caused food shortage in other parts of the country. People started panic buying and prices shot up. The journalists failed to evolve a policy which could highlight the famine and keep the news of higher food price and food shortage at a low profile.

The newspapers probably face the biggest dilemma during a communal tension or an ethnic trouble. In such situations media may aggravate the situation by inciting the people belonging to respective communities to take part in the violence. This happened in many cases in our country and in many other countries having communal problems. But Bangladesh press always tried to play down the news of the communal violence. At times the journalists blackedout the news which proved successful in defusing the tension. But during the Babri mosque incident last year in India the newspapers played a divisive role in our country. One or two newspapers highlighted the Babri mosque incident in such a way that it angered the Muslims in Bangladesh. But most of the papers played down the news. The whole situation was upset by the international media. The international media followed the policy of objectivity and highlighted the incident. The Bangladesh media blackedout a news where a Hindu sweetmeat shop owner allegedly distributed sweets to people after hearing the news of the damage to Babri mosque. But the international media used this news. Many blamed the international media for communal tension in Bangladesh last year.

In the current crisis of natural disaster in Bangladesh, wrought by the cyclone, the national press was unified in dealing with the situation. The main thrust of the newspapers is objectively highlighting the loss of lives and properties and bring the plight of the survivors to the notice of the national and international community. The press played a commandable role in this situation.

The above case studies regarding the role of the press during a war, political crisis, economic crisis, communal and ethnic violence and natural calamities, it is clear that the press did not follow any uniform guidelines at least in Bangladesh. The seminar may take up these cases to arrive at a conclusion whether the Bangladesh press was wrong or right in certain situation. This will help us in deciding the role of newspapers in our country in future.

However, I strongly feel that the newspapers and the media practitioners should follow the principle of objective journalism to avoid any misunderstanding particularly in case of war, political and economic crisis. But in case of communal and ethnic crisis where the objectivity might prove suicidal, the position should be decided otherwise by journalists. I feel that in such cases, the final decision should be left to the media practitioners.