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Media And Values

By

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Paper No.13
PRESENTATION BY SINHA RATNATUNGA
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ON
"MEDIA AND VALUES"
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have waited two days to say something at this workshop. So much has already been said by others, I wonder whether I have anything new to say.

As an editor sitting behind my desk in Colombo, very frankly I must confess I have very little time to go into values. When stories come up or even when there is planning to be done for future issues, because we have other pressing problems to worry about like Emergency Regulations, contempt of court charges, Parliamentary Privilege issues, defamation and the like, there is very little time to worry about values. What is the meaning of values and the media? I think we will be just going on a voyage of discovery if we are to analyse these meanings. The media is not the last bastion of morality and values. I was listening very earnestly this morning to all the discussions. In the Western world the issue of values at the moment, revolves around privacy; about intruding into the privacy of people who are in public life.

In our part of the world it is more about foreign influences coming through the media which is largely western controlled. The canned products that we get on our television sets through video cassettes. In the morning we heard delegates from Bangladesh and Pakistan and I was just listening to the phenomenal figures of video parlours that have mushroomed. We were told how police stations have been established near these video parlours because the crime rate is directly related to these films. In Sri Lanka there are similar uncontrolled video parlours. You can buy these items off video shops and view them at home. Violence, sex, sexual violence all that is coming through video products to our country and to our bed-rooms and sitting rooms. More than the state-controlled TV, even the controlled press, or the independent press, it is through video that moral decadence is seeping into the young and not so young minds of South Asia's teeming millions.

Today the heroes of young Sri Lanka is not Mahatma Gandhi. It's probably Rambo; not Indira Gandhi but Madonna. I find that there is nothing so wrong in that. Twenty five years ago I was a fan of the Beatles. I used to grow my hair long as a form of rebellious escapism. That was twenty five years ago. Later however, I read Mahatma Gandhi and I am not a fan of the Beatles, but a fan of Mahatma Gandhi. Even the Beatles have grown older and if I may use the word "reformed".
In the morning Shehara (de Silva) was talking very movingly about her own child. I think she is younger than me, and when she was young she must have been a fan of Janis Joplin or somebody who came after the Beatles. You would have heard how so protective she is of her little child, trying to protect him from foreign influences that are intrinsically bad by not getting him to watch certain TV programmes. So, basically I will not agree that these foreign cultural influences have played such a role as to completely change the basic values of our people.

Going back to television programmes, we have opened up STAR TV through which BBC news is reported. That is alright, but there is a lot of violence shown through these western TV programmes. India is now introducing these programmes. I am not sure about Pakistan. So the flood gates have been opened foreign influences are coming through satellite TV, in addition to the plethora of videos that have flooded the market.

In the morning there was a discussion about the western 'Coke Culture' which transcends all barriers. It has in fact, broken one of the worst, most horrendous values the sub continent has experienced; the caste system.

It is true that the media in South Asian countries have refrained from whipping up the issues revolving round caste. But again, the media has done very little to suppress it, or to educate the people that it is a evil system. The international 'Coke Culture' which is an international culture with all its faults has greatly smashed through these barriers. The caste hierarchy has been largely swept away by the Coke-culture. So what is wrong with that?

I work for an independent newspaper in Colombo. I also worked for another earlier. We were not subsidised by the state and we found it difficult to oppose movements like the anti-smoking campaign. Why? My present newspaper for example, is sold at seven rupees and fifty cents in the streets. It costs fourteen rupees to print it. People have got more sophisticated. They have got accustomed to colour, off-set printing, they want more pages, there is competition from rival newspapers. To import colour costs money as does high-tech machinery. It costs fourteen rupees to publish each issue. You can't sell it at fourteen rupees because the purchasing power of readers is lower so you sell it at seven fifty. And who therefore subsidises it? The advertisers. And who is our main advertiser? the Ceylon Tobacco Company.
It was only yesterday that my friend Rane from Sri Lanka was telling me how our Advertising Manager would quite often call him up and say, "Rane please help us out. This week our budget is down, cover up with an ad", and Rane would always oblige. He was the Advertising Consultant to Ceylon Tobacco. So, Rane and the Ceylon Tobacco Company are two of the great defenders of press freedom in Sri Lanka. Without them, and some others, it is very difficult for the independent press to survive in Sri Lanka. As I said we can't rely on the largess of the state, nor are we subsidised. Maybe the state-controlled press can afford to launch anti-smoking campaigns. But their role has other connotations. They have to be government propagandists. Political news is always heavily slanted even though they can do without tobacco advertising. We can't. Independent newspapers, independent radio and independent TV will not be able to.

As I was saying earlier about the West, we are importing a lot of their technology and their media systems. The modern media we have is imported from Western systems even though in ancient times there were different forms of communication in our countries. We send our journalists for scholarships to the United States and England, and what do they learn there? When they come back after six months they have learnt about cheque book journalism that is the high point of sensationalism. We cannot think of it leave alone afford it. But they come after such training. Maybe when we get financially powerful we may resort to mucky journalism where the publisher pays a price to even a criminal to sell his story to that newspaper. Or somebody is paid in advance to reveal personal family secrets about her father if the father is a former president of the United States like Ronald Reagan's daughter's case. Or someone is given money to research into the personal assets of somebody aspiring to get into public life. Or for some photographs be taken with a super zoom lence of a Princess in a bikini. Anything that titillates the public is paid for cash down, even if you happen to watch through the key hole. In such circumstances, media and values are world's apart. These are the influences that journalists from our countries go and acquire from the West and bring back to our countries and try to experiment in our media.

The British media and the public in fact at the very moment is engaged in a great debate on media ethics. Each one is accusing the other with gusto about about muck-raking. They used to seperate the muck-racking news papers in the good old days from the decent newspapers; the tabloids from the broadsheets and the popular newspapers from what the popular newspapers call are the unpopular newspapers. But today, they are all the same.
England's respected newspaper, The Sunday Times, brought out the story of Princess Diana and her family problems. I think all the others were jealous of The Sunday Times. The Daily Mirror and The Sun which is a sister paper of the Times, would have liked the story for themselves, but the Sunday Times ran it first. Five or ten years ago it would not have done it, I think. They ran the story, it was a big and sensational story which probed the private lives of the Royal family and rocked the corridors of Buckingham Palace. We in Sri Lanka reproduced it. We gave more space in our newspapers than we gave the Environment conference, the crucial Earth Summit, in Rio about the same time, and nobody complained. All the readers lapped it up. So we give the readers what they want.

While many ordinary people have been undoubtably revolted with this kind of journalism, others have argued that the British press is duty-bound to expose the lives of public personalities who get paid by the average taxpayers money. The same cannot be said about the Sri Lankan papers reproducing these articles, except that it is good for circulation. So that is why I said that values and the media are distinct. When you sit behind that desk your eyes are more on circulation figures. What your readers want to read rather than what is morally good. When we say you get value for money from our newspapers we dont mean values for money. We care tuppence about the heartburn these stories would cause to individuals. Even if they are public figures and even if they have feelings. We go ahead and print. It's become virtually a bloodsport now in the West, and we in South Asia are not to be outdone.

In fact, last week the London Economist referred to this debate in England. The British had just tried to legislate against what some political leaders felt was an intrusion of privacy by an irresponsible media tearing apart the social fabric of its society by exposing the private lives of public figures.

According to the London Economist, Britian had become a sex-saturated, sex obsessed society. Popular newspapers sometimes seem to have very little, but sex stories. It may be mildly helpful to the editors if the participants are known to the people. It goes on to say that in the years gone by only a few hundred society types who met at the St. James Clubs and aristocratic parties knew of the latest sexual tid-bits in high places among the high and mighty. Today, with the democratisation of the press, anyone who can afford to buy a newspaper for 25 pence can know of the latest gossip in the city and that's true of all democratic countries where a free media exists.
Now even in Bangladesh there is a great democratisation of the media, and with the good it would do Bangladesh in establishing greater freedom of expression of the Bangla people, it would also necessarily be a party to the greedier side of world journalism.

I don't know whether there is general agreement of what Mr. Haleem from Bangladesh said in the morning. There is a lot of smutty magazines, papers, videos going round, he said in his country. That is happening in Sri Lanka too. Numerous smutty newspapers and magazines not officially recognised, are available to corrupt the young and old alike.

In the United States a new dimension has been introduced by televising court cases. Especially rape cases or sexual harassment cases. It is called 'Trial by TV' and critics say it transforms the most personal human experience into a circus for human consumption. A criminal lawyer will hold underwear of a lady not only to the Judge and Jury, but the cameras and the world.

Still, all this by no means is a condemnation of the role of the Media in the spread and dissemination of values. It by no stretch of imagination dismisses the role the Media could play in the propagation of values, as an exercise in futility. It does not attempt to under-play the powerful means through which a nation could be gently educated on socio-economic and political values. It's not that. As much as the Media, if one may say plays to the gallery, the gallery too allows themselves to be indoctrinated by the Media. As much as the Media needs it readers and viewers, they need the Media. That is arguably why, the day is not complete without having glanced at the newspapers, listened to the radio and watched television. I am only expressing a view of the practitioner and urge this workshop comprising largely of academics, to appreciate and understand the real politik of the functioning Media.

So we are living in fast-changing world. Hallowed traditions of yesteryear are withering away before our eyes. In India, ministers are being hauled up for stock market scandals and they are blaming the press for it. In England, they are getting caught with their pants down and they are blaming the press for it, saying that the media is intruding into their privacy. At the Barcelona Olympics athletes are writing to newspaper columns, things that were unheard of in previous Olympics. Olympics are for amateurs. Officials are pulling up these competitors and saying that they must not write to newspapers.
The world order has changed. Live coverage of the Olympics is coming into our bedrooms, and it costs money. Big money; and if you want it there is no escape from the necessity of commercialising the Olympics. The media is now a captive of this global commercialism as satellite television smashes international frontiers and penetrates the minds of viewers in our part of the world, long accustomed to a different set of values than those in the West. We must accept the fact the mores of our people could get more and more westernised. The fear of being left behind in the field of superior media technology and the urge by Western dominated international lending institutions to open South Asia and its economies to western products, will inevitably see the liberalised import of a different and largely mercenary set of values.

But are we to say "No" to these rapid and exciting changes? I do not know the answer, though I think that we must not. Mr. Ghosh of India referred earlier in the day, to a statement of Mahatma Gandhi where Gandhi said to open our windows to outside technology but not to be swept away by the draught. He said so I believe after a visit to Liverpool and Manchester in England where he saw the manufacture of garments and textiles. He came back to India with that technology. A man of the soil, a man of the people, Gandhi transferred that technology to his people. He was not averse to foreign influences. He was open enough to see how western technology can help his people and the people of Asia. And what a revolution he caused here in India in the textile industry. Unfortunately modern India has seemingly abandoned the thinking of Mahatma Gandhi. At least politically. The concept of good neighbourly relations has been abandoned for awhile. All those Gandian ideals have been abandoned and swept away, but I think that what Gandhi said was right.

Let us open our windows to outside technology and western media and thereby some western values, but let us not be swept away by the draught. Let AMIC and SAARC, and all of us, go on this voyage of discovery together, and find out how in the process we can keep our feet firm on the ground.

Thank you.