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The Role Of The Media In National Crisis

By

Sakhawat Ali Khan
The Role of the Media in National Crisis

Sakhawat Ali Khan, Ph.D.

I have been asked by the sponsors here to speak on the subject titled "The Role of the Media in a National Crisis." The two key words of the title are, 'Media' and 'Crisis'. We know very well that crisis is much older a phenomenon than the media. Perhaps much before man's arrival on this planet, it had to face many environmental crises. It is said that earth had to go through huge structural changes before life came into existence and then came man who initiated civilization. Civilized men created states, constituted nations. Thereafter, one day the states, or for that matter the nations, fell into crises too. If we classify broadly, these crises are of two kinds: man-made and originating from natural disasters. Of course, there can be another kind of crisis which is accidental. But accidental crisis is rather uncommon and in most cases it is again the human folly that remains behind the disaster causing such crisis.

One of the best examples of man-made crisis is the atomic bombardment of the sleepy populace of Japan's Hiroshima and Nagasaki; a rather citable example from this part of the world is the killing of thousands of innocent people in riots in undivided and divided India in the name of Hindu-Muslim political rivalry. These man-made crises could have been avoided if the people involved had the wish and will to do that. It is not unknown to a modern man that given the goodwill and strong determination, it is now very much possible to check an epidemic or a
famine. Even in the case of flood or cyclone or earthquake, which man cannot prevent occurring, the degree of destruction could be minimised to an astonishing extent. Through planning and preparedness nations could be made ever alert.

It is, therefore, clear that there is no reason why one should feel absolutely defenceless in the face of a crisis, whatever might be his trade. All citizens of a country should perform specific duties to overcome a crisis. It hardly needs any mention that media men are no exception.

The first and foremost duty of the media in the wake of a crisis is to report the situation objectively. It is rather an accepted fact that crisis breeds rumours. Rumours in turn help precipitate a crisis situation. Objective reporting kills rumours to a great extent. Therefore, the primary task of the media is to portray the crisis as faithfully as possible, gauge its extent, give an idea about the damage it is supposed to do, find out the number of people going to be affected by it etc. so that courageous people could face it squarely with confidence. In the midst of a crisis, which invariably warrants emergency actions, it is only media through which the leaders of the government or a community can communicate with the people effectively.

But media are just not the vehicle for disseminating information, time has proved that they cannot escape their social commitment. For survival of their receivers, as well as their own survival, media sometime need to restrain themselves in a crisis situation. It solely depends on the nature of the crisis. The neutrality the media want to maintain in the name of
Objectivity cannot make them just isolated islands in the society. Even if media are considered to be information selling agencies — or for that matter just a sort of business — they cannot be allowed to do the sort of business that harms the society.

There is no denying the fact that media often thrives in a crisis situation. It means that in a crisis media get more attention than do they get in normal time. This thriving of media is somewhat like thriving of physicians during an epidemic. Though it may sound harsh, the fact remains that it is a bitter truth. Crisis increases people's hunger for information, they feel unsafe to remain ignorant about their surroundings. In a crisis situation media become the constant companion of a conscious man and suddenly media's utility and perhaps influence multiply enormously. And because of that the mediamen need to be more cautious in such situations. When a crisis originates from political repression in a country, the people of that country faces a dilemma. They cannot speak out the way they feel. Speaking the truth may become dangerous or fatal even. But in their heart of hearts they keep suppressed their hatred for the oppressor. In such a situation, even if a clandestine medium could give vent to their feelings, it immediately become part of their existence. We, the people of Bangladesh, had such experience two decades back.

In a crisis the credibility of the media sympathetic towards the affected people are always enormous, be the medium a radio, a newspaper, or even a mere leaflet or poster. If a courageous youngster risking his life writes something on a wall in the dead of night championing the cause of the oppressed, the wall next
morning becomes a beloved spot for the silent hapless people around. It serves as the make-shift alternate medium. So it can be said that how media would behave or how the people will look at a medium in a crisis situation depends largely on the surrounding factors. I can say from my experience in Bangladesh that during the last autocratic rule the people of my country had to depend largely on foreign media to know about their own country. It was at the same time a ludicrous and a painful experience. One of our major poets has described the experience as feeling 'an alien in his own land'. We were the unlucky (or who knows might be the most lucky ones) to have such an experience. Such experience perhaps inspired the nation to take up arms against the oppressor to end such an intolerable situation. You all know that we fought a liberation war twenty years back — millions of our people, including myself, have gone through the traumatic experience of that glorious war. While we were fighting relentlessly, it was the clandestine radio and the newspapers published from the small liberated areas that kept our morale high. In the camps of young freedom fighters (the 'Mukti Bahini'), in the houses of all citizens, even in the capital city of Dhaka, the clandestine radio was heard, the secret leaflet and newsletters read with such intense eagerness that can only be fully describable to persons who had similar experiences. The radio was low voiced, the leaflet and newsletters were badly printed in rather crude method, but they were the most sought-after, most beloved and the most talked about things in those days. The people of Bangladesh could get the feel of a media with a difference in those difficult days. On the other hand, the government controlled media tried to put forward a bright
picture of the country but their credibility went down to a big zero. Historians later rightly described those controlled media as 'Captive Media'. People during the liberation war period considered that media as unavoidable evil.

By describing the above mentioned situations, what I want to emphasize is that to discuss the role of media in a national crisis, we should, at the beginning, make clear what type of media of which countries we should include in our discussion. Should we also discuss the role of foreign media in a country's national crisis? I have hinted earlier that in all the crises that originated from political repression in our country, the role of foreign media were much bigger than that of the local ones. Only in 1971 during the liberation struggle we were able to build up a sizable clandestine media that performed a positive pro-people role. The government media, as usual, in almost all the political crises played negative roles.

We have been able to give democracy a go in our country. As a crisis-prone nation we are eager to see how the media under a democratically elected government handle crisis in future. Moreover, being a poor developing nation, we are having problems everyday which are almost equivalent to living in perpetual crisis. Under the new democratic order it is expected that the media will be allowed to play its due role in crisis management.

In the past in Bangladesh or even in erstwhile East Pakistan, media was never free in the truest sense of the term. In most of the time except for two brief periods, erstwhile East Pakistan and later Bangladesh was ruled by the ex-army chiefs. Even the democratically elected governments in the past did not prove
themselves as great believers in the freedom of the media. I have already mentioned that our present government is a new one and not enough time has gone by to pass any opinion about it now.

After the partition of India in 1947 when East Pakistan became a separate entity, the media here as a whole did not have a homogeneous role. The electronic media were always under the strict control of the government and amongst the print media some had glorious roles in national crises while others had very unfortunate roles. Only when crisis occurred out of natural disaster, the print media almost without any exception tried to play the welfare role. But the electronic media tried to overemphasize the government relief activities and when crisis occurred out of any accident, government controlled media almost unnecessarily tried to play down the impact of the disaster. This is a funny practice by our government public relations set-up. The controlled media particularly the electronic ones amply reflected this attitude of the government in case of a crisis originating from any accidental disaster.

As we have gathered in this lovely city from five South Asia countries, it is likely that while defining crisis the regional experiences should get upper hand. But there is no denying the fact that sometime regional or even a country's crisis may originate out of an international event. The recent Gulf War reminds us of that fact. Particularly those of us who have come to Sri Lanka from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, perhaps need not explain the situation to each other. When a large number of people of these four countries were coming back home from Kuwait, Iraq and even from Saudi Arabia, everyone including the media quickly
identified that as crisis. Though Gulf War has not touched Nepal much, we believe that our Nepalese friends here would be able to empathise the situation because of regional proximity. Moreover, because of greater socio-economic and political similarities the nature of the crises of these countries are somewhat the same. Before August 1947, the people of the sub-continent had to go through many common crises. We can, therefore, say with confidence that those of us who have gathered here today are to some extent birds of the same feather. The moment the word 'Crisis' is pronounced before us, it perhaps creates almost the same connotation in the minds of all of us. I, therefore, shall be least surprised if participants here define 'Crisis' with the same words.

In our discussion in the seminar, I consider the above mentioned situation as a plus point. I, therefore, strongly believe that the seminar discussion will be cordial, extensive and fruitful. We are, to a large extent, like-minded people and we are having similar experiences back home. In short, we are like brothers in a family and the seminar, therefore, will not be a simple academic pursuit, but will have enormous functional value. We are grateful to AMIC and Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) for providing us with the opportunity to talk to each other in such a cordial atmosphere.

I wonder whether I would be guilty of exaggeration if I say that the people of all the countries from where we have assembled here are constantly living in a state of crisis. There at best are some dull and eventless interludes in our national life, when people suffer from frustration and we identify those interludes,
perhaps wrongly, as the no crisis normal periods. I am afraid that the learned participants may find my statement as full of stupid extremism. Anticipating that, I tender my advance apology. I shall also like to add that by my statement I do not wish to undermine the intensity of the national crises of this region. Rather from my personal experience, I can say that in their extent and intensity, the crises occurring in this part of the world are rather unique. For example, let us take up the case of Bangladesh. You all know that the biggest crisis that fell upon this nation was in 1971. In that genocide of nine-months we lost about three million of our compatriots. There is hardly any family in Bangladesh which has not at least had one of its members tortured, crippled or killed in the process. Let us not drag that history too far. In the words of a Bengali poet, "who loves to dig heart to bring out pain?" We want to live well in a new world. But will that hope of ours ever materialise? Shall we be able to avoid at least the man-made crisis? Or shall we be able to get united to face the crisis originating from natural calamities?

I do not have the answer. Rather my apprehension is that in future we will have to face a number of man-made crises. We will perhaps be feeling helpless again in the face of many natural disasters. In this circumstances, we, the persons directly or indirectly connected with media, shall have to learn from the past and should get prepared for the eventualities in future. It is, therefore, perhaps the right time for us to evaluate the role of our media in national crisis. In the process, we should try to identify the strength and weakness of different media.
In this context it is necessary to point out the nature of ownership and structure of our media. The ownership of media in Bangladesh has some peculiarities. For example, during the Ershad era in the recent past, nine of our daily newspapers were owned by the ministers of Ershad government. We have newspapers owned and controlled by private citizens as well as by the government. So far as freedom of the press is concerned in the government-controlled newspapers, the less said the better. Radio and TV are completely under government management. Even newsmen there are government servants and they do not have the right to join even the journalists' union.

The situation is gradually improving under the new democratic set-up. The one-sided electronic media are now even broadcasting news of the political opposition. Our film industry is primarily in the private sector. But films are generally vehicle of cheap entertainment. Large number of feature films are produced but they rarely disseminate vital information. Documentaries are few and far between and government documentaries speak mostly of non-existent government success in all the spheres of developments. The documentaries have, therefore, very little social or political impact. Political groups occasionally publish leaflets, handbills, posters etc. but as effective communication media their influence is momentary and, therefore, very limited.

This is the general picture of our media. But we must admit that when crisis originating from political agitation engulfs the national life, even our static media sometime behave differently. It is natural that pro-establishment owners expect the media to side with the establishment in case of a crisis originating from
mass movement; but because of the pro-people character of the movement the working journalists often think and act differently. And it was observed during political crisis originating from mass upsurge that it was the working journalists who became the temporary deciding factors in the newspapers. The owners either remained silent or absented themselves or agreed with them. These happenings are directly proportional to the intensity and size of the upsurge and, as has already been mentioned, purely temporary.

Let me cite an example to make clear my contention. You all know about the 1971 mass upsurge that culminated into the liberation war in our country. On 7th March, 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivered a very significant speech in one of the largest public meetings of our history. The government radio and television did not broadcast the speech. But later the electronic media had to bow down to its employees who broadcast it without permission and the authorities kept silent. Similar things also happened in privately own newspapers. Journalist community as a whole in our country are democratic minded. A good number of them are political activists. They still do not believe in complete obedience to unjust whims or caprices of the media owners, thanks to the number of bold stand taken by the journalists' union of our country during crises periods. Few months back prior to the fall of autocratic Ershad regime, the journalist community led by their union refused to bring out newspapers protesting the undemocratic behaviour of the government. The government ultimately had to yield to the journalists' demands and to withdraw the system of unjust press advice to the newspapers. After that incident, irrespective of ownership or control, the newspapers
of Bangladesh sided with the people's wishes and at least tried to publish all sides of the political stories.

One thing must be mentioned here. The newspaper business in Bangladesh is still not a full fledged industry. Most newspapers are still published by political personalities or by persons having a sort of missionary zeal in this direction. The owners or sponsors are not the out of reach persons or 'big brothers' as is the case of big industries or multi-national companies. Newspapers are still a sort of joint ventures of the journalists' labour and owner's capital. One cannot ignore the other. Perhaps this is another reason why in case of a crisis the journalists or workers of a newspaper could prevail on the owners. In the year 1952 when there was a movement for making Bangla (Bengali) as one of the state languages of Pakistan, armed forces fired upon demonstrating students killing many of them. The most influential pro-government daily newspaper - the 'Azad' - swiftly shifted its policy, supported the students, published objective reports and the editor of the paper resigned his membership of the provincial assembly and even inaugurated a hurriedly built memorial for the martyred students. It almost looked like an opposition newspaper for a week. But after the movement had subsided the newspaper went back to its original role. Perhaps it was a classic example of pro-establishment owner toeing the pro-people mass line in a crisis situation, as the owner of the paper was the provincial chief of the ruling party. Also at the time of mass upsurge in 1969 some pro-establishment papers temporarily switched over to people's side and supported the movement. Almost the same thing happened in
1990, when irrespective of control and ownership, the working journalists forced the newspapers to take a positive role in the democratic movement. The electronic media were rather static during the movement and therefore lost credibility almost totally. People of Bangladesh used to hear BBC or Voice of America and other foreign radios for knowing what was happening in their own country.

Bangladesh, as you all know, is prone to natural disasters. We had floods, cyclones, and tidal waves of almost unprecedented magnitude in the past. The role of our press, radio and television was really commendable in those crises periods. Apart from flood, cyclone and tidal waves, our people almost periodically face draught, epidemic and sea and river erosions. Erosion, though apparently a slow process, badly affects millions of people. It is being said that erosion can 'turn a king into a beggar overnight'. Flood, cyclone, tidal waves kill thousands of people, make much more people homeless. Epidemic is basically a side effect of poverty and ignorance. For flood, cyclone, tidal waves etc. people need the preparedness, so that when these are going to hit them they can save themselves. To make people aware of such dangers and to disseminate danger signals to them in case of an impending cyclone or storm — our media are playing praiseworthy role. Another perpetual crisis is the unchecked high growth of population. Bangladesh is a small country and though it has the most fertile agricultural lands, it is also one of the most densely populated regions of the world. It is, therefore, imperative that we take to family planning in all seriousness. The media fortunately are aware of their responsibility in this
regard. Family planning campaign is a favourite subject in all our media. With the help of media the government and people of Bangladesh hope to overcome the crisis of overpopulation in near future.

Whenever crisis occurred out of natural disaster, the media irrespective of ownership always stood by the side of the distressed people and tried to help them. Our media tried to draw the attention of the more fortunate citizens of the country who were not affected by the disaster, attract the attention of governments at home and abroad, international agencies etc. to the plight of the suffering people, and issued appeal for relief and help to everyone. Of course, by government controlled media, authorities some time tried to play up government relief activities, but the media as a whole disseminated the selfless activities of all relief workers particularly from private agencies—both national and international. News about the disaster and relief works got adequate coverage and good treatment in the media. In the most recent devastating flood of 1988, the print and electronic media people worked on emergency basis with the whole nation to mitigate the sufferings of the millions. It can be said that compared to their role in political crises, our media’s role looked much more responsible in crisis originating from natural disasters.

A most pertinent question can be raised here. What is the appropriate role of media in a crisis? Some people may suggest that in crisis reporting there is no question of media commitment, but what the media should do is to report faithfully the relevant incidents and their possible consequences. It may also be claimed
that apart from reporting, the media has nothing to do in solving the crisis. But is that contention acceptable? Suppose, there is a natural disaster. Will the media be satisfied by only reporting what has happened? Or should they say that the suffering people need immediate relief? Moreover, if the media reporter from his past experience feels that if relief materials are not distributed by honest people, the whole relief operation may backfire, should he not explicitly say that as well? Can he, if he feels so, suggest that army team should be sent to the spot immediately to help civil administration?

Let us take a hypothetical case. Suppose a big-scale communal riot breaks out in the country. Suddenly news comes that somewhere unexpectedly a large number of majority community members had been killed. The dilemma in front of the media is that if they do not flash the news adequately, the majority section of the populace will be unhappy. On the other hand, if the news is flashed in a big way it is certain that the minority community members in the majority areas will be butchered. What should the media do? Will the media in the name of objective reporting pave the way for a new massacre? Or should it tone down the news with the hope that it may check the further spread of riots? Which of the two should we recommend?

Let us consider yet another case with more social complications. I have already mentioned about the perpetual crisis resulting from overpopulation and the alarming growth of population. In such a situation if a theologian with better articulation than the family planning workers goes on dominating the scene and gradually attracts more people in his anti-family planning -
gatherings, should the media in the name of objective reporting and journalism ethics give wide coverage to such meetings?

I seek your learned opinion on the topics raised. I shall carry back to my country your suggestions on the topics with gratitude. We have identified the problem of population-explosion as number one problem of the country. If we do not do something to solve this omnipresent crisis, we do not know where we will land ourselves in future. I wonder whether without the active, positive and enthusiastic participation from media the nation will ever be able to come out of this crisis.

The planned participation of media in the effort to avert crisis is not only a need of the developing nations alone, even in developed countries it is being practiced. One of the most recent examples is the dissemination of war news during the Gulf Crisis. The Gulf War created almost a national crisis in all the countries of the coalition side including the U.S.A. But the American or for that matter the western news agencies disseminated the news about the war in such a manner that the relentless air attacks were not harming the civilian population of Iraq at all. They were trying to make the readers believe that only military targets were hit. It was, however, later revealed that destruction of Iraqi civilian property and population was colossal. Should we not call it a deceiving tactic resorted to by the media? Did the people of the countries involved including that of the U.S.A. expect such behaviour from their media? The media must have their own reasons for doing that, but perhaps by no yardstick these methods will ever be said to be ethical.
One interesting aspect of such reporting is the media’s use of euphemistic terms in their attempt to minimise the intensity or impact of an action or situation. The media may use the word 'invasion', for 'operation', 'depression' or 'recession' for 'economic crisis', 'revaluation' for 'devaluation', 'lower income bracket' or 'underprivileged' for 'poor', 'elimination' or 'liquidation' for 'killing' etc. for achieving their purpose. But whatever may be the degree of use of euphemistic words by the media, the crisis remains the same. Therefore, there remains danger on the part of the media of being accused by the receivers of deception. A medium is supposed to lose its credibility if it fails to give proper treatment to an item, unless it can explain its behaviour. The media’s only plea in such occasions which may get partial acceptance from receivers is that they have tried to prevent even bigger massacres by withdrawing some information from their report.

On the otherhand, we have examples before us where dissemination of false or biased reports had caused riots among different sections of people. In the recent past one of our well circulated vernacular dailies reported that Hindus have completely demolished Babri mosque at Ayodha in India. The item, as you know, was untrue. We all know that fundamentalists did attack Babri mosque but they could not destroy it, rather quite a good number of them were shot dead by the members of the law enforcing agencies. But the miscreants at Dhaka and in some other places took advantage of the false news and destroyed some properties of the minorities in this country.
Hence the question arises: what actions should be taken against newspapers or electronic media if they disseminate false news? Definitely we cannot allow such an anarchy in the name of freedom of press. One answer to such a problem can be framing of some ethics for crisis reporters by the journalist community themselves. The journalist unions along with the owners' bodies may commit the reporter to such ethics. There must be some mechanism to admonish or censor the violaters of these ethics. As the ethics will have the support of the community itself, the newsmen are supposed to abide by them.

Here is again a striking example of responsible journalism in a crisis. In 1964 in the then East Pakistan some miscreants raising religious slogans attacked members of minority community. But the right thinking progressive people from the majority community protested instantly and that culminated into a clash between them and the miscreants. Some protesting secular minded people from the majority community were even killed by the miscreants. In that national crisis the major section of Bangladeshi press took a firm stand against communalism. Some of the newspapers even put banner headlines in their front page asking people irrespective of religious or political beliefs to resist the miscreants. The anti-riot civil activities supported by the media helped defeat the communal forces quickly and normalcy and peace returned to the land. In my opinion, courage and sincerity shown at that time by the major section of our print media to deal with that crisis should be written in golden letters in our history of journalism.
The sponsors of this seminar in their project justification have drawn the attention of the participants to one very important subject. They told us that international media coverage of the pro-democracy movement in China have very eloquently articulated to the world the democratic aspirations of a significant section of Chinese population. But ironically, as they pointed out, the worldwide coverage—with its photographic and video coverage—has also led to dire consequences for the leaders and participants of the movement. Therefore, the seminar organizers concluded that the consequences of the media coverage of this particular crisis have set journalists to rethinking their roles in covering events of this nature. It has also resulted in modifications to the practice of broadcasting video materials that may jeopardise the lives of the people.

It is difficult to predict the outcome of this 'rethinking'. Will the journalistic world become overcautious and lose some of its attractions or will it draw more respect and attention by becoming more and more responsible? Only future will answer these questions. In the meantime, if the journalists all over the world narrate their valuable firsthand experience gained during crisis periods, it will no doubt help formulate an overall policy. It is also advisable that younger media people interview their senior colleagues to bring out the news behind the news. Let us realize that journalists with long experiences are worth interviewing for knowing many hitherto unknown facts and for betterment of this old trade itself. This task must be accomplished with the attitude of a researcher. Perhaps this is the field where media scholars could step in. Why not the
University Departments and Institutes of Mass Communication and Journalism conduct research on this important topical subject? They can be rest assured that there is immense utility value of such research projects. Seminars like the one we are attending in Sri Lanka may be arranged by other mass communication agencies in other countries. This will help exchange of opinion and experiences among the people in the relevant fields. Specially when international crises are increasingly at the sametime becoming national crises too, the contact between media people and media scholars throughout the world is becoming all the more necessary. To take important corporate decisions about their future activities and to discuss about areas of common interest, should not the birds of the same feather flock together very often?