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<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2639">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2639</a></td>
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The Role Of The Media In A National Crisis

By

Gopal Das Shrestha
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Information is a question of fundamental importance from the point of view of the dynamics of social stability. It is that input on which stability sustains and perpetuates itself. Its absence is therefore, also the beginning of crisis.

Going through the world history even briefly, we will notice how human societies tended to be caught in a cycle of crises and convulsions, because among other reasons, these societies usually lacked a flow of necessary amount of information they needed in order to continue themselves in a state of what we may say, dynamic stability. When a social stability is thus deprived or robbed off its dynamism, it turns into stagnation, and stagnation cannot last for any length of time for the simple reason that our objective conditions continue to change, it does not matter with what speed. If these changes occur slowly, stagnation lasts for a longer period; if they are faster, they are relatively short-lived. It is only a question of time.

Analysing the past historical situations in this manner, one will thus see that from the point of view of time, human societies used to have relatively longer stretches of stability than what they have been living with these days which are marked so much by tumult and turmoil. (Even the 1917 Great October Revolution of the Soviet Union which envisioned itself as the beginning of a world revolution could not sustain itself more than mere seventy years by which time its system had begun to be questioned. In comparison to this, even the stagnation of the medieval age persisted much longer encompassing centuries.) The fixations societies had in matters of perceptions seem to have been of longer duration in those times and their behaviours too reflected this. But whereas this seeming stability can be also viewed as stagnation in comparison to our present times from the point of view of varieties and human creativity, it will be agreed that flow of information had much to do with this situation. Societies were more insulated and information used to travel much slower in those days. This created a situation where human interactions too remained slower in consequence of which societies had longer spells of stability or stagnation, whatever we may like to call it.

But with the advent of information explosion, all this has changed. While no society can and does remain insulated any more, the vastly accelerated flow of information has created its own conditions where perceptions and aspirations have been thrown in a state of constant flux.

This has its own advantages and challenges.
Among its advantages are that societies throughout the world are positioned as never before, to share the attainments of human civilization, it does not matter at what stage of socio-economic and cultural development they may be, counted singly. It is an opportunity never witnessed before in the history of mankind. Human vision has never been so much replete with possibilities as at present.

But as noted above, it poses its own challenges. The progressive universalisation of values and perceptions, of aspirations and culture has brought about a state of convulsion where the old world confronts the new world amidst a continuous torment of the tensions of change. There is an admiration for the new world and the opportunities it offers but at the same time, there is an element of resistance. It involves that flux of identity which cannot but be tortuous both at the individual and collective levels.

The role of mass media, in such a context, cannot but be of crucial importance. By providing timely and necessary information, it can help in maintaining appropriate equipoise in perceptions and behaviours so that the society’s journey to development and progress may not turn into a passage from one crisis to another. By making available ideas and informations it can trigger and sustain a thought process which can enable a society to sail in more or less even keel even as it proceeds ahead in mostly rough weathers of change. In sum, it can, by making available information, enable the societies and their individual components to strike a creative and dynamic balance between continuity and change so that the travails of discontinuities may be appreciably avoided or reduced. In other words, the process of change can be made relatively smoother through dissemination of information.

But this requires that the information itself which is being made available is properly informed. Which means that the information itself should be a performance in adequate in-depth knowledge of the social milieu in all its aspects including its past, present and future as objectively understood.

One of the problems of journalism, at least in my part of the world, has been that it is not so educated. For a number of reasons, particularly because of the constraints originating from the overall backwardness of the society, journalism remains more or less, rather superficial in its content as well as approach. Informations are of course, generally available but very few of them reflect what we may call a fundamental perception as conditioned by a comprehensive knowledge of the society in its historicity and obtaining complexities. This type of journalism, lacking fundamental comprehensions, may sell because of its engagement with superficialities but it certainly does not succeed to inform the readers with the sort of knowledge and information they need to make socially and historically responsible decisions.
Not much attention has yet been given to this problem, most of the training programmes and curricula in the field of journalism as they have been and are in my country continuing to be mostly focused on technical aspects of the profession. There are, for example, classes on what is defined as objective journalism; there are classes also on how to make up the pages of newspapers: and then there are classes on news writing and editing too. But beyond that, no endeavour has so far been made to link up these professional trainings with a broad knowledge of the social, cultural, economic and political realities of presentday Nepal in its historical background. In the rough and tumble of day-to-day journalism, all this may look sometimes rather a dispensable exercise. Journalism, though an intellectual exercise, is not a performance in doctoral dissertations. Surely, it is not. There is, and there has to be some, some demarcation line between journalism and academic profession. But to say that a profession which has to be as socially responsible as journalism can do without some knowledge of the fundamentals of the existence of one's society and surroundings, is asking for rendering the profession into an exercise in ignorance. A journalism which is reduced to such a performance in ignorance can hardly be capable of playing the role it is expected to discharge its responsibilities towards ensuring progress in a state of creative stability. Even with the most pious intentions, it is liable to err, for it simply does not know what it is talking about in its fundamental historical, social and cultural implications.

Going a little beyond my country's borders, I am almost always amazed, for example, to find that for all the writings that Indian newspapers have been doing on the subject, they have not been able to promote a better communal climate in their country. There is certainly, a consciousness of the Hindu-Muslim problem which is only reflected in their reportings whenever communal clashes take place in any part of the country. For example, while reporting such events, several of the Indian newspapers are seen referring to them as clashes between two communities instead of naming these communities. This of course, reflects a responsible desire on their part not to aggravate matters by naming them. But has this sense of responsibility been rewarding? It most certainly, has not been instrumental in decreasing the number of such incidents in any single year. At least, nobody has laid such a claim.

The point I am seeking to make by citing this example is that however developed journalism may be in India in comparison to that of other countries in this region, it has not yet given much evidence of its occupation with the fundamentals of Indian society, as it has been conditioned and handed over by history, and as it has been conditioned by its presentday needs and
aspirations. This is by no means intended to belittle the intellectuals attainments of Indian journalism which are by no means insubstantial. But as a journalist functioning in a neighbouring country as close as Nepal, I sometimes find myself wondering as to why after all the great amount of information being made available by Indian mass media has not succeeded to bring any substantial improvement in the Hindu-Muslim communal situation. Surely, the mass media alone cannot be held responsible for this situation where other channels of communication such as word of mouth, continue to function with equal effectiveness, perhaps more in some cases. What the print media informs through their channel can be diluted or even destroyed by what is transmitted through other less organised but equally effective channels. Even so, it should be an important question which the print media can usefully ask itself as to why it is not making any dent in the situation. The immediate explanation that one lands at under these circumstances is that, barring some quality newspapers, most of Indian journalism has not bothered to fundamentally inform itself before taking up the business of informing others. If this is the situation in India which is, by far, the best developed in journalism in comparison to most of the other developing countries, it should be imaginable as to what level of development Nepalese journalism is trapped in this regard.

As I see it, this shortcoming greatly handicaps the mass media in properly addressing itself to the problems of the society. Its effectiveness in constructively acquitting itself in its role in moments of crises thus, gets severely limited.

On the other hand, lack of fundamental understandings provides scopes for errors and distortions, however unintended. I think an examination of journalism as it obtains today in my country from this angle, should yield revealing results.

As far as I am concerned, I have continued to believe that human societies have so much knowledge at their command today, if they only bother, that they can easily denecessitate occurrences of convulsions for attainment of changes and furtherance of the cause of progress. The sort of crises that has beset these societies in the past can in most instances, be done without in order to achieve change if only the knowledge that they have in command now at this point of development of human history is put to use. If conventional ways of life in many respects have become outdated, so have conventional crises. Conventional revolutions can therefore, be viewed as dispensable hangovers of backward ages. Equipped with such knowledge, the print media whose strong point is indepth reporting and analysis, can play a vital role in times of crises to at least mitigate their rigours and their unsettling effects.
It can therefore, play a vital role in crisis management.

What however complicates this role of the press in the Third World among other things, as I see it, is the intrusion of foreign journalism. The presence of the developed journalism of the West is all pervading. Because of their resources and because of their professional excellence, they naturally attract more respectability as well as credibility in many instances in the Third World countries. Theoretically, being distantly-placed, they also have the advantage of being in a position to be more dispassionate and therefore, more objective in their reporting on Third World affairs. But this very distance and their being alien to socio-cultural and historical milieu of the Third World countries works to their disadvantage also in that the informations they impart do not carry the comprehension they should. So, even if they are charitably disposed, their information may not be truly informative. There is enough truth in the complaints of Third World critics when they say that the Western media by and large, concentrate in focussing on whatever is bad about Third World societies and usually overlook their strong points. It may be contended that there is no bad intention behind such reportings and that such reportings are natural products of a western press which many a time theorises adversary relationship as an inevitability between itself and the establishments. But even after making allowances for these arguments, it will be agreed that this Western press, by and large, sustains itself in a patronising and high-brow negligence of the need of informing itself adequately with the fundamental aspects of the realities of Third World societies. Whatever may be the reasons behind this attitude, it naturally deprives the informations they impart from the possibility of being fuller. Not infrequently, we come across a reflection of this superiority complex in the writings of the Western press. One need not grudge if one has a superiority complex but when and if this complex conditions one’s journalistic performance, it is very likely to fall short of being fully realistic, even if objective. The message such journalism gives can be even deceptively disinformant without being intended as such.

It need not be pointed out that journalism being a social function, is basically a cultural performance also. Since it does not and cannot function in a state of cultural vacuum, it is to be assumed that the messages it gives become understandable only in relation to the culture it represents or is conditioned with.

International journalism, if we may call it so, must contend with the fact that it can avoid being misunderstood or avoid creating misunderstandings only to the extent that there does exist a universal culture. It needs to be noted in this connection that whereas some values of life have become universal, cultures of different societies continue to vary widely from one another. Along
with that, attitudes to life, notions of even time scale, perceptions of progress and development also continue to vary. Passing a remark from New York on what has happened in Colombo, for instance, can be wide off the mark in its composition and content even if most of the factual details on the basis of which this remark is made, are in place. It can be therefore, deceptively misinformant or even disinformant. It may look very authentic and therefore credible but nonetheless, it can be misinformative or disinformative for the simple reason that it is not charged with necessary cultural comprehension. When the sociology of information is thus overlooked, the information itself becomes vulnerable to the possibility of being incomplete or even distorted.

One of the problems with journalism, both national and international, is that it has yet to grow fuller. Because of their limitations in this regard, the informations they give are bound to remain incomplete in varying degrees, giving scopes for fanning crises instead of playing their expected role in democratic management of crises. The free marketplace of ideas which is supposed to be kept live and kicking by the press in order to sustain stability in a state of progress by keeping the population well informed is thus foiled or inadequately served.

I may refer to the ethnic problems that have come to be discerned in Nepalese politics these days. They are undoubtedly in an embryonic stage, and are therefore very well within the realm of possibility of being managed to everybody's satisfaction ere they start refusing to be settled amicably. But how many have so far bothered to examine such questions in depth? Here again, the question of culture comes up. Let it be admitted that most of the print media as they exist today in Nepal, have never bothered to inform themselves adequately with their culture or the sub-cultures that compose the totality of Nepal's cultural and social existence. Of course, being Nepalese media, they do have the feel of their culture but to the extent that journalism is a conscious exercise, they have not bothered to equip themselves adequately with a knowledge about it. So there is every chance that their performance may not be as helpful as it should be in playing an effective role in dealing with such problems before they turn into full-blown crises.

The burden of this presentation is that time has perhaps come for us to see if our journalism can be more educated on the fundamentals of the society and culture than so far so that it may be more effective in fulfilling its task of playing a useful role during times of national crises. The task of journalism at such times, as I see it, is to place facts and information in their full perspective before the readers so that they may be in a better position to make appropriately informed decisions for the resolution of the crises to the advantage of their collective as well as individual interest. The sociology of
news or information, if we may say, is therefore highly important.

The blueprint for action in this direction suggests itself by the above narration of the problem.

Nationally, efforts should be made towards creating an increased awareness of the need of perspective journalism which is suitably equipped with the knowledge of its own overall historical, cultural and international context.

This can be progressively achieved by initiating continuous discussions on related matters through frequent seminars and writings. At the same time, courses and trainings can be similarly formulated, which is not the case at the moment.

Regionally, contacts and exchanges on relevant matters can be usefully promoted between the concerned countries.

In the South Asia region itself, although we have so many similarities culturally, there are a host of dissimilarities also. Talking of Nepal and India even, which have such close cultural affinity as they do have, it will be a news if I were to point out that since after the time of Ashok, Nepal’s cultural growth and existence has run parallel to that of India instead of being similar. That has created some dissimilarities which give Nepalese culture a distinct identity. Same can be said of other cultures in this region. These minute distinctions, which are of vital importance, can be discerned only if we take pains to properly inform ourselves about them. It is of course, easy to lump them together by emphasising their similarities but it needs to be observed that it is those forgotten dissimilarities which many a time count more than any thing else when we face each other. It will be therefore, necessary to inform ourselves regarding these intricacies if we want to make our communications more meaningful to each of us.

It is necessary also because news media in all these countries interact with one another, however limited though such interactions may be. Talking of Nepal and India situation, however, it may be said that such interactions are rather extensive, although usually one-sided. For example, there is virtually no restriction on the entry of Indian newspapers into Nepal. The unrestricted convertibility of Indian currency in Nepal besides the open border between the two countries facilitate this entry so much the more. This has come to create a situation whereunder, the presence of Indian news media in Nepal is pervasive, if not dominant. Same cannot be said of Nepalese newspapers in respect of their circulation in India. Being less developed in all respects, they have not been able to create a market for themselves, although opportunities do exist to do so. This lop-sided exchange of information, to the extent that it can be truly called a state of exchange, has again created a situation where the
sociology of news is thwarted. The free marketplace of ideas that thus exists in Nepal also tends to be a free marketplace of confusion. The role of Nepalese media at moments of national crises thus, gets additionally limited.

It is not at all my contention that the sort of free entry of Indian news media as well as other foreign media in Nepal is undesirable. Far from it. It enriches the information market, and should be therefore, welcome. But what needs to be done is to see that we pay better attention to what I have called above, the sociology of information.

At the same time, news media in the region as well as organisations like the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre can help each other by stepping up their cooperation in further developing themselves. This can be done not only in the field of holding seminars which is of course important in view of the fact that they provide valuable occasions to exchange our thoughts and experiences; it can be done also in the field of upgrading each other's resources, intellectually as well as materially. Mass media of the region thus combined in their awareness of the need of fruitful cooperation amongst themselves can play a very important role in stabilising the regional situation out of which many national crises in the regional countries have tended to stem to a significant measure. This will not only help the regional situation, it will help them individually also in that each one of them would have further strengthened its sense of security and prospects of development through the mechanism of this cooperation.

At the same time, we are reminded of the vast potentialities that exist in this region of development, progress and stability provided we manage to create a climate where better informed governments and peoples join hands in realising them. Over the span of a few years, the region can turn into a market bigger than that of the European Community. In a mere few years, it can turn into an economic and cultural giant to the benefit of the concerned countries as well as the world at large. What we need today is a will to recognise our common destiny, and get over the inhibitions as they have been handed over to us by the past and a receding cold war. What we need today is to go over from the constraints of conventional strategic perceptions to wider vistas of new perceptions as required by our modern requirements and possibilities.

Talking on world scale, such a development will also contribute to the further enrichment of international media, to the extent that we are a part of it. The impact and interaction that it will necessarily occasion cannot but prove helpful in initiating a trend obliging each of us to know better before we talk about each other. Communication would have thus been rendered into vastly improved vehicle of mutual understanding than that of
misunderstanding, which sometimes seems to be the case rather unfortunately.

After having made these observations, which I hope is relevant to the topic I am addressed to, it may be in order to cite some examples to highlight them in the context of Nepalese situation which was only a year ago beset with a major crisis. What was the role of Nepalese media, in spite of its limitations, before, during and after this crisis?

Way back in December 1960, the multiparty system of democracy as obtaining in Nepal at that time, had been dispensed with and replaced by a partyless system, known as panchayat system.

Since that time onwards however, controversies continued to persist whether this partyless panchayat system was democratic and whether it should not be dismantled to revert back to multiparty system in order to establish democracy. This controversy sometimes erupted into active politics of mutual opposition between the contending parties in the form of struggles and agitations, and sometimes they lay dormant. But at no stage during the thirty years of partyless panchayat system did this controversy die. In 1980, a national referendum was held to solve this problem. People were offered two alternatives: to opt for the panchayat system with reforms which prescribed elections on the basis of adult franchise, election of the prime minister by the members of the National Panchayat (as the legislature was called during the Panchayat system days) who would in their turn be elected on the basis of adult franchise, and a cabinet functioning on the basis of joint responsibility, or to vote for multiparty system. With this announcement of national referendum, all concerned parties and people were told they were free to advocate whichever system they thought appropriate without any fear. Subsequent to this announcement, the newspapers took up their respective positions. There were not few newspapers which advocated day in and day out for multiparty system, among which was mine also. Neither was this advocacy journalism partisan in the sense that what was being advocated was not any particular party but some principles.

As a result of this performance on the part of newspapers, at least one thing was averted. In course of the controversy, rumblings of the possibility of coups were not totally unheard of. There used to be ominous rumours that a military takeover could not be ruled out altogether. But whether these rumours were true or not, and I have reasons to believe that they were not altogether baseless, it did not come across. The referendum was held on time and peacefully, although the result did not go in favour of multiparty system by a small margin.

What I feel is that continuous newspaper discussions and writings on the
topic during those days restored confidence of all concerned quarters that whatever the result of the referendum, every one would remain safe and secure. The very nature of democracy would preclude victimisation of any quarter engaged in the fray. This obviously contributed in averting a crisis which would have necessarily aggravated had there been no such open discussions in the newspapers. The open and fearless discussions that took place in the columns of newspapers in those days liberated every one from his or her fears regarding each other, making it possible for all to think in terms of coexistence between opposing interests.

The latest crisis which overtook Nepal a year ago also highlights, although in a reverse order, as to how it came about. After the 1980 national referendum in which partyless panchayat system got 54 percent votes cast as against 45 percent secured by the multiparty side, it was expected that as announced prior to the referendum, the reforms promised in the partyless panchayat system would be translated into reality. Of course, these reforms were enacted and a new constitution came to being in consonance with the reforms mentioned above. But votaries of partyless system who came to power would not let these reforms travel from the paper to day-to-day life. They remained unrealised in practice. There were some obvious reasons for this behaviour. Above all, those who came to occupy the seats of power did not obviously think that their interest would be served if they allowed the new reformed constitutional provisions to fully function. The process of democratic evolution towards eventual multiparty system which would have been certainly ensured had the provisions of the reforms been allowed to be fully operational, was thus frustrated. Several newspapers from time to time, at great risk, criticised the establishment for this state of affairs, and advised that the reforms had better be allowed to work in reality. It was felt in many circles that once these reformed provisions started working, evolution towards multiparty democracy would be inevitable. This would be good for the country in that it would have achieved democracy through stable evolutionary process. But all these advices were ignored. Indeed, even during the early days of the people's movement a year ago when the crisis had not yet heightened, these establishment politicians managed to frustrate even a Royal address which sought to hint at change if necessary by stating that systems were not sacrosanct and could be changed if the people so desired. The press took those politicians in power to task who misinterpreted this Royal announcement which clearly hinted Royal amenability to change if so desired. The result was that the movement heightened, and the country was thrown into a cauldron of crisis.

The point I am trying to make is that the mass media, however limited in
its resources, had tried to smoothen out the crisis through its writings so that the changeover from partyless system to multiparty system might not have an unsettling effect on the society. No attention was given to its advice by those who mattered at that time. So it can be said that the press could not manage to play an effective role. But it does show that it had tried to fulfil this role.

What also became evident along with this was that the press in Nepal, in order to be better heard, must be better-equipped resource-wise, professionally as well as materially. How this can be done constitutes a separate topic by itself but that a determined departure in this direction has become imperative, is obvious.

One of the important points of departure in this direction, I believe, will be to build up better state of mutual understanding and cooperation on an improved level of mutual contacts and exchange of opinions amongst the journalists of this region.

While we may do well to examine why this has not occurred so far to an appreciable degree, there needs to be a greater realisation on our part that an enhanced creative cooperation amongst us in a context of our diversity will not only help us enrich ourself professionally but impart to us the necessary strength to make conducive impact to ensure our national and regional growth in a state of comparative stability. The power of reason that will emerge out of this situation shall have to be heard. The Fourth Estate must come to its own to fulfill its historical role as it has been determined by the age of reason humanity has stepped in.